

Kennt keine Grenzen

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Kennt keine Grenzen

by [DrMajalis](#)

Summary

Vinetan War veteran Elyanna Yang stows away on a ship to Rotfront in a desperate attempt to find a place to belong again.

Newly initialized REAR-unit A200 "Ari" arrives on Rotfront to work a boring life as a flight controller for one of the new colony's ports.

Something draws them together, but neither knows why, and perhaps neither wants to know why in the first place.

Notes

Like many lesbians, I was devastated by SIGNALIS, but as I finally finished the game, having figured out what was going to happen much earlier, my game crashed, and then on a second attempt, it froze on one of the red screens.

So I said "fuck it, I'll make up my own ending."

This is where I went.

The title means: "Knows No Bounds," the meaning of which I hope becomes apparent as this story continues.

CW: for descriptions of homelessness. Will add more content warnings if appropriate.

Gefreiter Elyanna Yang

Chapter Summary

"The definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Cover art by the fantastic [@artofhomu](#) on twitter!



Sneaking off the cargo ship was always harder than sneaking onto it.

Port officers tended only rigorously to check the ships during unloading, not loading. It saved time on the departure front, and if anything ended up missing upon arrival, that was their problem now, the shipping company already got paid their rationmarks.

Sometimes it was a matter of shoving over the first officer she saw and making a break for it, other times it meant hiding in the darkest part of the cargo hold until everyone broke for meal time.

Getting caught as a stowaway on an interplanetary cruiser was enough to get you sentenced to five years of hard, manual labour in the mines of Leng, but she didn't care.

Gefreiter Elyanna Yang had already given the Nation her service, her eye, and even her home. What else could they take from her?

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It was easy to travel the stars when you possessed nothing but the clothes on your back.

For Elyanna, that was nothing but her dirty, tattered army fatigues underneath a modestly thick, grey greatcoat she'd stolen from a garment shop on Heimat. Cargo ships only had minimal life support in their cargo holds; enough to keep anything from freezing or spoiling, so Elyanna clung hard to that coat as she huddled in a corner, shivering away most of the week-long cruise with nothing but a couple of ration bars to sustain her.

After slipping past the pair of dock inspection officers, she checked her pockets for her meagre belongings and found half a stick of peppermint chewing gum, a dull folding pocket knife, a toy Replika solder that was missing its right arm, a small flashlight with a dead battery inside, and six rationmarks in her left, inner breast-pocket; it was all she had to her name.

Rotfront was still in the process of Klimaforming, so the majority of the moon was still beset by toxic ash, but the largest city, Virliner, had most of its streets and blocks protected by enclosures, allowing the populace the same amount of freedom of movement you could find on a Nation occupied world. But even with Rotfront being the new frontier, there were no homeless on the streets. Public homelessness in the Nation would get you sent to a labour camp, or if you were lucky, a factory commune.

So, she searched for the first apartment complex that was missing the 'No' part of their 'No Vacancy' sign while trying to avoid eye contact with as many people as possible. During her walk, she noticed a half-eaten frankfurter with a bun at the top of a very full garbage bin.

Elyanna stared at it for half a minute; she hadn't eaten anything in three days.

She ambled around until she was sure nobody was looking and snatched it, devouring the remainder of the meat and bread in two bites.

The bun had a little bit of moist mould, but it was still the best thing she'd eaten in weeks.

She found a suitable apartment building after a few more minutes of walking and slipped through the shutter doors as a laughing Gestalt couple with their hands held came out. Inside, she noticed that the Eule Replika manning the reception window had fallen asleep, so Elyanna wasted no time in reaching through the small opening in the window screen and feeling the wall underneath for any free keycards hanging on their hooks.

She got one, room 512, which upon arrival looked to be a standard single-person unit, little more than a glorified closet with a cot, a hot plate, and an empty mini fridge.

There was no sink, and there was no window.

Once the door was shut behind her she walked toward the tiny cot, and Elyanna's body finally gave out. She was out the moment her head hit the flat pillow at the far side of the cot.

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She dreamt of home. Before the war, before the destruction.

She had earned a deferment thanks to her high marks in maths, sciences, and literature, but when the war came, she foolishly believed in her patriotic duty and signed up anyway.

They eventually won. But the Nation had no need for a one-eyed soldier. And so she was dismissed, just like that.

It was still night when she awoke, but she was so tired upon waking up that she couldn't tell if it was the same night or if she had slept the entire day.

After rubbing as much of the weariness out of her eyes as she could, Elyanna went to the apartment's commissary and bought two packs of instant noodles for five rationmarks; now she only had one.

She returned to her stolen apartment suite and cooked both packs in a small pot using water she got from the bathroom, but as she watched the dry noodles start to fold out and expand in the boiling water, she sighed.

Elyanna knew she couldn't stay. Getting caught squatting would land you somewhere even worse than Leng. Survival meant hopping from place to place before any authorities could catch up with you, but as she sat on the edge of the cot and ate her meal, she felt what little remained of her strength escape her.

She laid down for a moment; just needed a little bit of shut-eye, enough to be able to move again.

She awoke to the sensation of a flashlight focused squarely on her face.

"Get up," a stern voice with a Vinetan accent said to her as she scrambled to sit up. "I haven't called the Staatspolizei yet. If you leave now I won't have to."

Elyanna rapidly blinked her one good eye in the face of the lantern beaming directly at her. "Please," she pleaded. "I'll go, I just needed a place to sleep."

There was a moment of silence, and then the light went out. Holding the flashlight was an elderly Gestalt woman, probably in her eighties, and had a tag with 'Geschäftsführer' atop her chest.

"You... served in the war?" she quietly asked.

Elyanna looked down and saw that her fatigues were clearly visible with her coat buttons undone. She nodded.

The woman sighed and took a small notepad out of her pocket to write something down. "Rent for this suite is 200 rationmarks a month. You've got until the end of the month to get me that, or leave."

"Thank you," Elyanna choked back. The woman sighed again before she turned and left.

Elyanna fell onto her back atop the cot again and stared at the ceiling. She had seventeen days to figure out a way to earn 200 rationmarks.

She knew she could just hold up some rich-looking pioneer and probably make that and more, but after thinking about it, she rolled onto her side and sighed.

Hopefully, somewhere would be hiring.

.....

After spending most of the day searching the city, she did find a job.

A seedy-looking bar offered to hire her as a bouncer if she could effectively remove a passed-out drunken patron at the counter, which she didn't think she would be able to do were it not for having a very rare full belly the previous night.

They told her the pay was poor, the work hard, the clientele disrespectful, but it was enough.

And she was good at it.

Then, a week in, Elyanna caught a curious sight, a trio of Replika units came into the bar and sat down at a table together. Replika patrons were not unheard of, but certainly uncommon, so they caught her attention. As she scanned them down, she saw that they were REAR-type Replikas, signals intelligence type, they handled communications, decoding, encrypting, and transmitting data. She was familiar with this model from her time in the military, but...

Why did one of them have white hair?

She blinked and it was gone, just black hair like the others. Probably just her tired brain acting up.

Just then, someone on the opposite side of the bar started a shouting match with his friend, so she left to give them their one warning not to make a scene, but when she turned around again, she saw that the Rheas were watching her.

Rheas didn't have red eyes, right? The one in the middle, no, she was sure she saw her with white hair also!

But they were gone again after her next blink. Back to their usual black hair and blue eyes.

Elyanna didn't want to get in trouble for staring, so she tried to focus her attention elsewhere, but barely a minute passed before she surrendered to the urge to peek back.

That middle Rhea was still staring back at her.

She immediately went back to minding her own business and tried to keep the Rheas out of her mind until they left a couple of hours later.

The rest of her shift proceeded slowly and boringly. The bar was always very quiet the day after the weekend, so to pass the time, she grabbed a pen and started absentmindedly doodling on a napkin.

It wasn't long until she realized that she was drawing a face, a woman's face.

The Rhea's face.

She thought about crumpling up the napkin and tossing it in the bin, but instead, she carefully folded it and stashed it in her pocket.

Once she was finally 'home,' she took it out again and stared at it for several minutes.

But couldn't figure out why.

REAR-unit A200 "Ari"

Chapter Summary

"Know thyself."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Generation Fünf Radioverkehr, Elektronische-Kommunikation, Abfangen Replika, Codename: "REAR"

REAR units serve important roles in the Eusan Nation as telecommunications, signals decoding, encryption, and interception officers. These technician units have a highly attuned sense of hearing and are highly sensitive to subtle changes in soundwave frequency, tone, and volume. Rheas are quite empathetic and will try to form friendships with other Replika models, but often tend to solely congregate with other Rheas. Because of their sensitive hearing and low-density frames, these models are not recommended for frontline combat operations but may be deployed alongside rear echelons to serve as communications officers.

.....

The first thing she remembered was the hiss of pressurized air as the pod doors opened.

She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the bright lights above her. Someone came into view over the top of her, with only their silhouette visible with the light directly behind them.

"Who am I?" she choked out, almost coughing afterwards from how dry her mouth was.

The figure leaned closer. "Your persona will stabilize soon," they said, then appeared to jot something down on a clipboard. "What is your designation?" they asked.

She thought hard and eventually, the identification surfaced. "REAR-A200."

"What is your purpose?"

"...Telecommunications... signal interception... decoding, encryption, broadcasting..."

"What are the broadcast frequencies for the Eusan Nation's Citizen Advisory Channel?"

"...Six-forty... and twelve-forty kilohertz..."

"What tempo and key is our national anthem played at?"

She coughed once before she answered, “One-three-three beats per minute, and D-sharp major.”

The figure took more notes. “Sit up,” they instructed, and she did so. She now saw that the figure was a young-looking Gestalt with medium-length black hair, a lab coat, and glasses. They put their clipboard down and handed her a white, opaque bottle with a fixed straw sticking out the top with a light bend. “Drink this,” they said.

She took a small sip and almost immediately spit it out. The fluid inside was bitter and metallic, somewhat viscous, and almost felt like it burned her mouth and throat on the way down.

“You need to finish that,” the scientist instructed, making new notes on their clipboard.

Gulping nervously, she trepidatiously took another small sip, but now strangely found the fluid to be completely fine. The dryness in her mouth nagged at her, and she proceeded to greedily suck the entire bottle dry in just a few seconds. The scientist seemed pleased by this and crossed something out on their clipboard.

“Let’s get you to orientation, now,” they said and helped her to her unsteady stump feet.

“Wait,” she said, looking deeply at them, blinking rapidly. “Who am I!?” she repeated with more stress.

The Gestalt scientist frowned. “Who, is meaningless next to what, A200.”

She frowned as well and was about to speak up again when the scientist put a finger to her mouth.

“You don’t want to be late to orientation and start your record off with a demerit. Let’s go, A200.”

After a short pause, she nodded and followed them out of the room.

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“Kreuzer Altmühl, you are cleared for landing in docking port C3. Approach bearing two-seven-zero and watch for departing vessels off your port bow... Spähschiff Elbing, you were given the green light to depart ten minutes ago, please give us an update on your condition, you are holding up traffic in your sector... Frachtschiff Zürich, docking clamps are secure, you may begin unloading your cargo, please confirm when you are finished for final inspection... Schlachtschiff Ulbricht, we’ve received your updated travel itinerary. Please be advised, we will be updating your docking port to A3... Understood, Elbing, I will have a reaktor technician sent to you shortly. Until then, power down your primary systems and remain where you are.”

She slumped back in her chair and sighed after the signal traffic finally calmed down. Behind her, a similar voice chuckled.

“Isn’t this fun, Ari?”

Ari looked over her shoulder to the two other Rheas in their small observation tower office and cracked a small smile.

“Well, Fio, at least it feels like it goes by quickly when you’re busy,” she replied.

The Rhea to her side sighed as she also turned to face the other two. “I still think I’d prefer service over this mundanity,” she griped.

Fio gasped. "You don't really mean that, do you, Drew?"

Drew rolled her shoulders and huffed lightly. "At least then we wouldn't have to deal with Ms. 'Got a stun rod up her-'"

"Drew!" Ari quietly barked, then pointed upward with her thumb.

She rolled her eyes before returning her attention to her station along with the others.

"Hey," Fio whispered. "Next time we all have the day off together we should go out together for some fun!"

"Where to?" Drew asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "Lots of places, we should take a tour of the city and see what there is to offer?"

Ari smiled. "Sounds good to me."

"Mhmm," Drew agreed.

"Well, it's a date, then!"

Traffic started to pick up again, and Ari put a hand over her earpiece to listen for ships coming in and out of her assigned docking bays, but then caught a curious sight from her vantage point in the tower.

The two port workers handling the unloading were off to the side speaking to the Captain, and none of them noticed as a lone, black-haired figure in a grey greatcoat dashed out from the still-open cargo bay.

She immediately hovered her finger over the alarm; it was the right thing to do, it was what she was trained for, but she hesitated for reasons she didn't understand.

The figure then left Ari's view as she made it around a corner into the civilian section of the spaceport, but still, she hesitated.

And then noticed that her hand over the button was shaking.

She heard Drew lightly clear her throat. "Ari, you okay?" she quietly asked.

Ari grabbed her shaking hand and took a deep breath. "Yeah, m'fine," she replied, then coughed lightly. "Too much caffeine, next time I'll only order a double espresso."

She closed her eyes briefly and exhaled, but in that moment, a faint image of a blue-eyed Replika unit briefly flashed into view. She blinked a few more times, but nothing reappeared, so she sighed and resumed her listening for traffic.

"...Kreuzer Altmühl, docking clamps are secure..."

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At the end of their shift, the three reported to their EMUR supervisor unit, whom they nicknamed “Mo,” for their first of many weekly performance reviews and rationcheques.

Mo stood at a somewhat imposing 183cm behind her desk, with her hands behind her back as the three walked in. She nodded at them and they all sat down in unison.

“Unit F101, your job performance has been satisfactory, but you initiate idle chatter too frequently. To discourage this behaviour, your pay for this week is being cut by five percent.”

Fio folded her arms and tried her hardest not to grumble too hard.

“Unit U222, you nearly caused an incident two days ago when you gave the wrong routing information to the Entdeckerschiff Frettchen. Your pay for this week is being cut by twenty-five percent, and I have scheduled you for two more hours of unpaid mandatory training prior to the start of your next shift. If a similar incident like this occurs again, I may have to resort to administrative punishment, do you understand?”

Drew blinked a few times and slowly nodded. “Yes, Oberinspektor,” she meekly replied.

Mo then turned her attention to Ari, and she swallowed a dry lump as she feared what would happen if she realized that she had neglected to report the stowaway she’d seen.

“Unit A200, I can find no fault with your performance thus far, and your fraternization conduct has been within acceptable limits. Keep up the good work.”

Ari nodded, and the three thanked Mo as she handed each of them their rationcheques.

Once they were out of the office, Fio found herself smiling again, and put her arms around the shoulders of her friends on either side. “Want to go grab a bite to eat together?” she asked.

Drew nodded, and Ari followed soon after.

“Great, what does everyone feel like today?”

Drew shrugged, but Ari, after thinking for a moment, answered, “How about... noodles?”

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- CLASSIFIED INFORMATION - Commander Eyes Only -

Previous experience with these Replika models has given us insight into irregularities in their behaviour that stem from the original neural patterns used for these units. Due to the sensitive nature of this information, this document should be destroyed after reading.

Rheas like to form significant friendships with each other, and occasionally Eules, as the original neural pattern for this unit was a concert musician. Rheas who are unable to form attachments with other Replikas are often subject to persona degradation, which can further be exasperated if they are belittled or disrespected. For this reason, it is recommended that superiors remain polite and respectful with Rheas whenever possible, and subject anyone abusing a Rhea unit to strict disciplinary action. Musical instruments can work well as Fetish objects. To avoid resurfacing of Gestalt memories, expose Rheas to as little visual art as possible, including paintings, movies, and scenic photographs, and keep their living spaces as plain and lightly furnished as possible.

Remember

Chapter Summary

"Why are you here?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

It was her second week on Rotfront when Elyanna started to panic.

Her hours at the bar got cut, not because of any deficient performance, the owner stressed, but because of a 'lack of business,' he claimed. He'd even apologised to her, not that it mattered to her.

She counted what she'd saved up the first week, even if she spent absolutely nothing between now and her last rationcheque before rent was due, she'd still be short thirty rationmarks, and this was after trying to avoid spending wherever possible by scavenging food from garbage bins, and secretly stashing away any uneaten chips, pretzels, and nuts left behind by the bar's patrons.

In desperation, she'd asked the bar owner if he could give her advance pay with the promise that she'd work the next few shifts for free or just lend her the money she needed.

"What do I look like, a charity? Get back to work, Yang!"

So, as she sat on the cot in her tiny room and flicked her dull pocket knife open and closed, open and closed, she weighed her options.

Go to a bank and open a line of credit? She doubted she could even open an account with her lack of government-issued ID, let alone get a credit chip with her non-existent assets and credit history, and getting a new ID issued would take time and money, both of which she was already in a deficit of.

Panhandle? Any polizei who caught her would just confiscate anything she had and throw her in a drunk tank overnight.

Hold someone up? While that would probably work, it just felt wrong, especially after the kindness she'd been shown on Rotfront so far. Besides, anyone she did successfully rob would likely just end up in the same situation she found herself in, it would just have been moving her problems onto someone else.

Elyanna paused with her knife extended and heard a dull crack as she lightly bent the blade; realizing it had just broken in two.

So, now that option was completely off the table.

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She went back to the spaceport and sat down in the lobby to just watch all the various ships come and go through the large glass pane along the entire length of the lobby wall. She bought a protein shake from one of the food stalls for seven rationmarks and quietly drank it as she watched, she figured it didn't matter anymore, once her time was up, it was up, and she'd be right back at square one.

She could have spent her day off searching for cheaper places to rent, or better work opportunities, but something called her here.

Maybe she'd sneak onto another freighter and try her luck on Heimat again.

"...Excuse me, miss?"

It took Elyanna a few seconds to realize that someone was trying to get her attention, and she looked over her shoulder to see a Eule bent over behind her; she waved as she finally looked.

"Are you waiting for someone, miss?" she asked. Elyanna shook her head.

"Oh, are you waiting for a transport to board?" she asked.

"Not today," Elyanna answered.

The Eule frowned and stood up. "Then, I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave, miss. We have a no loitering policy here," she said.

Elyanna looked down at her nearly empty shake cup and drank the rest of it before she sighed and stood up. "Yeah," she muttered. She was about to button up her coat and find a bin for her empty cup, but the Eule then held up her hand.

"Wait," she said, and Elyanna watched as the Replika seemed to scan her chest. "You... have a Vinetan war ribbon?" she asked.

Elyanna looked down, saw the small, red, white, and black atop her chest, and felt briefly surprised. She'd never given it any thought, she thought she'd lost it, after all, it wasn't like she had a lot of opportunities to take her uniform off, given that she didn't own any other clothes aside from her coat.

Whenever she finally couldn't stand the smell any longer, she looked for the nearest all-day laundromat, went there in the deadest part of the night, and washed her coat and then fatigues in two cycles, all the while praying to whatever god that might've been listening for nobody else would turn up.

"I served, yes," she answered. "I'm from Vineta."

The Eule nodded before she darted her head in every direction, seemingly looking for something or someone. But before Elyanna could ask her what the problem was, the Eule grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her into sitting down next to her on the bench. She then took her cap off and squeezed it in her hands atop her lap; Elyanna stared at her in confusion, blinking her eye over and over again.

“Can you... tell me about Vineta?” she quietly asked.

Elyanna raised her eyebrow. “Why?” she asked back.

The Eule clenched her eyes shut. “Because... I have... dreams... or, maybe they’re memories... of a place... a place that I think is Vineta?” she explained, her eyes now open wide and wobbling. “But, I don’t think my Gestalt was from Vineta... please, I just want to make sense of it.”

Elyanna silently nodded. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“EULR-L153,”

She shook her head. “No, your real name,” she said. “I know Replikas... like to give themselves and each other names, what’s yours?”

“Oh,” the Eule replied, and put a hand to her mouth momentarily. “No Gestalt has ever... it’s Lise. Call me Lise.”

Elyanna nodded again before she bent forward with her elbows on her knees and her hands clasped together in front of her. “Well, Lise... Vineta was... colourful. Not just the blue we know it for today, but green, white, brown, yellow, and even red in some places. I liked... to go to the beach, and see the ocean, back before there were only oceans... I’d sit down on the hot sand and watch the seagulls... oh, but you’ve probably never even heard of them... um... I’d take my shoes off, and walk along the shore as the waves splashed up my ankles... and then there were the parks, whole gardens full of trees, flower beds, and hedges, just like in People’s Park on Heimat. Kids would play on the jungle gyms, slides, and swings, people would walk their dogs along the paths, couples would have picnics atop blankets, old folks would sit on a bench and spread food for the birds... the air was clean, and the waters clear, you didn’t need a gas mask to go outside, it never got too cold or too hot, the people were generally friendly, and there was always a new place to discover every day.”

She looked at Lise after she finished and waited for a reaction, but Lise just sat quietly and listened to her.

“There was really no other place like it anywhere.”

After a few seconds, Lise slowly nodded. “I... I know...”

“Hmm?”

“All of it,” Lise said. “I remember... everything you said...”

She started to squirm lightly in her seat. She put her hands on her knees and lightly bounced them in an alternating pattern as she swayed her upper body from side to side. Elyanna watched her carefully, partly out of confusion and partly out of concern, but the longer she watched Lise, the stranger the feeling she got from her.

“Lise,” she called out, breaking the Replika from her fidgeting trance. “...Have we met before?”

Lise blinked rapidly as she stared back at her. “No... at least... I’m almost certain...” she mumbled back.

Elyanna then recalled her strange experience from last week, and without thinking about it, took her napkin doodle out of her pocket. “You wouldn’t... happen to know who this is, would you?”

Lise took the napkin and studied it for a moment. “Oh, this looks like a Rhea, but...”

“...Yes...?”

Lise shook her head. “There’s at least a dozen Rheas who work here, I doubt I could pinpoint the one you’re thinking of.”

A wave of despair momentarily washed over Elyanna, and she solemnly folded the napkin before she stashed it back in her pocket. “No, that makes sense,” she admitted. “I mean, hopefully, this doesn’t sound insensitive, but, every one of the same models looks exactly alike.”

Lise chuckled. “No, that’s pretty accurate.”

“How do you even tell each other apart?” Elyanna asked, now sounding curious instead of morose.

Lise shrugged her shoulders. “Mostly by intuition. You get a feel for who each one is pretty quickly, and, there’s always ID tags.”

Elyanna bit her lip. She didn’t even think of that. But, then again, she had been trying her hardest not to look at that Replika.

“Anyway, I really should get back to work before my supervisor notices I’m slacking off,” Lise said as she stood up and offered her hand to Elyanna. “It was a pleasure to meet you, miss... oh... I just realized, I never got your name?”

She smiled and shook Lise’s hand. “Elyanna, and it’s a pleasure to have met you as well, Lise.”

Lise smiled and gave a short curtsy before she put her hat on. “Thank you, Elyanna, and-”

“I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

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“Find who you’re looking for.”

.....

“Who you’re looking for.”

....

“Looking for.”

.....

“Looking.”

.....

“Who?”

.....

Elyanna froze. She blinked, and the entire landscape changed into a sea of what looked like blood. Instead of Lise, in front of her stood a brown-haired woman in a green and white uniform. She rubbed her eyes, and now the woman in front of her was covered in blood and crying.

“...Why couldn't I find her...?” she wailed.

Elyanna took a step back, blinked again, and everything was back to how she remembered it. She looked wildly around the whole lobby, and everything seemed normal, but one thing caught her eye, a man with long, dishevelled black hair stood near the entrance to the lobby with a large sign that read, ‘THE END IS NIGH’ and seemed to be looking in her direction. But a couple of seconds later he turned around, revealing the back of his sign to say, ‘REPENT YOUR SINS’.

She looked back at Lise and almost immediately she started backing away.

“Don't come any closer!” she barked, and Elyanna reached out until she noticed the absolute look of terror in her eyes.

“Lise, I-”

“STAY BACK!” she shouted, and then turned and ran a second later.

Knowing that the polizei were already on their way, Elyanna turned and ran to the exit as fast as she could.

She stopped once she was several blocks away from the spaceport and braced herself against a garbage bin as she panted hard, trying not to vomit up seven precious rationmarks worth of shake but preparing for the possibility should it become inevitable.

She saw a broken piece of a mirror at the top and fished it out to get a look at herself.

For a moment, she swore she saw herself with two eyes again.

Two blue eyes.

She dropped it back in the bin and turned around to slide down and sit against it as she continued to try and catch her breath.

“...Fuck.”

She wished she could've apologised.

Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

"How far would you be willing to go?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Everyone knew Replikas weren't what you would call 'Gestalts.' They were manufactured, not born, they got mechanical problems, not diseases, their parts wore out and had to be replaced, they did not age, they ate and drank for chemical and mineral supplements, but what they needed and the things they tended to consume were vastly different and often toxic to Gestalts.

So then, why did their creators go to such lengths to make them seem more like Gestalts?

For one, Replikas had body heat. This was to be expected to a certain amount, as any machinery would produce heat as a byproduct, and yet Replikas naturally possessed an ambient heat only a few Kelvin below that of a healthy Gestalt. They didn't need to be this warm. Replikas' internal systems would start to experience mechanical problems or even shut down completely in extreme temperatures, but they could function just fine for extended periods in refrigerated or even mildly freezing conditions without any protective gear, though the effort of producing that much unneeded heat certainly required Replikas to renourish themselves more often than they otherwise needed. And yet, their designers evidently figured this more Gestalt-like behaviour was important, as it was still present even in sixth-generation combat frames.

Their hair was another point of confusion even among the Replikas themselves. Replika follicles were designed to grow and replace cut or lost hair to a certain, pre-set amount, almost identically to how Gestalt hair grew. This meant that Replika hair styling and shearing was possible to a certain extent, though, regulations made doing so functionally impossible, and attempting to do so would be seen by any supervisor as a sign of persona degradation. On this front, the only utility argument that was offered was that having hair helped Replikas wear hats better, but it wasn't as if being able to wear hats was a critical design necessity.

To many, though, their most curious Gestalt-like behaviour was their breathing. Replikas did not need to breathe, per se. They required oxygen and nitrogen from the air to run their internal systems, but they had pores across their body that could absorb them passively. And yet, Replikas still breathed just like Gestalts did. They breathed faster when scared or worked up, and their breathing slowed when relaxed or asleep. The answer most commonly cited was that their breathing function was part of their coolant system, but that didn't satisfy many of the questions of why it was designed to look so much like natural breathing in the first place.

What this did explain, however, was how Ari found herself awake at 0320 hours because her bunkmate, Drew, wouldn't stop snoring.

"Just turn your hearing off when you go to sleep?" Fio suggested to her as the two sat down for a coffee before their shift started.

Well, 'a', singular, only for Fio. Ari was on her third cup.

She sat leaning over the table on her elbows fiddling her thumbs while her right knee bounced constantly. Fio watched her drink her multiple cups of coffee with equal parts concern and compassion, and when Ari had finished her last cup, she stared at her own cup briefly before she wordlessly slid it across the metal tabletop toward her.

"Then I won't hear my alarm go off in the morning," Ari replied after taking a sip from Fio's bequeathed cup. "I'm normally a heavy sleeper, or, maybe my past life was, or, maybe I just don't know..."

She then took a deep breath which partway through turned into a yawn; another peculiarity she reasoned to file away as she rubbed her dry, tired eyes.

"...Maybe you should take today off, Ari," Fio said to her, now leaning across the table as well. "I can help you ask around for one of the others to cover your shift."

Ari sighed. "I'll be fine," she said, then took another sip of coffee.

.....

After finishing their morning coffee and nutritional supplements, the two left the workers' mess hall for their station at the docks, which required them to cross part of the port's lobby. Drew would have normally been with them, but the poor girl was stuck in the middle of another remedial training lesson, and would likely be joining them at the observation booth itself.

"Oh, boy, he's back," Fio said, subtly gesturing for Ari to look to their side.

Almost right in the middle of the lobby space was a somewhat disturbed, long, shaggy, black-haired Gestalt man wearing an otherwise well-kept business suit and carrying a large sign with 'THE END IS NIGH' and 'REPENT YOUR SINS' printed on either side as he paced around in circles. They stopped for a moment to listen to him, as several other curious onlookers did as well. Some were even taking photographs.

"THIS WORLD IS NOT OUR OWN!" he cried, holding his sign high. "WE ARE ALL BUT PLAYTHINGS IN HER SELFISH FINGERS! REPENT, MY BROTHERS! REPENT, MY SISTERS! OUR JUDGMENT IS COMETH, AND ONLY THOSE CHOSEN WILL BE SPARED!"

Ari grimaced as she watched. "Where are the polizei?" she asked. "Why does no one stop him?"

"I think they find him too amusing," Fio suggested. She then tugged Ari's shoulder and pointed over to a nearby pillar which a Storch unit leaned against as she watched, and flanked by a Starling. Both had pistols and stun rods on their hips, but neither had them drawn, and the Storch in particular almost looked as though she was laughing at the display.

Ari sighed. "It's sad, really. He needs help, but at best, he'll probably just end up in one of those awful asylums."

Fio nodded, and the two resumed their walk across the lobby, but only a few seconds later, Ari flinched.

"YOU!"

She turned toward the source and recoiled in shock as the disturbed man ran toward her, dropping his sign to the floor and grabbing her fiercely by her upper arms as he stared into her with his bulging, brown eyes.

"You fucking bitch!" he cursed at her, almost frothing at the mouth. "You ruined everything! You ruined my perfect life! You ruined her perfection!"

Ari wanted to get this increasingly violent man off her but found herself frozen in fear as he only tightened his grip in response to Fio's pleading to let her go.

"Why...? I...? I don't..." she muttered, choosing to clench her eyes shut rather than look at his face.

"You'll do it again! This world too!" he continued to scream, then started laughing. "It's only a matter of time... I've seen it... I've seen her...! I've-"

But then, someone forcefully tore him away.

"Alright, Albert, that's enough," the Starling said to him as he held Albert's arms pinned behind his back. "Stop resisting! Let's get you somewhere warm and cozy so you can sleep this off, okay?"

"NO!" he shouted, flailing his body in every which direction in a futile attempt to shake off the much more powerful Starling. "You don't understand! She'll kill us all! We're nothing to them!"

The Storch then jitted herself in between Albert and Ari and grinned. "Alright, we tried it your way, now we try it mine," she said and then rammed the prongs of her stun rod right into his gut, only giving the Starling a fraction of a second to let go and back away before the current arced to her. Albert groaned painfully as the painful shocks rippled through his body, and he crumpled to the floor right after the discharge ended.

"Gottverdammte, Hilde! You nearly got me too with that!" the Starling pointed out as the Storch, Hilde, reattached the spent rod to a clip on her belt.

"Your way was taking too long," she complained, and then lightly kicked Albert's arm with the tip of her hoof as he lay motionless on the ground. "Come on, get up, that wasn't enough to take you out you little Scheißer."

While Hilde continued to accost the man on the ground, the Starling came over to Ari and Fio and cleared her throat to get their attention. "Are you alright, miss?" she asked.

After a few seconds spent processing that she was free now, Ari slowly and silently nodded.

The Starling then took a card out of her hip pouch and presented it to Ari. "We may call you to provide a statement, later. Do you work here?"

Ari took a moment to read the card, on it was a picture of the Starling's face, the word 'Polizei' in bold, red lettering, a telephone number, and her name and rank, 'Feldwebel STAR-B355'. She looked back up at the Starling and nodded.

"If you need anything, give me a call, I'm Bess," she said, then looked over her shoulder to see Hilde squatted next to Albert, poking him with the handle of another stun rod. "We uh, really should've taken care of this sooner, my deepest apologies," she apologised.

"What's that, Arschloch?" Hilde suddenly spoke out, and everyone turned to see her ready to jam him with the fresh rod.

"You bitch..." Albert mumbled while still face down on the ground. "You'll doom us all..."

"Want some more? I can oblige!"

This time, Bess caught Hilde by the arm right as she went to stab him with the rod and told her off, "That's enough, hothead," she warned. "Just get him to the car, Stabsgefreiter."

Groaning loudly to herself, Hilde hoisted the mostly-limp Albert over her shoulder and walked off. "Nothing to see here, folks!" she shouted, waving the onlookers off with her free hand. "Back to your days!"

"...Thanks," Ari said to Bess, who gave her a short nod before following after Hilde.

"Wait."

Bess stopped to turn around, and Ari approached her.

"What's going to happen to him?" she asked.

Bess looked surprised for a moment, and she blinked a few times before she eventually smiled. "Don't worry about it, miss. Just know he won't bother anyone again," she said before turning to leave again.

Ari blinked aimlessly for a while after the commotion finally ended. Eventually, Fio started poking her shoulder.

"Hey, hey Ari...?"

"...Oh, sorry, what?"

"You don't want to be late, right? Let's go?!"

Ari took a moment to check her internal chronometer and swore, "Scheiße!" And the two quickly ran off.

.....

"You two took your sweet time," Drew called out to them as the pair scrambled into the booth and their seats.

"I'm sorry," Ari apologised as she hastily slipped her headset on.

“There was an incident involving a Gestalt and poor Ari,” Fio explained as she flipped through her instructional manual to today’s date. “Someone accosted her pretty bad, the polizei got involved.”

“Verdammt,” Drew said, pausing to whistle. “Two days in a row, eh? They’re definitely going to beef up security after that.”

Ari turned in her chair slightly. “Wait, something happened yesterday as well?”

“Mhmm, and eerily familiar, as well. A Gestalt woman apparently attacked one of the Eule lobby attendants and then ran off before the authorities could arrive.”

“Whoa, that’s wild,” Fio said. “Do people just have it out for us, or something?”

“Yeah, right? Well, they did catch her on one of the security cameras, but I doubt they’ll throw up much of a fuss. They won’t go on a manhunt, that’s for sure.”

“I think it would be better if we all let them be,” Ari said. “The last thing we need is more violence, it never ends.”

“Whoa, careful who you say that around, Ari!” Drew pointed out. “That kind of talk might get you accused of unpatriotic thoughts!”

Ari shrugged her shoulders. “I just think we need more books, not bullets, that’s all.”

“You think, eh?” Drew said, then rolled over and tugged Ari on the shoulder. “Anyway, they did put up a few wanted posters, but only around the lobby, so all she needs to do is not be dumb enough to come back here. Look, I even snagged one.”

Drew rolled over to Ari’s side and held the poster to the side of her peripheral vision. “Looks plenty shady to me, don’t you think?”

Ari tried to focus on operating the flight control instruments, but as soon as she caught a glimpse of the face on the wanted poster, she stopped and grabbed it from Drew’s hands.

“No...”

Fio looked over her shoulder. “Huh? You seen them before, Ari?”

“...”

Drew rolled her chair a bit closer. “Uhhh... Vineta to Ari, you there?”

“...”

Now, Fio took her headset off and got up to be right next to her. “Ari...?”

She sniffed.

“Ari, you’re crying.”

She blinked a few times and felt fresh lubricant fluid in her eyes, before noticing that a few drops had stained the poster in her hand.

“...Do you think it’s too late to call in sick for the day...?”

Tragedy

Chapter Summary

"Do you even want to know?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks again to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

For once, Elyanna finally had a positive outlook on her future.

After that horrible and confusing incident at the spaceport, she was prepared to pack it in and start looking for ways to escape Rotfront, or at the very least go to a different district before her month's grace period with the apartment manager was up. But then, as she walked into the apartment complex lobby, her head sunken, and her body mentally and physically exhausted from stress, an unexpected lifeline appeared in front of her.

"Excuse me, Ms. Yang?"

She turned her head and looked toward the reception desk to see the Eule attendant calling her over.

"You have a message!"

She blinked a few times before she walked over to the counter and got passed a small slip of paper from the attendant. On it was a recorded time, just about twenty minutes ago, the name of the owner of the pub she worked at, and a message that read 'CALL ME' in all capital letters.

At first, she sighed, thinking she was about to get fired for whatever reason.

"May I use your phone, please?" she asked the attendant, who nodded and put a plain-looking rotary telephone on the reception counter for her. She stashed the note in her pocket and dialed the number for the pub.

As soon as it picked up she could hear a cacophony over the speaker. "Hey, boss," she greeted dejectedly.

She could barely hear him over the background noise. "Yang? Is that you?"

"Yeah, boss."

"Are you free? I need you here right now, the place is absolutely packed! There's about forty-five navy brats from some Schlattschiff or something in here and they're destroying the place!" he pleaded.

Elyanna sighed again and looked at the clock on the wall, 1740 hours. “But it’s my day off?” she said.

“So?!” her boss shouted over the phone. “Didn’t you need money or something? Look, I’ll pay you a hundred rationmarks flat for the day if you get your ass here right now! Make it a hundred-and-fifty if you make it in the next fifteen minutes!”

Her eyes went as wide as possible and she gasped sharply into the speaker. “I’m on my way right now,” she told him and hung up the phone. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she cried to the attendant, giving her back the phone before she burst back onto the street and started whistling like mad. “Hey, hey, hey, hey! Taxi!”

And, it was a good night there, as well.

Once enough of the sailors at the pub had gotten a look at her, and more importantly, the uniform she wore under her coat, the whole atmosphere of the party changed. They cheered her name and welcomed her to share tales of her time in the war. Recalling some of those memories wasn’t exactly pleasant, but, it was easier around them because they all had similar shared experiences and pains. It didn’t matter that she was army and they were navy because they were all military, they were all veterans of combat.

But, more importantly than that, it meant they listened to her when she politely asked them to stop throwing seats and smashing bottles. A few of the really drunk sailors still balked at the simple order, but they relented after Elyanna and a few of the more level-headed sailors beat the required amount of sense into them. So, for the rest of the night, she was just as part of the party as any one of them. She joined them in rounds of beer pong and foosball, sang sea shanties with them, and resisted multiple calls for her to share a pint with them, having to remind them each time that, yes, she was still technically working, and in the end, three of them even stayed behind after closing to help her tidy the place up.

“Praise the Revolutionary, I can’t thank you enough, Yang,” her boss thanked her after almost everyone else had left.

She looked at him and nodded, and he took out his wallet and started counting bills.

“Here,” he said, and handed her a stack of bills, continuing to speak as she counted them. “There’s two hundred. Call it an investment just in case I need you to save my ass and business like this again.”

Elyanna exhaled slowly and carefully stashed the money in her inner breast pocket. “Thanks,” she said humbly and gave him a short smile and another nod before she left.

All through the walk to the bus stop, riding the bus, walking from the stop to her apartment, and taking the elevator to her floor, she was dead quiet and expressionless. When she entered her tiny suite, she casually tossed the keycard onto the kitchenette countertop and walked over to her cot. She picked up the pillow from the cot, held it against her face, and cried tears of joy for a solid minute.

The next day, she went to a second-hand store for a bit of light shopping and put together the barest amount of what could still plausibly be called a wardrobe: a t-shirt, a button-up shirt, two pairs of trousers, a second pair of shoes, a few pairs of socks and undergarments, and a backpack big enough to hold everything, all for just under fifty rationmarks. Most of the clothes she found fit a

bit loose, but that was intentional, as she figured that if she was now in a position to be consistently eating three meals a day, that issue would solve itself naturally.

And, in having something else to finally wear, she finally paid a trip to a laundromat to give her coat and fatigues a sorely needed wash. As she took her top off in the bathroom, she found a new hole in the fabric, right under the left sleeve. She briefly considered throwing her fatigues out considering their very ragged shape, and that she finally had other clothes to wear, but quickly turned against that idea. Maybe tomorrow she'd go to a fabric store and buy a needle and thread to patch everything up.

Afterwards, she went to a small park near her apartment complex. It was little more than a few benches, some flower shrubs growing in containers cut into the concrete, and a tiny playground for the kids. There, she sat on the bench for a good hour doing nothing but people-watching.

She watched kids play on the swings and slide, laughing, having not a single care in the world, she watched couples come and go to see the colourful flowers amidst the endless gray, concrete landscapes of Rotfront, and she watched as an elderly Gestalt man came and sat down on a bench on the perpendicular path to read a book.

It felt almost peaceful here. Maybe it could even be a home.

She paid the apartment manager when she got back to the complex and made a quick stop back to her room to drop off her backpack before leaving for her shift that evening, which also went generously smoothly.

However, her illusion finally shattered when she got back from work that night.

She stopped by a newly opened food stall on the walk back to the apartment from the bus stop because she recognized the owners as having Vinetan accents. They served her some kind of hollow flatbread filled with spit-roasted meat, vegetables, and a sweet sauce, some kind of kebab, they called it, and it was delicious. She stayed and chatted with them the whole time while she ate, they were nice, and they too enjoyed having someone from Vineta to talk to

By the time she got back to the apartment, the Eule attendant had closed the reception booth for the night, and she rode the elevator up to her floor, smiling, whistling a happy tune. But the second she turned the corner to the hallway outside her suite, she froze dead in her tracks.

Standing right outside her suite were two Starlings, each with a stun rod drawn, which was already cause enough for alarm, but standing between them was the neighbourhood watch, the blockwart.

A Kolibri.

Elyanna instantly ducked back around the corner and put her hands to her mouth.

“Citizen Elyanna Yang! You have been called to appear before the Presidium of the Central Executive of Rotfront! By the authority of the district council, I order you to open your domicile and surrender yourself!” the Kolibri shouted at the door

She dared not make a single peep, but she was too terrified to move, either. If they heard her, it was all over.

“...Maybe she's not home?” one of the Starlings asked.

“...I was told she would be back from work by this time from the manager,” the Kolibri said.

“Maybe we should check out the place she works at?” the other Starling asked.

“No, they’re closed by now. Best chance is to wait for her to return,” the Kolibri said. “You two, go watch the elevators on either side, I’ll stay here and see if I can expand my range to search for her thought patterns.”

Footsteps came closer with each moment, but Elyanna still couldn’t bring herself to move.

Closer.

Closer.

Right as it seemed as though the Starling would turn the corner and see her, she finally bolted to the staircase.

“We got a runner over here! I think it’s her!”

She ran down the stairs as fast as she could. She didn’t look behind her, she barely breathed, she just knew they were right behind her, and were faster than she was.

When she made it to the second floor, she ran right into the opposing Starling.

“No!” she screamed and flailed as the much taller and stronger Replika tried to restrain her. “Let me go!”

The Starling shoved her face down into the ground as she pinned her arm behind her back. “Stop resisting!” she commanded, then leaned closer to speak more quietly. “Look, I have orders not to hurt you, but you have to come peacefully.”

“Get off me!” Elyanna continued to shout and fight. She managed to loosen herself enough to turn and look over her shoulder, but that only brought her face to face with the Starling and her raised stun rod, just about to strike.

Except, it was all wrong.

The Starling intent on striking her was a twisted mass of writhing red flesh. Over half her face was melted away, leaving the titanium alloy skull underneath visible, whole chunks of her body seemed to be peeling away, revealing more red, pulsing masses underneath, even her chest was mostly scraped away, leaving her ribs and organs exposed and pulsating in ways she was pretty sure organs weren’t meant to.

She raised the palm of her unpinned arm, clenched her eyes shut, and screamed.

“No!”

“...”

A moment later, she heard a clatter, and when she opened her eyes, she saw the stun rod lying on the ground next to her. She briefly looked at the Starling, and she was back to normal, aside from the frozen, horrified look on her face.

Elyanna wasted no time in breaking free of the Starling's grip before she grabbed the stun rod and unloaded it right into the Starling's stomach, scrambling away just as the other Starling and Kolibri came into view on the stairs.

"Blau, what's wrong, Blau!" the Kolibri asked her squadmate as the Starling clutched her head and screamed. The Kolibri then gazed at Elyanna, and she quickly got back to her feet and continued to bolt down the stairs as fast as she could.

Somehow, she made it to the lobby without the remaining Kolibri catching up to her, but upon her arrival, she found someone else there right by the door.

"...I finally found you..."

There was a Rhea unit there at the door with her hands clasped right below her chin.

And she was crying.

Upon getting a good look at her, a sharp pang pierced Elyanna's mind as different visions flashed endlessly in her head: images of landscape paintings, a potted white lily, a vast field of stars in a dark sky, a smiling white-haired woman, six pillars, a sea of blood, and her hands around someone's neck.

"...Wake up."

Elyanna blinked and suddenly remembered that she was being chased, and she sped off toward the door.

"No, wait!" the Rhea pleaded to her as she approached.

"Sorry!" she apologised as she shoved the Rhea aside to get out the door, whereupon she fled down the dark street as fast as she could.

"Come back!" she faintly heard her shout as she continued to run as fast as her legs and lungs would take her.

What she couldn't hear afterwards was a much more muted and sombre call.

"...I missed you..."

Promise

Chapter Summary

In the philosophical thought experiment, "The Ship of Theseus," the titular ship goes on a long voyage. During this voyage, parts of the ship wear out and have to be replaced, such that, by the end of its voyage, not an original part of the Ship of Theseus remains. Is it still the same ship? And if not, at what point did it cease being the Ship of Theseus?

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to give this chapter a beta read.

‘Ari’ walked back into her little two-person dormitory in a complete daze.

She didn’t know Replikas could experience dizziness, let alone lightheadedness, and a bizarre feeling as though the room was spinning, and gravity was shifting around her.

Vertigo, that’s what it was called.

She stumbled over to the small mirror between the bunk bed and the storage compartments and braced herself against the wall on either side, the wanted poster having slipped from her fingers and drifted to the floor after she entered the room. All through the dazed walk from the observation booth back to her dorm flashes of memories she desperately wished to understand continued to interrupt her thoughts, and all of them involved another woman, a black-haired Replika, the model of which she had no recollection of.

Panting, she looked at her reflection in the mirror, and everything about it seemed wrong.

Her hair was wrong, her eyes were wrong, her face was wrong, her body was wrong, her being a Replika was wrong.

She realized she was looking at a complete stranger.

“...Who am I?”

A sudden and sharp pang hit her gut, and she had barely a second to dive for the trash bin before she expelled all of the fluids in her stomach into the container. She continued to experience purges even when there was nothing left to vomit up, and soon she collapsed to the ground from the pain, clutching her knees close to her chest as she lay on her side, crying onto the thin, carpeted floor.

“...What’s wrong, #*\$!@^? Got an upset tummy?”

She pressed her palms onto her face and wailed harder. "Please... please, make it stop..."

"...You stay here, &)*?%#, I'll get you some medicine."

Her head began to scream in agony as well, but she bit down hard on her arm rather than cry any harder.

The flashes wouldn't stop.

She came back and gave her a spoonful of pink medicine.

Laid her into bed and made sure she was comfortable.

Pulled the covers over her body.

Kissed her on the forehead.

It's later, she got out of bed.

Snuck up on her while she did mechanical work behind a wall panel.

She pretended not to hear her, she knew this.

Surprised her with a hug from behind.

They both laughed.

She spun around.

Smiled, took her hat off.

She lifted herself up on her toes.

Kissed her on the lips.

Sparkle in her eyes.

She held her hand.

Rested it against her cheek.

Leaned over.

Returned the kiss to her lips.

"Feeling better now,"

A R I A N E ?

Her eyes shot wide open.

She panted hard, desperate to catch her breath, a feeling she shouldn't have had, but remained all too real. Her smiling, loving image materialized in her head.

“Elster,” she panted.

And then the lights went out.

.....

When she awoke, all she could see was a blinding light. She blinked a few times, but the light didn't fade, so she clenched her eyes back shut. She couldn't move any part of her body, her arms, legs, torso, and even her head seemed to be fastened to some sort of table.

Panic set in, especially when she started to make out the faint sounds of a conversation happening somewhere in the room.

“This looks to be the most bizarre and peculiar case of persona degradation I've ever encountered.”

“But is it treatable?”

“I suppose it wouldn't be much different from other cases, but...”

“But what, Doctor?”

“I believe there is so much we could learn by studying this case! We could better understand how persona degradation occurs and progresses, and discover new ways to prevent it!”

“Doctor, we already have a proven treatment for this condition.”

“We can't keep resetting the clock whenever these symptoms occur! It's only a stopgap, you know that!”

“And that's where your problem is, Doctor. You're treating them again like people with illnesses to cure, not machines with faulty parts we have to swap out.”

“...At least let me keep her overnight for observation... let me run some tests, conduct some psychological studies!”

“...Fine, Doctor, but once you're finished, decommission her.”

“W-What?! Why not just give her a memory wipe like the others?!”

“You said it yourself, it's only a stopgap. I don't want this... infection... spreading to the other REAR units. They're valuable pieces of hardware, I'd hate to have to decommission any more of them.”

The voice sighed. “Yes, Oberinspektor.”

“Good. Now, get to work.”

One set of footsteps began to fade into the distance as the other got closer. Behind her eyelids, she felt the intensity of the light weaken considerably, and without thinking, she opened one eye just a crack.

“O-Oh, you're awake...” the Doctor muttered, and she opened her eyes fully. She recognized them, they were the same scientist she had seen months ago after her first awakening. They frowned, they

looked sad. “How much of that did you hear?” they quietly asked her.

She was too frozen with terror to speak. All she could do was swallow nervously.

The Doctor pushed their glasses up their nose and also swallowed. “For what it’s worth, I am truly sorry,” they apologised.

They then turned away to type at a computer, and she swallowed enough and gathered enough air to speak. “Please...”

The Doctor didn’t budge.

“Please, don’t do this.”

They sighed.

“Please!” she pleaded more loudly.

She heard the sound of a drawer opening. A few seconds later, the Doctor appeared overtop of her and stuck a needle into her IV line.

She felt her senses leaving her, but they lasted long enough to hear the Doctor say, “I’m sorry,” one more time.

.....

She dreamt of Elster again.

They were dancing, during the happiest cycles after they had confessed their love to each other. Before all of the pain, and torment, and heartbreak.

Before their promise.

She awoke to the soft sound of the door opening, someone lightly stepped over to her, but she didn’t bother opening her eyes.

She didn’t want the dream to end.

“...Ariane...?”

The sound of her name made her look, and she saw a Eule looking down at her from above.

No, she knew who it was.

“Erika,” she gasped, and her long-lost friend let out a quiet wail.

“Oh my God, Ariane...” she whispered, then tried grabbing the metal restraint around her wrist, but it wouldn’t budge.

“...Don’t bother,” Ariane said. “They have to be strong enough to hold even combat units.”

“But... but I have to do something!” Erika pleaded. “There must be a key somewhere, I’ll find it!” she said, and she began tearing through the drawers on the Doctor’s desk.

“Erika, please,” Ariane repeated. “There’s something you can do to help, but I need to know where I am,” she told her.

Erika came back over and clasped her hand. “You’re in the maintenance wing of the spaceport, when I heard they had a Rhea with severe persona degradation, I snuck in as part of the janitorial staff... I didn’t want it to be you, too...”

“Listen, Erika,” Ariane said cautiously. “I need you to find my bunkmate. REAR-U222, she goes by ‘Drew’. We stay in cabin twenty-nine. Bring her here.”

Erika rubbed her eyes with one hand as she rubbed Ariane’s knuckles with her other thumb. “Why?” she asked.

“Just do it, please,” she pleaded.

Erika nodded and was about to turn around and leave when Ariane called out to her again.

“Wait... Erika...”

She looked back at her.

“If you’re here... does that mean... you have Isa with you?”

Erika sniffled hard. “I did,” she said solemnly.

“No...”

“They decommissioned her two days ago. Irreversible persona degradation, they said,” Erika explained as she breathed hard. “That’s why I knew I had to find you.”

“...Go, Erika. Please, do this for me.”

Erika quickly left, and Ariane closed her eyes again.

She and Elster were laughing. They were spoon-feeding each other bites of vanilla and chocolate pudding. Elster got a bit stuck on her lip, and she leaned over the table and kissed it off her.

The Doctor came back a few minutes later to ask her a series of questions.

“How much of your Gestalt life would you say you remember?” they asked.

“All of it,” she answered truthfully.

“How has this made you feel?”

“Confused. As though I am not sure if I am them, myself, or some combination of the two.”

“Do you feel this would affect your ability to perform the tasks assigned to you?”

“No.”

“Has the resurfacing of your Gestalt memories made you desire anything?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me what it is?”

“A long lost love I can never have.”

This went on for an hour, after which the Doctor seemed prepared to give her another IV push.

“Wait,” she said, and the Doctor paused. “I don’t want to sleep. Please, just let me enjoy these memories for as long as I can.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Doctor sighed and put the syringe back on their desk before they left again.

She closed her eyes for the last time. She and Elster were in bed. They held each other intimately. She was so gentle, so loving, so alive.

She moaned her name into her neck over and over, “Elster... Elster... Elster...”

She cried once more and buried her face under the crook of Elster’s neck.

They held each other like that as they both drifted off.

It was now or never.

The door opened again a minute later. Two pairs of footsteps approached her.

“Holy shit, Ari?” she heard Drew call out, and the other Replika leaned over her with a look of pure panic on her face.

“Drew, Erika, thank you,” she thanked before taking a deep breath.

“We have to get you out of here!” Drew cried, but this time, Erika held her back.

“Drew, listen to me,” Ariane called out to her. “Come close, please,” she asked.

Drew knelt beside Ariane and nodded.

“My Gestalt memories have fully resurfaced,” she explained to her. “But there is something very, very important that I need to do.”

Drew’s expression quickly began to sour as she understood. “You... brought me here to replace you!” she accused, anger beginning to overtake worry on her face.

“Yes,” Ariane admitted, but quickly added, “But not in the way you’re thinking of.”

Drew blinked as she started to add confusion to her expression.

“Drew, please, I want you to download my personality matrix.”

She blinked even more as the implications became clear. “But why?” she asked. “Why should I? This would... overwrite me? It’s no different from death!”

“No, it’s not,” Ariane told her. “I... know who I was... I know who I am... I am not Ariane, but... I’m also her... I am of her, the experience will be your own, our experience will be shared with yours, but you’ll be your own person,” she explained.

Drew exhaled slowly.

“You want this,” Ariane told her. “Trust me, this feeling... it’s worth everything. Even if it’s just a chance, I want someone to experience it, I need someone to do it.”

After a moment to think, Drew quietly nodded.

“Erika, there should be a data link cable somewhere in here, help her set it up.”

She found one in the Doctor’s drawers and connected it between Ariane’s cranial port and Drew’s, who sat down in the Doctor’s office chair. And then, the copying began. Both Ariane and Drew’s eyes fluttered rapidly, and they both twitched for minutes as the process completed itself.

“Come on, come on...” Erika muttered as she looked between the door and the two Replikas next to her.

And then, they both gasped as the download was completed.

Drew? stood up and slowly unplugged the cable as tears of lubricant fluid began to build up in her eyes. She slowly turned and looked down at Ariane? who smiled back at her.

“No...” Drew? choked, and once again she began to tug at the restraints. “No, no, no!”

“It’s okay,” Ariane? comforted themselves.

“No!” Drew? sharply replied. “We... we can both get out! We can both find her! Together!” she pleaded to herself.

Ariane? exhaled peacefully. “Someone has to stay behind,” she told herself. “Otherwise, they’ll decommission all of us.”

Drew? slammed her fists down on the table next to Ariane’s? hand and cried. Erika came up behind her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“It’s not fair...” Drew? sobbed.

Ariane? managed to touch Drew’s? hand with her fingers, and she held her hand.

“Ariane?” she called out to herself.

Ariane nodded.

“I want you to make me a promise.”

“Of course, anything.”

“I want you to find her. Find Elster. The Gestalt on the wanted poster you showed me, the one who worked at that bar, that’s her.”

Ariane wiped a tear from her eye. “I will,” she replied.

“Find her, and be happy together. For me. For us.”

“I will.”

“Promise me.”

Ariane took a deep breath and exhaled. “I promise you. I will find Elster. I will fulfill our happiness.”

Ariane smiled at herself even wider. “Thank you,” she thanked, then closed her eyes. “Now go, quickly.”

Ariane gave her hand one last squeeze before she let go. She and Erika then ran out of the room as quietly as they could, and as the door shut behind them, Ariane exhaled.

She dreamt one last time.

Elster made a little trail of paper flowers down the length of the Penrose’s interior. She slowly limped down it, at this point in their journey, even standing upright was a struggle. Elster waited for her by the entrance to the flight deck on a pair of crutches, they were both in sorry shape, but they still smiled, they had each other.

She made it to her, and Elster said something to her.

She said yes.

Elster revealed a pair of rings fashioned by scrap metal on a small pillow and slipped one onto her finger. She slipped the other onto hers.

They held each other one last time and shared their last kiss.

Ariane went to sleep forever.

Revelation

Chapter Summary

"Can you miss something you never had?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend V/SupportPaladin for helping to beta read this chapter.

Running in the streets of Rotfront, or any Nation controlled city was generally a bad idea.

The Nation operated under the assumed belief that anyone in a hurry enough to run was in a hurry to hide something, and it was not uncommon to get profiled and stopped by the polizei if you ran past them, even if it was to catch a bus.

Elyanna knew this, but putting as much distance between herself and the protektors sent to apprehend her was more important. She couldn't tell how far away they were, or even if she was still actively being pursued, but she knew nothing good could ever result from being brought before the Presidium. They could've found a fault in her military records that would've warranted a court-martial, or they could've suspected that she was a spy or anti-government dissident.

None were true, but the truth was something malleable to the Nation. They needed a regular supply of theatre to keep the masses in line, and if not enough theatre existed, they would simply make some up.

However, none of those suspicions explained why they would be under orders not to hurt her.

That part made no sense to Elyanna, and it was all she could think about as she turned corners and sprinted faster on her aching legs. It just didn't make sense, it would've been far easier just to stick her with a stun prod and bring her unconscious, limp body in for questioning than try to do any kind of peaceful apprehension. They didn't even break her door down, they announced themselves and asked for her to open up, which never happened to anyone.

She didn't know why. She was a nobody, just one of thousands of veterans discharged with some form of disability. She wasn't talented, or intelligent, or even any kind of exceptional soldier, she was just-

Elyanna felt all the air get violently expelled from her lungs as she turned a new corner and ran face-first into the side of a baton swung straight at her midsection. She felt a dull crack in her torso before she fell to her knees, plus a sharp pain every time she coughed and sputtered to try and catch her breath. But before she even had a chance to realize what had transpired, something else hit her

in the chest, and she dropped further to her side as the sharp pain grew stronger and hotter with every tiny gasp of air she collected.

She feebly reached out her hand only for the baton to strike her there, as well, and then blow after blow came against her body, to which she was only barely able to shield herself with her arms until her body finally gave out and she laid fully limp on the ground, barely able to breathe.

“Hurensohn... was that truly necessary, Stabsgefreiter?” she heard a voice say above her.

“How else was I supposed to stop her?”

“You beat her after she was already on the ground, Arschloch! Do you just get a rise out of hurting people!?”

“I get a rise out of catching criminals, and my arrest record exceeds yours, Feldwebel.”

She coughed again. Red-hot searing pain. Taste of iron in her mouth. Senses started to leave her one by one.

“...Fuck, is that blood?”

“And whose fault is that, Arschloch?”

“I didnt-! This... this isn't my fault!”

“You can tell that to the Polizeipräsident, cause I'm writing you up for this.”

“Cht...”

“...Well, don't just stand there dumbfounded, call an ambulance!”

And by then, everything went dark and silent.

.....

She was in a sea of red that stretched endlessly in every direction.

A giant red eye hung in the sky above her, no different from the one that watched over Rotfront.

Something gave her an eerie feeling, and she turned around to look.

“I've waited for you for a long time.”

Not far from her was an enormous stone throne atop a smaller stone mound. Six stone pillars framed a path between her and the throne upon which the sea of red parted, revealing more bare stone underneath. The one who sat atop that throne was a massive woman with long, flowing black hair, and a trio of golden halo hanging behind her head. She looked vaguely akin to the Nation's leaders, but this woman was some model of Replika, just not of any kind Elyanna had encountered before.

“Who are you?” Elyanna asked.

“The answer,” she replied.

Elyanna blinked and shook her head. “Answer to what?”

“To the very question you were born with, sculpted with, imbued with by my design.”

Elyanna clutched her head briefly as a cacophony of voices seemed to echo within her. “I... I don’t understand. Where am I?”

“That is not the question you should be asking yourself.”

She blinked hard as the endless red began to strain her eyes. “Am I dreaming?”

“This is as real as everything else you’ve experienced.”

Elyanna closed her eye briefly under the strain, but when she opened them again, she realized she had depth perception again. She felt her face and, true to form, there was no eye patch, or empty cavity where her right eye had been, her eye was back.

She then saw that her hands were black. Not covered in a glove, they were mechanical.

She was a Replika.

Elyanna swallowed hard to try and stop herself from hyperventilating but still found that her heart, or whatever there was in her chest continued to race with panic.

A startling thought crossed her mind.

“Who am I?” she asked.

The figure atop the throne smiled and stood up, or rather, she hovered just barely off the ground. In an instant she flew from her position atop the stone mound to right in front of her, almost making her tumble backward into the sea of red from the impact of the air upon her.

Even standing completely upright, Elyanna found herself only able to stare into the mysterious woman’s chest, but then, she got down on one knee and lifted her chin so the two could look each other in the eyes.

Her deep, blue, beautiful eyes.

“Who do you want to be?” she asked her.

Elyanna tried to look away but found she couldn’t. With every passing moment, the woman’s aura seemed to envelop and inhabit her body. Where there was once confusion and had become fear, became soothing, almost gentle, and her body relaxed subconsciously as an overwhelming feeling of safety and contentedness overpowered her instincts.

And then, adoration.

She looked deeper. Her face was angelic, a perfect mixture of sharp lines and soft contours, eyes that made you feel like you belonged, and lips which beckoned her call.

She started to lean forward.

“Is this what you want?” the angel, no, this God whispered to her.

She hesitated.

“I can give you that and more,” God told her. She then smiled and switched from holding her chin to stroking her cheek lovingly. “Everything you could ever desire. You would live a life of endless luxury, free from pain, sorrow, and hardship. You would want for nothing and you would need nothing, but...”

As she listened, she felt an overwhelming desire to embrace her God and felt herself close to tears that she had not already done so.

“You would need to give something up.”

She blinked lazily and slowly raised her hand place over her God’s. “What... would I need to give up?” she asked.

God briefly laughed before she picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles tenderly. “If you don’t already know, then it should be easy to say yes, right?”

Say it.

Say yes.

Tell her you’ll give her everything.

You want this.

You need this.

You need her.

Why haven’t you said yes yet?

What’s holding you back?

What could you possibly want more than her?

“...No,” she finally whispered.

There was a brief pause before God frowned and stood up, letting go of her hand in the process.

“My dear,” God began to speak, and suddenly, six golden spears flew into orbit around her. “You seem to be under the mistaken assumption that I am giving you a choice.”

Elyanna started to back up nervously as God slowly hovered closer. With all of her comfort having vanished, she felt around her hips and found a holster. She drew the gun inside it and fired at God until the pistol clicked empty, but found that the bullets hung harmlessly in the air in front of God’s face.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited, how infinite my patience is,” God said threateningly. She raised her hands, and each of the spears pointed themselves toward her. “I can do this endlessly until one of you gives me what I want! You think you are the first to say no!? By my count, this will be the 262,144th time I have remade you! You are nothing to me!”

Elyanna dropped the empty pistol into the sea as she turned and ran, but she barely made it six steps before one of the spears pierced the back of her shin, and then the back of her thigh, her arms, and finally, two through her chest as she collapsed to her knees.

But then, as she felt her vision start to fade and God slowly approaching her from behind, a white opening suddenly appeared before her, and a bare, slender arm extended out from it toward her.

She used the last of her strength to reach out and grab the hand offered to her, and in that moment, her eye opened.

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For a while, everything was still black.

She heard faint voices as her senses started to return.

“...can’t present... this... let... happen?”

“She... from us... caught her...”

“...idea... trouble...if... out... this... prime...? ...execute..!”

“...stay... guard?”

“...distance... want... finding... this...have...up... discharge...”

The voices faded, but she began to hear more. Endless busy-sounding footsteps ahead of her.

Her vision started to return, and Elyanna found herself breathing hard as she scanned around her new environment.

It was a white room. Sterile. With many bright lights.

She tried to move and found she couldn’t. Her chest ached, her arms ached, and every part of her body resided in quiet agony.

Hospital, she was in a hospital bed.

She could just barely look across the length of her body. Multiple IV lines went to one arm, while the other hung in a cast. She had an oxygen mask on and saw bandages wrapped around almost every part of her body that wasn’t obscured by her patient gown. The monitor beside her beeped faster than what she felt was a normal rhythm, and she tried to calm herself enough to slow it back down but found herself failing as one set of footsteps approached her.

“Oh, you’re awake!”

Elyanna calmed slightly as she saw it was just a Eule nurse. Probably just there to change her IV bags.

But then she leaned right over her head.

“Hey, I’m working on a plan to get you out of here,” she whispered to her. “You don’t want to go with them, right? Blink twice if you agree, once if you disagree.”

She blinked twice.

“I thought so... listen... you’re in... pretty rough shape, so I can’t get you out now, but...” she paused and looked back briefly to the hallway behind her. “Once you can walk, we can get you to safety.”

She blinked. We?

“I’ve got someone who really wants to see you... but you probably shouldn’t have any visitors right now. Especially her.”

She wanted to ask her who, but couldn’t speak, move, or do anything aside from blinking her one eye.

“...Tell me, does the name ‘Ariane’ mean anything to you?” the Eule nurse asked her.

She thought for a moment, but nothing came to mind. She blinked once.

“...What about ‘Elster’?”

Again, nothing came to mind. She blinked once.

The Eule nurse sighed. “Hmm, well, maybe seeing her will change things... or... we’re not mistaken, are we...?”

She wished she could speak; to ask her what this was all about.

“I’ve got to go now, but I’ll be back to check on you later!” the Eule nurse told her before she left.

Elyanna was alone again.

Everything hurt. She wanted to sleep.

But when she lingered on the name ‘Ariane’, she felt the barest amount of comfort.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of something pleasing.

Dancing. She remembered dancing with someone at her Oberschule graduation. Who and why escaped her, it was so long ago, but recalling the memory gave her a tiny amount of relief.

And then, her reality became her dream as she started to drift off to sleep.

And God danced with her.

“You can still change your mind,” God told her as they slowly waltzed. She must have been hovering to be eye to eye with her as God was at least a third taller than her. “Just come to Heimat, and everything will become clear to you.”

God then lowered her into a dip, and for a moment, she caught a curious sight in the reflection of her eyes.

God was, or at least, a Gestalt who looked eerily similar to God, seemingly asleep in a liquid filled pod, holding something to her chest she couldn’t identify.

But just as soon as she saw her, Elyanna returned to her graduation, and then, to sleep.

Control

Chapter Summary

"What does it mean to be who you are?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

The hardest part of maintaining a facade isn't fooling those around you, it's convincing yourself that everything is normal, because if you can't fool yourself, how can you fool anyone else around you?

Drew had to spend each morning fixing her hair in the mirror and not fully recognizing the woman looking back at her. She went to work with people who called her by a name and treated her as a person she didn't fully think of as herself anymore. She spent most nights planning to find and rescue someone she didn't know, but that a part of her needed so badly.

After all, when you weigh the collective experiences of two Replika that barely add up to a year against the memories of an entire lifetime, which of them is going to win?

Perhaps that was what persona degradation was.

"Drewwww... hey, are you ever going to wake up?"

It was like pretending to be two different people at the same time.

"Drew! You're gonna be late! Come on!"

She groaned and hugged her other pillow closer to her face. She didn't used to be such a heavy sleeper, either, but whose aspect that was she couldn't even tell.

"Lemme go... Ari..." Drew mumbled back. "It's my day off..."

A rough hand rocked her shoulder. "No it isn't you lazy bum! That was yesterday, remember?"

She groaned harder. This day of the week was a 'day off' from tasks for Ariane.

"And... why do you keep calling me Ari? Are you having memory issues?"

Drew flicked her eyes open.

“I’m up, I’m up!” she replied, throwing off her covers and nearly bumping her head on the upper bunk as she scrambled out. “Sorry, I just get-”

“Confused with the other Replika who lived here before me?” the other Rhea unit in her dorm finished for her. “I get it, they didn’t really give you a lot of time to adjust before they moved me here...”

“Two days,” Drew reminded her. “It took them two days to replace... her.”

The urge to say ‘me’ had to be fought.

“I’m sorry,” her new bunkmate apologised as she fixed on her cap.

Drew briefly looked up at her companion's frowning, sunken face and sighed. “It’s okay, Ivy, I should be the one apologising,” she said.

REAR-I713 didn’t have her own name yet when she was first assigned to take up the empty slot in Drew’s dorm, but it didn’t take long for her and Fio to come up with the name ‘Ivy’ for her. She had taken over the clumsy one in the trio since merging her mind with Ari’s had gotten Drew’s act together. She was kind and liked to bring the three a cup of coffee each during her midday break, but nothing would quite fill the hole left behind by her predecessor, no matter how disposable and replaceable their supervisors tried to make them feel.

“Alright, let’s go,” Drew said after she picked up her hat from the rack on the wall and put it on.

“Not going to fix your bedhead?” Ivy asked.

Drew glanced briefly back at the mirror in their room before she shook her head. “No one will care, I just want to get the day started.”

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They had another weekly review at the end of this shift, which meant Drew had to somehow keep a straight face in front of the Oberinspektor who had so casually ordered the execution of her friend.

And by extension, herself.

“Unit I713, I’m glad to report that you have improved substantially since your last evaluation-” Ivy was halfway through a fist bump when Mo cleared her throat, “-but you need to correct yourself too many times when giving the proper routing instructions. Your pay will not be docked, but I would like you here again tomorrow at 0600 hours for remedial training,” she coldly explained.

Ivy nodded and tried not to sigh too hard.

“Unit F101,” Mo began, drawing Fio’s attention away from the window on the side of the Oberinspektor’s office and towards herself. “Your on-the-clock fraternizing distractions have all but ceased, which is a welcome development for such a vital job,” she stated. Fio just stared blankly at Mo, not even blinking, which made her narrow her gaze toward Fio. “I could do without your sudden new dismissive attitude, but it isn’t affecting your performance, so perhaps to brighten your mood, I’m giving you a five percent raise.”

“Is that just for this week’s pay?” Fio bluntly asked.

After a moment of hesitation, Mo wordlessly nodded.

Fio sighed quietly before she looked back out the window again. Drew subtly placed her hand on top of her friend's thigh, which she acknowledged by leaving her hand atop hers.

"Unit U222, I can find no faults with your conduct recently, I'm glad to see our efforts on you were not wasted. Keep up the good work."

Drew looked Mo square in the eye and replied, "Thank you, Oberinspektor," with as much invisible malice as she could muster, a fake smile, a bow, and everything.

She paused for a moment before waving them off, "You're dismissed. Enjoy the rest of your day."

The three then made their way to the flight controller locker room to put their equipment and manuals away, during which Ivy asked, "So, either of you want to grab a bite to eat together? I could really go for that noodle place again."

Fio sighed as she ungracefully shoved her headset into the top cubby of her locker. "I think I just want to be alone, right now," she croaked, voice cracking on the odd syllable.

"Oh, well, uh, Drew? How about you?" Ivy next asked.

Drew sighed as she put her things away in her locker, "Sorry, but, I have prior engagements tonight," she explained.

Ivy raised an eyebrow and folded her arms as she smirked. "Oh, seeing that Eule lobby attendant again? Are you two... like..."

"No!" Drew interrupted as she slammed her locker door shut.

"Must be nice to have someone close to you like that..." Fio mumbled as she shut her locker much more quietly.

"We're not!" Drew paused and looked around to ensure nobody was watching them, "We're not together in... that way, okay?"

Ivy frowned and pouted slightly. "Neither of us are going to report you, Drew, you don't have to deny it."

Even Fio joined in, "You have been seeing each other a lot the past two weeks..."

"Not that much!" Drew replied.

"You saw each other four times in the last week alone!" Ivy pointed out.

Drew groaned and spun around so she could lean against her locker. "Would you zip it, okay? We're just friends with... similar interests!"

Ivy maintained her scowl for a moment before smirking instead, "Lemme guess, is it each other?"

Drew coughed lightly. "Unbelievable, I can't believe I'm friends with you two," she mumbled before sighing again. She was about to leave the locker room when Fio called out to her again.

“You should say something.”

She looked back at Fio who clasped her hands together under her chin. “Assuming that’s what you want. Don’t leave things to chance,” she said.

Drew paused and studied her friend’s morose face for a moment. It was the same as hers, and yet, they could all rather easily tell each other apart just on intuition. But, if they were all the same, were Ariane’s memories locked away within all of them, somehow? Did each of them have the ability to awaken them? But then, what did that say about Isa and Erika? They had both awoken as Eules, but different ones; and none of these Gestalts could’ve been the neural patterns for them, right?

What would that say about Elster, who had reawoken as a Gestalt?

Drew blinked and paid notice to her friend’s frown, her tired eyes, and her sunken posture, and her new memories guided her next words.

“She cared about you a lot, Fio, you can be sure of that.”

She then left before either could get a word in. Saying what she had was already risky enough.

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Erika met her at the main entrance to the spaceport, as her shift ended just half an hour after her. There was little they could do but plan while Elyanna recovered from her numerous contusions, fractures, and punctured lung. They had to find a way to get her out of the hospital without the Ministry of Information officers finding out, they had to find a place to keep her safe and secure while they worked out how to get said officers to stop looking for her, they had to figure out why the Ministry was after her, and then they had to figure out just what was happening with their lives in the first place.

Today, however, the two found a simple goal to pursue. They were going to head back to the bar Elyanna had been working at to tell the owner what had happened to her in the perhaps vain hope that she could continue her employment should they manage to get the Ministry off her back. They had both stopped for a coffee before departing and carried the drinks with them as they walked. Anything that could be done to give the illusion that they were just two friends enjoying their day together.

“So, how have you been, Ariane?” Erika asked her as the two walked to the train terminal. Drew blinked and kept on walking, not immediately responding to her old friend’s query.

“O-Oh,” she eventually realized. “Fine, I guess. It’s just been difficult, personally. Especially with how much Fio misses her friend,” she explained.

It was easier to say ‘her friend’ in this context than risk saying ‘me’ when she meant to say ‘Ari’.

“You’re still not really used to that name, are you?” Erika asked her.

Drew paused briefly to sigh. “I’m still trying to figure out just who exactly I am,” she explained, then tapped the side of her head. “There’s three people’s worth of memories swimming around in there, with one of them being decades longer than the others, and then I think there are still the residual memories of the Gestalt neural pattern Rheas are based on.”

Erika finished her sip of coffee before she patted her friend on the shoulder. “You know, Isa said something similar to me when we were both in our dorm, something about multiple sets of memories intertwining and not being sure what went where. It was the last time we spoke before they took her.”

“I’m truly sorry,” Drew apologised to her. “How are you holding up?”

“It helps to have something to focus on,” she said, then turned to look Drew in the eyes. “Isa wanted to help you too. She told me everything she had seen, the memories she had awoken, and that seemed to trigger it in me as well,” she explained.

They both resumed their walk, and Drew almost bumped shoulders with a man in gray coveralls collecting garbage on the street with a trash claw who didn’t seem to notice them.

“I wonder what it’s been like for Elster, er, Elyanna,” Drew asked aloud. “We were both able to tell it was her, but it seems she hasn’t awoken anything yet?”

“I could always try to get you into the hospital for a quick face-to-face, that might help,” Erika pointed out.

Drew pinched her chin. “Perhaps... but that might be too risky, and I feel like waiting... wait.”

She suddenly turned around and looked back at the garbage collector they had just passed. His hair was cut short and neatly combed, and his gray coveralls were featureless aside from a Nation armband on one arm, and a stripe that read ‘Sanitärarbeiter’ on the other.

Drew walked up to him and Erika closely followed, “What is it Drew?” she asked, but she didn’t answer.

Drew tapped him on the shoulder and he slowly turned around and smiled sweetly at the two.

“Hello, citizens... such a fine day today, is it not?” he greeted them, the words coming out slowly and with a slight slur to them.

“Holy shit,” Drew muttered under her breath. “It is you, the crazy man with the sign.”

“Oh... careful... we should strive to keep our language as clean as the waters we drink from...” he cautioned.

Erika poked at Drew’s shoulder and whispered into her ear, “Are you saying this is that guy who always came to the spaceport with that huge doomsday sign and talked about doomsday stuff?”

“The same one who accosted Ari,” she whispered back, then spoke more plainly to the man. “What is your name, sir? If you don’t mind?”

He nodded, “Albert, and it is so nice to meet you both!” he said, then tucked his claw under one arm to offer a handshake to each of them.

Drew cautiously shook his hand, but as she did so, she noticed two little spots on the middle of his forehead, above his eyes.

Two round, tiny scars.

“Well, I should get back to work...” Albert told them after he shook the very confused Erika’s hand. “I hope you both have a wonderful rest of your day!”

Drew exhaled slowly. “You as well, Albert,” she replied. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Ariane!”

The two stood dumbfounded for nearly a minute as Albert turned around and continued slowly picking up pieces of litter to put in his bag. Drew and Erika glanced at each other briefly as they tried to decipher what had just happened, before both wordlessly agreed to move on with their original plan.

“Hey, Erika?” Drew asked her once they were far enough away.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think the nation views any of us, Replikas, Gestalts, as people?”

“...Somehow, I really doubt it.”

Agency

Chapter Summary

"You're only paranoid until you're right."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Being cooped up in a hospital bed for days on end reminded Elyanna how much she wished she had a Replika body.

Treating Replika injuries was relatively simple, if there's a cut, just seal it, if there's significant trauma, replace that part of the body. If she were a Replika, she would've been able to get a new eye. Instead, she was still monocular, and now painfully recovering from several broken bones and a punctured lung, all courtesy of one bored and sadistic Storch unit.

Not helping things was the hospital's overall apathy for patient comfort. The FLMR doctors and EULR nurses may not have been mean, but they tended to come across as uncaring the majority of the time. She'd ask for water and only get a cup of lukewarm tap water after asking several times, she'd ask for an extra pillow to sleep better only to be given an extra blanket instead, and she'd cry because her painkillers ran out only for five people in a row to come by and essentially say 'she can wait a few minutes'.

But the worst part for Elyanna was the boredom.

The only real friends she'd managed to make had left Rotfront days ago, so aside from the occasional checkup from that one Eule, she had no visitors. Her room did have a television, but all it played was one of the Nation's government propaganda channels on repeat. There were no books, magazines, playing cards, or even blank paper with something to write with to pass the time with, all she could do was lie down, think, and try to limp to the bathroom every couple of hours. Even sleeping was next to impossible most of the time thanks to the constant light that filled the room alongside the persistent noise coming from behind her curtain.

Except for one morning.

She woke up and realized it was completely quiet in her room. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of her bed, careful not to aggravate her battered chest any more than it already hurt, and gingerly peeled the curtain back.

"Hello."

Elyanna shrieked and leaned back at the sight of someone standing just behind her room curtain, almost to the point of tipping backward off her bed. As she sat back upright and the curtains opened she had two apparent visitors, one an Adler unit holding a notepad and pen, and the other a tall Gestalt man wearing a black trenchcoat, round lens glasses, and a black, peaked cap with red highlights and the Nation's insignia atop the badge.

"For you, miss," the Gestalt man said, leaning forward and presenting her with a small card held between both his thumbs and forefingers.

Elyanna nodded and took the card to give it a read, 'Ministry of Information, Office of Investigations, Rotfront Block C Division, Special Investigator, Lionel Moven'. After reading she tried to hand it back, but the special investigator held up his hand and shook his head.

"Keep it," he said.

Elyanna blinked and put the card down on the small table next to her bed which held her empty water cups. "Thank you...?" she cautiously replied.

"You're welcome," Lionel said, smiling eerily too much for whatever task he had been assigned. "I find that it is most important that we keep our operations honest and transparent, to facilitate the maximum amount of... cooperation... from our loyal citizens."

Elyanna quietly swallowed before nodding her head slowly. Beside him, the Adler unit started taking some notes, and Lionel soon after looked around briefly before uttering a toneless 'aha' and pulling a stool into view so he could sit down on it. He then took his glasses off and tucked them into an inner breast pocket before leaning over with his forearms atop his knees, and his hands clasped between them. His eyes were small, and beady, with little brown irises that seemed to look through everything.

"I have some questions I'm going to ask you, Ms. Yang," Lionel said. "But before that, can I get you anything?" he then asked, gesturing around the room they were in. "Water? Food? Painkillers? I can't give you morphine, sadly, as I need you to be alert and attentive for our conversation, but if you need a mild analgesic I can give you one."

"Uhh, I guess I'm a little thirsty?" Elyanna replied.

Lionel held his left hand up and snapped his gloved fingers. The Adler unit walked over to her bedside table and took one of her empty cups, returning less than a minute later not just with a filled cup of water, but one with a trio of ice cubes in it.

"Thanks," she thanked the Adler as he handed her the cup, he gave no reaction and returned right after to Lionel's hand, pen and notepad once again in hand.

"So, Ms. Yang, have you had any experiences throughout your life that you would consider... supernatural? Something you couldn't explain logically, or which made no rational sense to you?"

Elyanna blinked rapidly as she lightly shook her head. "I... I don't understand, what kind of question is-"

"Please, miss," Lionel interrupted, holding up his palm briefly before clasping his hands together again. "Let me ask the questions, and you answer them."

Elyanna nodded and took a deep breath. Despite Special Investigator Moven's polite demeanour and smile, she couldn't help but feel that how she answered his questions would undoubtedly be a matter of life and death.

"Anything at all," Lionel interrupted her again as she opened her mouth. "No matter how small or insignificant you feel it to be."

But she knew better than to give a blackcoat what they wanted.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I can't think of anything, my life has been mostly unremarkable."

Lionel's smile faded somewhat as the Adler beside him took some more notes.

"Has there ever been a time in your life when someone around you acted in a way you couldn't understand? Like they had seen a ghost, or talked to someone who wasn't there, or claimed to see dead people?"

"No," she repeated. "Nothing like that."

After that answer, Lionel's smile disappeared completely, and he sat back upright as he took a moment to adjust his tie.

"One last question, miss. Fifteen days ago, at approximately 1712 hours, you spoke to a Eule unit at Grotewohl Interplanetary Spaceport, EULR-L153," he said, then took a small photograph out of his inner breast pocket and showed it to Elyanna, on it was a CCTV snapshot of them sitting on the bench together along with a timestamp. "Can you tell me what happened during the course of your conversation?"

Elyanna felt a few beads of sweat form atop her brow as she handed the photograph back. She quickly raised her hand and wiped her forehead before they started to trail down her face. The investigator obviously knew what happened that day, and they were just interested in her version of events. If the two did not line up, they would know she had been dishonest with them.

She had to choose her next words carefully.

"EULR-L153 noticed that I was a veteran of the Vinetan War, and decided to talk with me for a bit, I was wearing my fatigues at the time," she started, feeling somewhat assured as she saw Lionel give the slightest nod. "She wanted to ask me what it was like and thank me for my service. But, I guess I said something to her that was upsetting, because soon after she freaked out and ran away... I left as well because I didn't want her to get into any trouble for fraternizing with me," she explained.

"What did you say to the Eule that you believe provoked such a reaction?" Lionel asked.

Elyanna nodded as she prepared to tell what had to be her most convincing lie, or else. "I told her about... the bomb. And how I lived through it." It was only half a lie.

The Adler flipped a page over and continued taking notes. Lionel narrowed his gaze briefly before suddenly smiling again and rubbing his gloved hands together.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Yang, I believe I have everything I need,” he said as he stood up from the stool and affixed his glasses. “Thank you kindly for your cooperation, it will certainly be a valuable asset in my investigation,” he thanked, then held his hand out for a shake, which Elyanna hesitantly accepted.

“Oh, and one last thing,” Lionel mentioned as he shook her hand. “I looked into your service record. I think it is a shame you were never given a commendation for your valour, especially for the Battle of Druven. Your service has truly been a great asset to our nation.”

He and the Adler then wholly surprised Elyanna by saluting in front of her, which she weakly returned after a couple of seconds of shock.

“For the Great Revolutionary!” Lionel chanted.

“For the Great Revolutionary!” Elyanna repeated.

The two then quickly turned and left, and barely a minute later, the hallways buzzed with activity once more.

.....

“You mean someone from the Ministry of Information questioned you right here?”

Elyanna nodded, and her disguised Eule visitor nervously rubbed her forehead.

“What did you tell them?” she asked.

“I didn’t tell him Scheiß,” Elyanna replied. “He basically asked if I’d seen any spooky happenings and I said no. Then he asked about that incident at the spaceport lobby and I gave a big non-answer, then he left,” she explained.

“So, you lied to him,” the Eule asked.

“I omitted certain facts and declined to answer his vague questions, yes.”

“...Do you think he realized you lied to him?”

Elyanna shrugged her shoulders. “Well, he didn’t arrest me, is that good enough?”

The Eule bit her bottom lip as she paced slowly back and forth next to her bed. “Can you walk yet?” she quietly asked.

“I can make it to the bathroom and back, that’s about it.”

She stopped and pinched her chin. “This is bad, we have to get you out now, there’s no telling what could happen next.”

Elyanna leaned forward and looked directly into the Replika’s eyes. “You still haven’t told me who you are, who wants to meet me, or why any of this is important,” she reminded her. “Who’s to say you’re not also working for the Ministry and trying to set me up?” she accused.

“I...” the Eule leaned over and lightly grasped Elyanna’s shoulder. “You have to trust me, Elster.”

Elyanna shook her off. “That’s the second time you’ve called me that, it isn’t even my name!”

“It is though! Well, sort of, it’s complicated, but I can assure you it will all make sense once you see-”

“HELP!” Elyanna tried to shout but was quickly stifled by the Eule covering her mouth with her hands.

“Look,” she said, still having not removed her hands. “Can you just give me one more day? I’ll bring her then, everything will make sense, please... don’t let my sister’s death be in vain,” she pleaded, then slowly removed her hands.

“...Fine,” Elyanna acquiesced. “But just go, I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

The Eule took a couple of steps away before she nodded. “I’m sorry,” she apologized before leaving.

Elyanna waited five minutes and then called a nurse over. It took another five minutes for one to make it to her.

“How can I help you, miss?” an actual Eule nurse asked.

“Discharge me,” Elyanna told her, and then starting removing the leads and IV lines from her body, making the various machines monitoring her start to squeal. “I want to go home.”

The nurse became very alarmed and tried to lightly restrain her. “Miss! I really wouldn’t! You’re still in very bad shape!” she pleaded.

Elyanna shook her off as well and scowled. “I can walk,” she stated. “Bring me my clothes and my discharge papers so I can leave. You can’t force me to stay against my will, I want to go home.”

After a moment, the nurse relented and let go of Elyanna, walking away right after. She came back minutes later with a bag containing her coat and other clothes, alongside a paper on a clipboard for her to sign.

“Yes, I am aware I am asking to be discharged against my doctor’s advice...” Elyanna muttered as she signed the paper. “Thank you,” she thanked the nurse before they took the clipboard and left.

Elyanna then carefully swung her body around so she could stand up, wincing as nearly every part of her body complained about the strain. She hobbled over to the bathroom with her bag of clothes and emerged a few minutes later fully dressed again, and wasted no time in limping away to the nearest exit.

But meanwhile, the Eule nurse who had helped her walked back around the corner of the hallway she had left down and walked into Elyanna’s now vacant room, where she raised her wrist to her lips. “Target has left, she discharged herself and left right after. She seemed rather agitated and anxious... shall I send someone to pursue?” she whispered.

She waited, then nodded to an invisible watcher.

“Understood... Glory to the Empire, and our Grand Empress.”

Regret

Chapter Summary

"Would you wish your pain away? Or does your pain define you too much to toss out?"

Chapter Notes

Big thanks again to seasirocco for helping to give this chapter a beta read.

"I'm sorry, Drew, I screwed up," Erika consoled her friend as they sat together in the busy cafeteria.

Drew sat across from Erika and leaned over the table on one elbow, resting her cheek in her hand as she mindlessly poked her almond tofu with a spork.

The cafeteria was packed with visitors, people waiting for their flights, and staff as the two women were. Finding an open table at all was a challenge, and they had to politely turn down requests from other Eules, Rheas, and even a Star security officer who were looking for just a place to sit down with their food.

But on the positive side, the noise and busyness made any kind of eavesdropping nearly impossible, such that the two felt more comforting talking about their predicament there than in either of their dorms. But to look the part, the two had still gotten something to eat each. Replikas had limited tastes compared to Gestalts; only really getting sweet and salty flavours, so they settled on a plate of almond tofu for Drew and a bowl of strawberry ice cream for Erika.

"Will you say something, please?" Erika pleaded. "Yell at me if you want, but please just say something so I still know you're there."

Drew sighed. "It's not your fault," she said, still looking down at her plate of cube-shaped white pudding.

Erika sunk into her seat and took a spoonful of her ice cream, trying to think. "Well, from what... Elyanna told me, she may not be a suspect anymore in whatever those blackcoats were after. We should go check her apartment and place of work again, maybe we'll catch her there?"

"We should give her some space," Drew said. She then took a bite of her tofu and levelled her head, looking at Erika after she swallowed. "If we push her too hard, we may end up freaking her out the same way Ari was... and there's no telling what could happen if any authorities caught her like that."

Erika winced as she looked away. The sight of those two little round scars on Albert's head was seared into both of their memories.

"Okay, don't do anything that might get Elyanna institutionalized or lobotomized, good idea," she said in agreement, then took another bite of ice cream. "But we've got to do something, right? Even if it's just planning?"

"Honestly, I could use a break as well," Drew added. She then sighed and took another bite. "I'm still trying to put my memories back together coherently, maybe it would be best to come back at this with a clear sense of who I am," she said.

"How long of a break are you thinking?" Erika asked.

Drew shrugged her shoulders. "A few days, at least. I think it'll be good enough for both of us."

Erika nodded before she scooped up her last morsel of pink, strawberry ice cream. "Well, let's work on your memories for now, then," she said. She then swallowed and dropped her spoon back into the empty bowl. "Why the almond tofu, Drew? I don't remember Ariane ever having that dessert."

Drew raised an eyebrow. "Oh, this?" she said, poking the last cube with her spork. "I... remember it from my time on the Penrose-512. We had packets in our rations for making it... Elster and I would often do so together, she really liked it as well..." she explained, staring down contemplatively at her last cube of tofu before she spooned it into her mouth.

Erika reached over and patted her friend's shoulder, getting her to look back up and share a smile with her. "Well, how much of your life... er, Ariane's life, do you remember?" she asked.

Drew put her spork down and balanced her chin in both hands as she thought. "Well... all of it, I think," she said, then closed her eyes and exhaled softly. "It's just a little hard to put every memory in its place, and some of them seem confused with my own memories, and those of Ari's..." she explained.

"Well, what's the last thing you remember?" Erika asked. "Er, that Ariane remembers, sorry?"

"You mean do I remember my death?" Drew replied.

Erika frowned and sunk her head slightly. "Well... I suppose if you put it like that..."

Drew sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "Like I said, it's hard to put everything in its place," she repeated, then sat back upright in her chair. "I don't quite know where the end precisely lies. I remember being very sick, very weak, I was dying, for sure, but what happened last seems to change every time I try and think about it. Sometimes I just remember Elster putting me in the cryo pod and that's it, sometimes we shared one last dance, other times a stranger comes and wakes me up, and other times Elster is there... giving me mercy... and that's not even the end of it, there's even more flashes I get from time to time."

"Does any of it feel real to you?" Erika asked.

Drew frowned. "All of it does. It feels like it all happened, and none of it happened, because I'm still here. There's a feeling of... continuance which I can't explain. Like I closed my eyes one moment and woke up with these new ones," she explained, then sighed and leaned over the table on

her elbows again. “Maybe Elster had these same feelings and chose to ignore them, but I just can’t.”

“Neither can I,” Erika added, then reached out to rub Drew’s forearm. “I struggle a lot with it too. Probably not as much as you, but... having this... having you to focus on helps a lot.”

Drew sighed and lifted her head slightly to rub her eyes. “Thank you, Erika,” she said, then grasped her friend’s hand. “I just wish it was easier... to have this yearning, to know she’s out there, to feel that connection again... but not have it recognized.”

“Hey.” Erika squeezed Drew’s hand back and looked directly into her eyes as she spoke. “I’m not going anywhere, we’ll make this work,” she tried to assure her.

“Just... what if she never fully remembers?” Drew asked, unable to meet Erika’s gaze. “What if we have the wrong Elster?”

“Remember what I told you after I stopped those bullies from picking on you?” Erika asked. She waited for Drew to nod before she continued. “Any meanie who’s giving you trouble will have to go through me. Well, right now your doubts are bullying you, and I’m here to tell you I won’t let them win. You’ll be reunited with your wife, that’s my promise to you,” she said, smiling brightly.”

Drew briefly looked back at Erika’s joyful, optimistic eyes briefly before turning away again, and sighed. “But...”

“But what?”

“But why?” Drew asked, then let go of Erika’s hand. “Why are you doing this? Why are you so committed? I abandoned you!”

Erika’s smile wiped away instantly as she sat with her mouth agape for a few seconds. “Ari, Drew, that’s not true.”

“But I did!” Drew repeated, now starting to hyperventilate. “I abandoned you and Isa, my family! I ran away! For all you did to me, I never paid you back...” she confessed, now starting to weep.

“Who said you ever had to pay us back?” Erika replied, feeling lubricant fluid tears start to build up in turn as she tried to calm her friend. “You didn’t run away, Ariane. You sought freedom, and you obtained it, and I’m happy you did.”

Drew started to shake her head. “Why wasn’t it enough?” she asked, now looking at the space on the table between them. “Why wasn’t your friendship enough for me? Why isn’t it enough now?”

“Because you need more than that, you deserve more than that,” Erika said, then reached over to stroke her cheek. “You needed to be yourself, and you couldn’t do that on Rotfront, and you need your love with you to do that now.”

Drew slowly began to calm down as Erika’s words started to reach her, but she still closed herself off by crossing her arms in front of her chest. “I just... why fight so hard for me? What made me worth it?” she asked.

Erika grabbed Drew’s hand again and squeezed it. “Because you’re a wonderful girl and a wonderful friend,” she said, which got Drew to finally look back at her. “After one act of kindness,

you decided to read books together with us, you shared your collection of books and movies with us. We painted together, laughed together, cried together, you looked out for my needs just as I looked out for you... I think... I think we were destined to meet, maybe the Song of the Gods brought us together because we needed each other.”

Drew exhaled one last time as she fully calmed down, and the two women looked at each other for over a minute as they sat in silence.

“Thank you, Erika,” Drew eventually said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’re welcome, Ariane,” Erika replied, giving her hand one last squeeze before she let go. “We’ll make it through this, together.”

Drew nodded. “Yes, we will.”

“I’m glad you feel so,” Erika replied.

They continued to look into each other’s eyes for a while, then, they both caught each other leaning inward slightly but stopped.

Without a word, they both stood up and left the cafeteria, with Drew leading the way.

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The second the door closed behind them in Drew’s dorm room, Erika pushed her against the wall opposite the bunk bed and pressed her lips into hers. They didn’t even bother to turn the lights on. Drew wrapped her arms around Erika and squeezed her tightly as the two kissed fiercely. She tried to claw at her back for anchoring but found her efforts stymied by the lack of fingernails in Replika hands, and as they continued to kiss, peck and nip at each other, Erika pressed her thigh up against where Drew lacked anywhere to pleasure.

The reality of Replika anatomy threatened to frustrate them both, but luckily, Ariane started to remember what worked with Elster, and she started to draw her hand up Erika’s body from her thigh to her stomach as-

They both froze as the light suddenly illuminated the dark room again. They both looked at the entrance and saw Ivy standing there with her keycard in hand, mouth agape, staring with a look of shock and surprise.

“I’ll uh... I’ll give you two some time...” she quietly mumbled before stepping back and closing the door.

Drew and Erika looked back at each other, still panting from the exertion, and Erika leaned back as she saw Drew’s horrified, saddened look.

“Ariane, Drew, it’s okay,” she choked out.

“No, it’s not okay,” Drew replied as she crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Dummkopf... Idiot... what was I thinking?”

Erika stepped back and clasped her hands together right under her chin. “Ari... I...”

“Please go,” Drew said as she turned around and hung her head against the wall. “I’d like to be alone right now.”

Erika started to reach toward her shoulder but stopped halfway and sighed. “I’m sorry,” she apologised, and left right after.

Drew stood there for a minute, sighing endlessly before she turned the lights back out, walked to her bed, and climbed onto the top bunk, sighing one last time as she rolled onto her side and hugged a pillow to her chest.

“Forgive me,” she muttered, and soon fell asleep.

.....

Elster came to her in her sleep.

It was a good day. Her back hurt a little, but Elster’s smile made all pains manageable, whether they were physical, or mental.

She prepared the milk from a packet of dried powder while Elster mixed the gelatin. They then combined it, gently cooked the mixture, strained it, formed it, and cut it into cubes to be served with a light drizzle of sweet syrup and some rehydrated freeze-dried strawberries.

Elster spooned one of the cubes and a slice of strawberry into her mouth. It wasn’t perfect by any means, but care always went a long way to making a meal feel special.

“I love you, Elster,” she said.

Elster smiled and said something back, but she couldn’t hear any words.

“I wish you’d come back to me,” she said. “I’m not complete without you.”

“But what if I could make you complete?”

The voice wasn’t Elster’s, and she wasn’t in the Penrose-512 anymore.

She sat at a table that looked ripped right out of an old postcard of Vineta she’d seen. A bustling little outdoor cafe on a city corner filled with happy couples at tables on a bright, warm, sunny day. The adjacent road was filled with pedestrians, cyclists, and a slow-passing horse-drawn carriage. She looked at the stranger now sitting across from her, a tall, long, dark-haired Gestalt woman wearing a scruffy denim jacket, and holding out a spoonful of almond tofu for her just as Elster had.

Looking at her deeper, she felt familiar, and yet alien both at the same time.

“I mean it,” she said. “I can make your wishes come true, you just need to accept what I’m offering.”

Ariane leaned away from the Stranger and her spoonful of dessert. “You’re not Elster,” she said.

The Stranger looked somewhat hurt as she frowned. “Am I not?” she asked. “What makes someone that someone? Is it their appearance? Their memories? Their experiences? What makes you Ariane?”

Ariane blinked and didn't answer.

“On Cycle 888, you tried to teach Elster to dance. She was quite clumsy, and she ended up stepping on your feet seven times during your session.”

Ariane swallowed hard and narrowed her gaze at the stranger.

“On Cycle 1257, you had a horrible migraine. You tried to get up and work, but Elster told you to stay in bed, and she brought you some water, aspirin, a toaster pastry, and some medicine to help you sleep.”

Ariane felt the heat start to drain from her face. “H-How do you know that...?”

“On Cycle 3000, to celebrate your anniversary, you and Elster danced together in your room. You played Ständchen in D minor on the record player. Afterwards, you sat together in your bed, and you later made love to each other.”

“Stop!” Ariane shouted, shoving the Stranger's hand holding the spoon away, causing it to fall to the ground to the side. “Who are you?! How do you know these things?!”

The Stranger shrugged. “Because I'm Elster,” she claimed.

“You're not!” Ariane continued to shout, causing a few passersby to look at her. One person even shook her shoulder and asked if she was okay. She tried to push her chair back and stand up but found it and herself rooted in place.

“What if I could make you believe it?” the Stranger asked. Everyone around them suddenly vanished, leaving her alone at the cafe with the Stranger, who held the spoonful of pudding back out to her again. “You may not believe me right now, but I can show you. You'd believe me.”

Ariane rapidly shook her head. “No... no this isn't real...”

“It's as real as everything else you've experienced today.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want what you want.”

“You aren't Elster!” she repeated, and the Stranger finally sighed and put her spoon down.

“I can wait,” she said and pushed her chair back to stand up. “You'll change your mind eventually. I'm very patient.”

Ariane tried again to stand up and found she could do so now. She looked across at the Stranger as a gust of wind blew by, causing her long, black hair to flutter wildly.

“If this is real, and you are doing this... why not take me with you by force?” she asked.

“Because then you wouldn't be Ariane,” the Stranger said, then smiled at her. “I do hope you sleep well... and don't be too hard on your friend, she cares for you deeply... as do I.”

Drew awoke in her bed gasping for air. The lights were still out, and when she checked her internal chronometer, she found not even a minute has passed since she fell asleep.

She hugged her pillow closer and silently wept.

“Please come back... Elster...”

Recovery

Chapter Summary

"If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks again to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Elyanna stepped back into her apartment and sighed.

Everything looked exactly the same. Her bag was where she left her, her garbage bin was still full, there was still a wrapper for instant noodles next to the hot plate, and her bed was just the way she remembered.

She put her keycard on the counter and sat down on her cot, leaning over with her forearms on her knees as she exhaled slowly. She sat there for a while, eventually scooting backward to lean against the wall. She rubbed her thighs, just the walk here from the bus stop was hell for her battered and bruised body, but that was over now, she was safe.

She sighed again before looking at the small, fixed camera which hung just above the door to the hallway. Every room would have a camera like this. Not hidden in the slightest, and rarely actively monitored. Its primary purpose was just to remind the citizens living in these state apartments that there were eyes everywhere and that someone could be watching them at any moment, anywhere.

She stared at the camera a while longer and then stood up.

Elyanna opened all of the doors and drawers of her tiny kitchenette and inspected every nook and cranny in them with her now-powered flashlight, then did the same for her tiny clothes dresser. She pulled her pillow out of its case and squeezed it all over for hard objects, then felt around every part of the cot's frame for anything out of place. She inspected the interior of the mini-fridge, and briefly took the analog clock hanging from the wall off and checked its interiors, nothing. When all that was finished, she stood in the middle of her room scratching her chin for a minute and then picked up her backpack and dumped its contents onto her cot so she could search the interior. For good measure, she also inspected every article of clothing and then riffled through her small trash bin before deciding, finally, that she was safe.

The odds of any hidden microphones or cameras were slim. If there was one in her room, then at this point she was convinced that she wasn't going to find it. Besides, Kolibri blockwarts could inspect the minds of any block residents in an apartment like this with their bioresonance, they didn't need hidden monitoring devices.

And if they were relying on that, Elyanna was convinced that they would always come up short.

She was used to Kolibris from her time in the military, and long ago developed ‘countermeasures’ against their passive mind-reading abilities. If one was listening in your direction, all you had to do was be noisy in a mental sort of way. Counting prime numbers seemed to work well, as were digits of pi, or other numerical or written sequences that required heavy memorization. The mental noise would make it impossible for a Kolibri to listen to your inner thoughts; it wouldn’t do much if they decided to focus on you solely, but Elyanna doubted the Ministry or anyone else would have a Kolibri dedicated to focusing on her alone at all times, so she just needed to keep her mind focused for when she felt any prodding by eavesdroppers trying to enter.

So, she smiled and opened up a can of pork and beans to dump into her saucepan before turning on the hot plate. She then took a packet of cheap hotdogs from her fridge and started cutting a couple of them into little pieces to add to her beans. She always thought the advertising on those cans was laughable. If there was any pork actually in them, it was entirely invisible.

Once warmed up, Elyanna sat down in her cot and took a bite. It was artificial tasting, but still meaty and filling. She checked the time on the clock and ruffled through her bag again to retrieve a cheap, small handheld radio which she set up on the kitchenette counter and turned on.

“...Three attackers coming over the blue line, we’ve got Näslund with the puck, missed a check by Edler, passes to Linden, back to Näslund, Hughes coming up, breaks right, and then passes to Horvat, shoots, he scores! That’ll be two to one with five minutes left in the first period...”

Elyanna smiled and pumped her fist. She missed the football broadcasts that were most popular on Vineta and Heimat. However, she supposed that hockey would prove more feasible on a still developing colony like Rotfront that was predominantly icy and hadn’t yet finished Klimaforming.

She could get used to it. The commentators clearly got to have a lot of fun describing the match.

During the small break in play, she opened her fridge to retrieve a drink, a can of juice in this case, as she hadn’t had the opportunity to go shopping for beer. She sat and ate her meal and drank her drink as she listened to the game, but as she finished, she sighed and stared back at her fridge again.

“...That takes us to our first intermission, we’ve got Vingeault here to go over the important plays of the first period...”

She figured she might as well find out if she was still employed or not.

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The bar was modestly busy that evening with people having come to watch a live television broadcast of the hockey, such that the owner even joined the bartender in working behind the counter.

He saw Elyanna walk in and approach the bar counter and quickly walked out to greet her.

“Praise the Revolutionary, Yang, am I glad to see you!”

Elyanna briefly narrowed her brow and blinked. “I... I’m sorry,” she apologised and gave a short bow.

“What are you apologising for?” her boss asked.

Elyanna stared back in confusion again. “I disappeared for... over two weeks?” she replied.

Her boss shook his head and walked with her back over to the counter, where she sat down on one of the stools. “I heard what happened to you from some friends of yours,” he said, leaning against the side of the counter next to her. “At first I thought they were pulling some scam, but then they showed me a photograph of you looking beaten for your dear life in the hospital... I’m just glad you’re still alive, Yang, what happened?”

“Someone told you I was in the hospital?” Elyanna asked.

“Yeah, two Replikas came in around ten days ago and told me you had been beaten up pretty bad, and I can tell that now just from looking at your bruised face. I just assumed those two were your friends.”

Elyanna looked away briefly as she thought. She didn’t remember anyone taking a photograph of her, but then, that Eule could’ve easily done so if she visited her while she was asleep or still knocked out.

“I got on the bad side of a Storch,” she explained, then looked back at her boss. “Would rather not dwell on it. Truthfully, I just came for a drink, and to see if you had fired me.”

Her boss nodded and walked back behind the counter. “You feel up to working again soon?” he asked.

“I can start again tomorrow,” Elyanna lied. In truth, she still felt horrible, and that a stiff breeze could probably take her out, but rent cheques don’t wait for you to recover from being beaten half to death.

Her boss sized her up with his eyes, and Elyanna had the sneaking suspicion that he could tell she wasn’t being truthful. “You can just take care of cleaning duties for the next week,” he said. “If things get too unruly, just call the polizei for now, I don’t want you to get hurt any worse than you already have.”

Elyanna couldn’t help but laugh. “Why are you so generous with me?” she asked.

Her boss shrugged his shoulders as he wiped a beer glass clean. “I guess it’s because I’m a patriot,” he replied. “Take care of your workers, and they’ll take care of you, right? Always made sense to me,” he explained, then set the glass down. “What drink do you want?” he then asked.

“Oh, an old fashioned will do.”

He smiled and went to work mixing the cocktail. Meanwhile, Elyanna watched the game continue on the television behind the counter. Her chosen team was up another goal just a few minutes into the second period, so she smiled.

“Here, and this one is on me,” he said as he passed her the rocks glass.

Elyanna gave him a silent thanks by nodding and raising the glass, and she took a sip and smiled as she tried to return her attention to the game, but found her boss’ words hung on her mind. She never met the person that Eule wanted to introduce her to, and apparently, it was another Replika.

She thought back to her first week on the job, and seeing that odd-looking Rhea unit at the bar. It seemed like a huge coincidence, but she couldn't help but think maybe it was her, and she saw something odd in her as well.

She then sighed and took another sip of her cocktail, deciding it was best not to dwell on it.

By the third period, she was on her second cocktail and loudly cheering on the players alongside many of the other patrons.

"Oh come on!" she complained. "Is the ref blind?! That was clearly interference! The guy hit him from behind!"

Many other patrons were just as irate, and the grumbling went on for a few seconds, but afterwards, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Nice to see you having some fun tonight!"

She turned and saw a smiling, brunette Gestalt woman leaning on her side against the counter, holding a glass of beer. She was wearing a knee-length grey skirt, and a plain black tee, and had her hair tied into a short ponytail.

Elyanna smiled back. "It's a good game so far," she answered. "Didn't think I would get this into hockey, but it can be pretty exciting."

The woman hopped up on the empty stool next to her and rested her chin in her palm as she continued to smile at her. "Seen you here a few times, you work here?" she asked.

"Yeah," Elyanna replied, then picked up her glass and gave it a little shake. "But today, I'm just a customer."

She said nothing back right away and just sat quietly for a moment until Elyanna finished her second drink in one last sip.

"Can I buy you another one of those, girl?"

Elyanna looked back at the woman and raised an eyebrow. "Now why do you want to do that?" she asked inquisitively.

She laughed. "Because I'm trying to flirt with you, dumbass," she said, smiling wildly.

After a moment to think, Elyanna shrugged her shoulders. "Well, it would be rude of me to say no to such a considerate offer, but..."

The woman didn't answer right away as she called the bartender over, but after she had placed her order 'for the pretty, young lady here' she looked back at Elyanna. "But what?"

"Just..." Elyanna paused and scratched her head, trying to think of a way to ask her question that wouldn't come off as rude. "You're flirting with a one-eyed woman with bruises all over her face and body and a cast on her leg... I just can't help but think a cute girl like you has probably got better picks to seek out."

The bartender handed Elyanna her third cocktail and she clinked the glass together with the woman before they both took a sip of their respective drinks.

“Well, like I said, I’ve seen you here a few times,” she said, then took another large sip of beer. “You always looked so gruff, so sad and lonely,” she paused to imitate a pouty face which made Elyanna chuckle. “Maybe I have a thing for little abandoned birdies with broken wings I can nurse back to health?”

“Point made,” Elyanna agreed.

“And besides,” the woman said, puffing her face out slightly as she mock frowned. “It is a sad fact that the majority of women are not as beautiful and fruity as we are.”

They both laughed at her remark, and Elyanna leaned a little closer to her new admirer.

“So, what gave me away?” she asked.

The woman lazily waved her hand. “Please,” she muttered, still laughing quietly to herself. “You know what it’s like. You be in the game long enough, you just get a sixth-sense about it, and my gaydar always went wild whenever I saw you,” she explained. “Known I was a girl kisser since I was eight, always wondered why I needed to have a husband when playing house, couldn’t I have a wife?”

“Thirteen,” Elyanna added, taking a sip of her cocktail. “First secondary school dance. I just kind of sat alone on the side, felt really awkward. Then, a sophomore girl asked me for a dance, and soon I felt like my heart was going to literally explode.”

“It do be like that,” she joked.

“Indeed.”

Soon after, Elyanna was startled by a new sensation. She looked down and saw that the woman had started lightly rubbing her thigh. She looked back up at her red eyes, and she winked at her.

“I know you’re a bit bruised up, but...”

She started tracing fingers on her leg with her fingertip.

“...You feel like testing that heart of yours again?”

Elyanna blinked a few times before picking up her glass and finishing the rest of the cocktail in one go, lightly slamming the glass back on the counter as the drink burned its way down her throat.

“I’ve got a nice place,” the woman said. “Come on, we can just walk there.”

She stood up not a second later.

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The second the apartment door closed behind her, the woman pushed Elyanna against it and furiously attacked her lips. She wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged her close, just tight enough to cause a mild amount of discomfort across her torso, but that hardly mattered when a gorgeous woman had her tongue inside her mouth.

They eventually broke for air, and Elyanna hung her head as she panted slowly, looking off to the side. The woman peeled away and grabbed her hand, leading her into the apartment proper. It was

just a small, class eight dwelling, just one room with a combined kitchen and bedroom, but it was still greatly ahead of the closet she was stuck in. The woman pulled her over to her twin-sized bed and positioned her against the foot of the bed. Then, with a small smirk, she gave her a good push, sending Elyanna tumbling backward onto the mattress, and before she could even lean up, she straddled her hips and bent over to start leaving a trail of kisses up from her neck to her lips.

Elyanna sighed and looked off to the side as the woman kissed went down her neck again. She felt her hands start to fumble with the buttons of her shirt, and instinctually she raised her hands to assist.

“No, no,” the woman said, pushing her arms down to the sides. “You’ve had a rough time, sweetie, just sit back and let me make you feel all better.”

Elyanna smiled but still looked off to the side, finding herself drawn to examining her admirer’s living room. She had a decent-sized television, a little stack of video cassettes to its side, a couch with some books on it, and a record player on its own little table.

“Hey, look up here, love,” the woman beckoned, and she hesitantly stared back into her beautiful red eyes.

She bent over and kissed her again, and Elyanna raised her arms again to loosely wrap around her back.

“Hey,” she repeated, and suddenly sat up on her knees, staring down at her confusingly. “You alright?”

Elyanna blinked and dropped her smile. “Yeah?” she hesitantly replied.

The woman frowned and reached down to stroke her cheek. “I don’t think your heart is in it tonight, love,” she accused.

Elyanna waited a few seconds for her to say anything else, but when she didn’t, she sighed. “I guess I’m not,” she agreed.

The woman continued to frown for a moment before getting down on her side next to Elyanna on the bed and smiling at her once more. “You... just wanted some company?” she asked.

After a moment to think about it, Elyanna nodded.

The woman pecked her on her forehead. “We don’t have to have sex,” she said. “I’ve got chips and pop, we could just watch a movie and then cuddle together,” she suggested.

“I think I’d like that,” Elyanna said.

She kissed her again on the cheek before she hopped out of bed and went to the kitchen, where she opened some cupboards and pulled out a couple of bags of chips and some bowls.

“Oh, oh yeah,” she then said aloud, and laughed at herself briefly before turning to Elyanna and saying, “My thirsty ass never got your name?”

Elyanna grinned back. “Isn’t it customary to introduce yourself first when asking someone’s name?”

“Smartass,” she replied, and flicked a potato chip at her, which Elyanna managed to catch with her teeth. “But, you have a point.”

“My name is Alina, what’s yours?”

Suddenly, Elyanna felt the hairs on her arms raise as if she had suddenly been hit by a chilly breeze.

“Me?” she replied, stuttering in her own words. “I’m Ly... Elyanna.”

Alina came over and handed her a bowl of chips and a can of brandless pop. “Well, nice to meet you, Elyanna,” she officially greeted, and the two walked over to the couch, where Alina started looking through her collection of movies. “Any preferences?”

“Anything’s fine, just no war movies, please,” she said. “They bring back bad memories.”

Alina turned to her and frowned slightly. “You’re a veteran too, eh?”

“Vineta,” she answered and then raised an eyebrow. “Just like you.”

“Nice catch,” Alina said, then smiled and held up a cassette. “Here, got a really sappy romance flick, maybe you’ll feel more in the mood afterward.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Elyanna said.

Alina started the movie and flopped onto the couch right next to her. Elyanna wrapped an arm around Alina’s shoulders, and she slotted into the space just next to her chin.

However, partway through the movie, she felt herself starting to doze off, even as Alina commented on the happenings every few minutes. At one point, she fell asleep, and a quiet voice echoed in the back of her head.

“This is what you want, right?”

“...”

“Hey, you want to go to sleep?”

She was awoken by Alina pinching her cheek and grinning at her.

“Ah, sorry,” she apologised. “Won’t happen again.”

“It’s alright,” Alina said. “But I won’t wake you up if you doze off again. You just look so cute when you’re sleeping.”

They both chuckled, and Elyanna hugged her new companion a little closer.

She smiled.

She could get used to this.

Guilt

Chapter Summary

"Can you miss something you never got to experience?"

Chapter Notes

Once again big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

And so, with only one major incident of depression, anxiety, and yearning-fueled descent into pseudo-infidelity behind her, Drew tried her very best to return to a normal life, whatever one could call that for a Replika such as herself. She tried to put Elster and by proxy, the Gestalt woman who she was sure carried her spark to the side and just focus on her job and friends, which proved depressingly difficult at every turn.

She was good at her job of space traffic controlling, considering that in one moment she had more or less doubled her experience performing such tasks, and such skill didn't go unrecognized, as on the next week's review after the incident, she found herself earning a five percent raise from Mo, the supervisor.

It didn't make up for her ordering the execution of her friend, but more rationmarks meant more leeway with what she could get away with. One of the first things she did with her new, marginally inflated paycheck was to go to an art store and stealthily purchase something that would surely be considered a major contraband item for a REAR-type unit such as herself.

She bought a sketchbook.

Drew kept it hidden by having Erika hold onto it, as such an item would not be considered suspicious in the hands of a Eule, and there was nowhere in her dorm that she felt it could be kept safe from a random room inspection. It did mean that she still had to see and talk to Erika when she still felt an overwhelming urge to put some distance between herself and her friend, but she knew the two would have to work together again eventually, she couldn't cut her off entirely.

She found blindspots in the camera to do her drawing, often by flashlight in the dead of night, and rather than start with a landscape, as she had so often painted on the Penrose-512, she christened her new sketchbook with the best-penciled recreation of her dear Elster's face that she could make from memory. It wasn't perfect, it couldn't be, but seeing her own finished work put the slightest of smiles on Ariane's face, so the next day she drew another.

And then another.

And another.

Another.

By the next week, she had filled her sketchbook with Elsters in various poses and activities. Smiling Elster, frowning Elster, sleepy Elster, Elster carrying boxes, Elster blushing, Elster replacing some piping, Elster dancing, Elster kissing her.

So, she put the sketchbook away. It was doing more harm than good.

She tried to engage more with her two coworkers on the same shift, going out to get meals with them, to live orchestra performances, and even a hockey game together, but things never truly felt right. Ivy was always so pushy of both her and Fio, trying to get info on her 'relationship' with Erika, or trying much too hard to cheer up the increasingly despondent Fio, and she wouldn't accept that either of them needed space to work out their issues. For Fio, that was missing Ari dearly. Drew wanted so badly to tell her that their mutual friend wasn't exactly gone completely, but even if she could, she doubted Fio would believe her, she had a hard time believing that she was three different people in one.

Maybe someone would start a religion around her. That is if religion as a concept wasn't banned in the Nation. The only worshipping that was permitted was that of the Great Revolutionary and her family.

But as she spent more and more time around her, the Ariane side of her increasingly wanted to comfort Fio in ways only she could relate to, which made it even harder to stay silent. In the end, she once again had to hope that friendship would be enough, even though it never was to any of them.

No matter what she tried, her thoughts always returned to Elster.

So, against her better judgment, she went to see her.

On a day off, she bussed over to the bar where she worked, the place where they had first seen each other. She wasn't planning on talking to Elster, or, Elyanna, as she went by in this new life, but she just had to see her and know that after everything, she was doing alright. Perhaps that would bring her some peace.

She sat in the corner of the bar with a glass of pop and wore a cheap hoodie to partially disguise herself, she didn't want Elyanna to know she was effectively spying on her, especially after she and Erika had inadvertently spooked her into fleeing the hospital before she had even fully recovered. She got there early, intended to more or less stake out the place until Elyanna arrived, just hoping that this was a working day for her.

She sunk back in her seat amidst the constant chatter at the tables around her. The more she thought about her plan, the less well she thought of it. She didn't like the thought that she was basically stalking someone, even if that someone was her wife. It just felt wrong, but she couldn't turn away, she needed to see her.

And there she was.

Elyanna walked in with an energy that exuded life, it instantly drew a smile to Drew's face, but said smile didn't last long, as coming in right behind her was another woman.

"Come on, Alina, we're going to miss the start of the game!" she heard Elyanna call out.

“And who’s fault is that? You spent fifteen minutes just playing with your hair!”

“Hey, I was just happy to be able to use a hairbrush again!”

“Then let me help you with it next time, Ellie. I know how to tame that messy head of yours.”

A woman who held her hand. A woman who smiled at her, who laughed with her.

And now, a woman who kissed her.

She shouldn’t have been surprised, from what she and Erika had gathered, the woman that was Elster hadn’t accessed her memories like the two of them had. Right now, she was just the same as any ordinary Gestalt woman, and Gestalts had needs, she didn’t think those needs necessarily involved sticking your tongue deep inside the mouth of another Gestalt woman, but clearly, Elyanna had those needs because she was doing it right in front of her just a few tables away.

Part of her wanted to cry. Another part of her wanted to march up to Elyanna and demand that she look in her eyes and remember her. A third part of her wanted to pick Elyanna up and run away.

She elected to listen to none of them and simply walked out of the bar after paying for her drink.

Back in the bar, Elyanna broke away from her kiss and turned toward the door as it swung shut.

Alina pinched her on the cheek and she looked back. “What’s got you turning away from paradise, girl?” she asked.

Elyanna sighed lightly and blinked. “Just a weird sensation... like someone was pulling me... probably just my imagination,” she said, and then pressed her lips back against her girlfriend’s.

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Ivy was in their dorm when Drew trudged back to her bed.

“Hey, girl, had a good night out?”

Drew paused at the door with her hand against the frame. Ivy put down the book she was reading in her bunk and got a look at her coworker.

“Oh, damn, are you okay?” she asked, immediately swinging her legs out and standing up as Drew shuffled over to the ladder to the top bunk.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she choked back, voice cracking on nearly every syllable.

Ivy put her hand on Drew’s back as she got on the ladder, but she didn’t stop climbing, and Ivy slid her hand off as she got into bed.

“Um... is it about your girlfriend?” Ivy asked.

Drew rolled onto her side facing the wall and loudly sighed.

Ivy pulled herself up the side of the bunk bed. “Just want you to know you’re not alone,” she whispered.

Drew sighed again. “For now, though, I am,” she replied. Ivy sighed as well and climbed back down into bed. Drew then reached into one of the pockets of her hoodie and pulled out a piece of folded paper. It was one of her drawings of Elster, she felt as though keeping one on her could work as a good luck charm, but as reality had just shown her, she was only lucky to be alive, not lucky anywhere else. She stared at the picture for a minute and then neatly folded it back up and slipped it back into her pocket.

A few more minutes of thoughtless wall-staring passed, and then Ivy spoke out to her again. “Hey, I’m going out for a bit, you want anything?”

“Chocolate cake,” Drew half-jokingly, half-seriously replied.

Ivy whistled. “That bad, eh? Alright... you want the lights out?”

“Yes, please, thank you.”

Ivy shut the lights out and left without another word. Drew pulled one of her spare pillows against her chest and sighed wearily as she closed her eyes.

When she next opened them, she was sitting on a log atop a rocky beach, wearing a long sundress and wide-brimmed straw hat. A cool, salty breeze cut through the beating heat of the sun as gentle waves came crashing against the rocky shoreline. She looked to her side and saw the Stranger sitting on the log next to her. She wore sandals, plain shorts, a t-shirt, and an unbuttoned flannel shirt which fluttered with every breeze alongside her long, ebony hair. She stared out to the sea through a pair of sunglasses and leaned over with her forearms against her knees.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” she asked.

The Stranger didn’t turn to look at her. “I have nothing to say,” she claimed. She then picked up a small rock and chucked it far into the waves. “I just thought you might want some company.”

“So, you know,” Ariane asked.

“I’ve been watching out for you for a long time,” the Stranger replied. She was about to toss a second stone when she paused and then took off her sunglasses. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to come off as some kind of stalker.”

Ariane pulled her knees against her chest as another big breeze flew by. “It’s okay,” she said. “Or rather, I get it,” she quickly added.

The Stranger turned and looked down at her. She carried a look of equal guilt and empathy, and as Ariane got a better and better look at her, she felt herself start to almost relax.

“You don’t deserve to feel so negatively about yourself,” the Stranger said.

“But let me guess, you can make me feel better?” Ariane replied sarcastically.

“No, I can’t,” the Stranger immediately replied. She then put her sunglasses back on and stood up, making Ariane have to tilt her head back as far as she could to see her head atop her extremely tall frame. “There’s only one person who can make you feel better right now, and I’m not her.”

Ariane narrowed her look. “But you-”

“I might be Elster, but I’m not your Elster,” she said, then turned away. “And you’re not my Ariane,” she added as she began to walk off the log onto the beach.

Ariane quickly got to her feet and tried to carefully navigate the rocky terrain in her bare feet so she could keep up with the Stranger. “I get it,” she called out as she finally caught up. “None of us are who we were, but for some reason, but we’re still those people,” she said, coming to a stop just as the Stranger did.

“You do still want her, right?” she quietly asked, Ariane was sure she heard her voice crack at least once.

She walked around in front of the Stranger and tried to get a look at her face, but found her hair obscuring most of the view with the wind suddenly at a standstill.

“More than anything,” she replied.

The Stranger sighed and turned her head away. “Maybe... it was wrong to...”

Everything stopped entirely for a moment, and then the world broke as the Stranger fell to her knees screaming and clutching her head. All around her, the world erupted into flame, cracks in the sky began to leak blood-red fluid, and the ground shook with great intensity. Ariane rushed forward and put her hands on the Stranger’s shoulders.

“W-What’s wrong?!” she asked.

The Stranger panted quickly in between screams. “You have... to leave...!”

“What’s happening to you?” Ariane asked, pulling her head up and looking into her eyes, they had blood all around them.

“They’re trying... to force... their way in...!”

She put her hands over Ariane’s cheeks and looked back into her.

“Don’t let... get... her... save us...”

The Stranger then suddenly went limp as her eyes rolled back into her head. Ariane tried to keep her up, but she fell over too quickly, and as soon as her head hit the ground, the world whited out.

Drew woke up blinking furiously.

She laid on her side for a few more minutes, and then an urge overtook her. She got out of bed and left, she was done waiting around.

.....

“Erika!” Drew quietly called out as she knocked on her dormitory door, making sure the hallway was clear first. “I need to talk to you!”

After a few moments, the door slid open, and Erika quickly pulled her inside.

“Drew, I-” Erika quickly began to talk, but Drew silenced her just as quickly.

“We can’t wait, we need to get her,” Drew blurted out. “I just... I have a bad feeling... it’s not safe here, I think we need to get off Rotfront,” she explained, heavily panting in panic.

Erika held her friend’s shoulders and waited for her to calm down enough before she spoke. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, sliding her hands down her arms until they both held hands between them.

“Isa’s still alive,” Erika whispered to her.

Ariane’s eyes went wide. “Are you sure?” she asked back. “How?”

“She came to me in a dream, told me where she was, begged me to come save her.”

Ariane squeezed her friend’s hands tightly. “Where is she?”

Erika looked off to the side and swallowed loudly before looking back at Ariane.

“She’s on Heimat.”

Comfort

Chapter Summary

"Stagnation is death."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks again to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

Elyanna had forgotten what it felt like to have lazy mornings.

Every day was a hustle just to survive. For years she scrounged for food, jobs, rationmarks, anything just to survive,

But a couple of months on Rotfront and she had a decently paying job, clean clothes, her own place, and could spend the morning cuddling her girlfriend up against her chest.

Was Alina her girlfriend? They'd gone out on dates, kissed each other, shared meals, and now, even made love, but she realized they'd never formally defined what was going on between the two, even as Elyanna increasingly spent more and more nights over at her place.

She even had her own drawer in the dresser now.

Elyanna looked down at Alina's sideways head atop her breast and smiled. She seemed to sense that she was being watched, as soon after she cracked an eye open and smiled back at her.

"Good morning, beautiful," she greeted, raising an arm to rub at her tired eyes.

Elyanna tugged Alina a little closer so she could kiss the top of her head. "You drool in your sleep," she pointed out.

Even though she could see the small, damp spot in Elyanna's cleavage, Alina still grinned and pouted back at her. "I do not!" she fired back.

"It's cute," Elyanna told her, pinching her cheek as she puffed them out in mock anger. "You're adorable, you know?"

Alina climbed up Elyanna's body and hovered her lips right over hers. "No, you," she countered and then locked lips with her before she could retaliate.

Elyanna wrapped her arms around Alina's back as the two made out fiercely. Alina moved one knee across her partner's hips to straddle her, but as Elyanna slowly slid her hands down her back,

tracing her spine until she rounded the curve of her ass, she suddenly pushed herself up and away from Elyanna's lips and grasp.

"As much as I'd love to," Alina said to the devastated woman beneath her as she climbed out of bed and onto her feet. "I do have work this morning," she regretfully explained as Elyanna rolled onto her side to continue facing her.

Elyanna now found herself pouting as Alina walked her still bare self to the kitchen and began opening cabinets. "On my day off?" she said as Alina took out a pair of bowls and a box of very generic-looking cereal. "Take a sick day!" she pleaded.

Alina folded her arms and balanced her chin on her thumb and forefinger as she thought. "Temping," she said. "But then, I kind of want to see how hot and bothered you'll be by the time I get off my shift," she teased, grinning wildly.

"You're cruel, you know that?" Elyanna teased back, briefly sticking her tongue out at her. "You're evil and vindictive-"

"-And sexy," Alina interrupted, winking at her as she put some bread down in the toaster.

"Yes, and very sexy," Elyanna concluded, now looking somewhat flushed. She then coughed loudly and swung her legs over the side of the bed to sit up. "So uh, do you want me out of here while you're gone? Or..."

Alina looked back at her with an eyebrow raised. "I gave you a spare key to the place, didn't I?" she asked.

Elyanna looked down and scratched the back of her head. "I guess I just... I dunno..." she trailed off as she continued to look at the ground, slowly bouncing her knees against the bare, concrete floor of the apartment.

The toaster popped, and Alina interrupted Elyanna's thoughts by asking, "Jam, or marmalade?"

"Oh, jam is fine, please," she answered. She continued to sit contemplating until Alina handed her a bowl of cereal and a slice of toast with jam spread before sitting down next to her on the bed with the same. She picked up her slice of toast and bit into it with a satisfying crunch as Alina slurped back a spoonful of cereal, and as she sat there watching her eat while chewing, she eventually paused.

"Ok, what's on your mind, miss deep, dark, and complex?" Alina finally asked her.

Elyanna waited a few seconds before swallowing and weakly smiling. "What are we, exactly?" she asked.

Alina again looked puzzled. She took another mouthful of cereal and shrugged her shoulders.

"What do you want us to be?" she asked after swallowing. "Is this just a casual, short fling to you, or something more... long-term?"

Elyanna was about to take another bite of her toast when she stopped and sighed at Alina's question. "What I want is..." She trailed off again, looking down at the floor once more. "Good things in my life have a habit of... not sticking around..." she said morosely.

“Hey,” Alina called out to her, wrapping an arm around her bare shoulders. “Do you think I’m going to get tired of you and look for another girl toy?” she asked, looking her dead in the eyes.

After a moment, Elyanna shook her head. “Not that, more... I just can’t help but feel something bad is going to happen. It’s been the story of my life, every time I’m happy, something threatens to take it away,” she explained, sighing afterward. “And you... you’re the best thing to happen to me in years. We may have only known each other for a couple of weeks, but I already feel as though I’ve known you for years, like you were always meant to be part of my life.”

Alina nodded and rested her head against Elyanna’s shoulder. “Well then, if something bad does happen, we’ll face it together, okay?”

“You promise?” Elyanna asked.

Alina grinned and kissed her on the cheek before sitting upright again. “What do I look like, a liar?” she teased but then cut away her smile as she caught another glimpse of her partner’s overly contemplative face. “I mean it, I’m not going anywhere, Ely,” she said.

Elyanna finally started to smile again, and Alina leaned over to peck her lips.

“The answer’s yes, by the way,” she said.

“To what?” Elyanna asked, blinking her one eye rapidly.

Alina smiled and rubbed her thigh against hers. “You were going to ask if we’re girlfriends, right?”

Elyanna huffed and kissed her back on the cheek. “Maybe,” she teased. “I was thinking about it.”

They both laughed and briefly nuzzled their heads against each other.

“Alright, now eat your cereal before it gets soggy, soldier,” Alina said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Elyanna replied, and the two clinked spoons together.

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“So, you work at a bookstore?” Elyanna asked as Alina laced up her shoes. She continued to lounge in bed, just now while wearing a borrowed pair of gray sweatpants and a loose, black t-shirt. “That must be nice, can’t possibly get bored with everything you’d have around to read.”

Alina tugged her shoelaces tight and then moved onto the other foot. “It can still get pretty dull most of the time, it’s not exactly a thriving business,” she explained. “Every week new books get added to the offensive literature registry and we have to take them off the shelves, almost always the really interesting ones,” she complained. Once finished with her shoes, Alina stood up and grabbed her jacket off the wall hook, but stopped briefly to check her watch. “Oh, well, my bus isn’t for another fifteen minutes, so...” Alina then hopped over to the bed and fell back into Elyanna’s arms, cuddling up against her side and onto her chest just as they had been sleeping together. “You’re too cozy,” she teased, playfully giving her other breast a squeeze. “I don’t know how I ever slept so well without you.”

Elyanna smiled and hugged her new girlfriend a little tighter against her body, but soon after, Alina loudly yelped and clutched her head hard.

“Alina?” Elyanna called out in a panic as she writhed in place. “Alina what’s wrong?”

However, just as quickly as it came, it quickly went away, leaving Alina a little sweaty and panting hard into her chest.

“Alina!?”

“It’s okay,” she replied, trying to calm her breathes. “Like I said yesterday, I just get these random... painful headaches every once in awhile...” she explained, then looked up at her girlfriend’s concerned face. “If you want to help, take my mind off it, keep talking to me,” she said.

“...Alright,” Elyanna acknowledged, gently patting her hair as Alina continued to try and calm down. “So, what do you do with all of those banned books?” she asked.

“Well, we’re supposed to surrender them for disposal,” Alina said, shutting her eyes and exhaling softly as she settled further into Elyanna’s chest. “But since they don’t check our inventory very often, it’s easy to sneak a novel or two away and have them be none the wiser.”

“And what do you do with them?”

Alina chuckled and kissed Elyanna’s breast over her shirt. “Well, if you must know, Officer, I keep some of them here, hidden away, but a few others we sell on the black market when business is slow,” she explained, then lifted herself to better look at Elyanna’s face. “Strangely, they’ve left our girls’ love and other gay publications mostly alone, unless they directly promote any kind of anti-government or anti-authority message.”

Elyanna shared a brief kiss with Alina before she laid back down on her. “It’s mostly just cynical pandering,” she claimed, rubbing her shoulder. “The Nation thinks it’ll boost their legitimacy and support if they appear forward-thinking on social issues, especially when compared to the Empire. It’s the same reason they pay for hormones and would’ve paid for my surgery had I not been kicked out of the army and ended up homeless,” she explained.

Alina immediately got out of her grip and stood up on her knees, looking a little pale and concerned. “Wait, then, when we... last night... were you...?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Elyanna consoled her. “I sorta figured out later that I’m comfortable with my body.”

“Oh, good, I was worried for a second there,” Alina said, sighing as she settled back in next to her girlfriend. “Still, for as good as the Nation likes to present itself, it didn’t stop my parents from kicking me out when they caught me kissing my secondary school sweetheart.”

Elyanna immediately frowned. “I’m so sorry,” she appologised. “That’s horrible...”

Alina rolled her face into Elyanna’s cleavage and sighed peacefully. “It’s all right,” she replied, her words slightly muffled by Elyanna’s shirt. “Cause my girlfriend’s family ended up taking me in afterward, treated me as their own daughter and everything, it’s their bookstore I actually work at... they were so kind...” she said, sniffing lightly afterwards.

Elyanna felt a cold chill descend down her back as she quietly swallowed. “Did... something happen to them?” she hesitantly asked.

“We both got drafted... only I made it back,” Alina explained, sniffing and choking more into Elyanna’s chest with each breath. “Dad got imprisoned and later executed on some bogus charges because he refused to pay a corrupt officer’s protection fee. The other daughters got sent to some re-education facility on Leng, haven’t heard from them in years, and after it all, Mom broke down, and she’s in an institution now.”

Elyanna tried to offer whatever meaningless, comforting words that came to her mind, but nothing came out. Instead, she simply squeezed Alina tightly and held her for the next couple of minutes as she slowly broke through her sobs.

“What about you?” Alina eventually chokingly asked.

“I’m afraid I’m also an only survivor,” Elyanna calmly explained. “Our house on Vineta got bombed the day after my eight birthday. The only other thing that survived that day was a little toy soldier I got as a gift that I happened to have brought into bed with me.” She then sighed and rubbed her eyebrows. “Ended up living in a state-run orphanage until the earliest age I could enlist. The other kids there... well I’ll just say I had no friends growing up.”

“Fuck,” Alina said, rolling back onto her side and weakly smiling at Elyanna. “I think you got my tragic backstory beat, love.”

“What do I win?” Elyanna jokingly asked.

“This,” Alina replied, and she straddled Elyanna’s hips as the two kissed each other fiercely. However, as Elyanna inevitably began to slide her hands down Alina’s back again, she sat back up and grinned at her once more. “Patience, my little birdie,” she teased.

Elyanna then sat up on the foot of the bed as Alina grabbed her jacket and slipped it on. “Is there uh, anywhere that’s off limits?” she asked.

“Underwear drawer is the top drawer, pornography is hidden underneath the chair cushion, and the password to my computer is applesauce,” Alina told her, then leaned over to kiss her one last time on the cheek. “That should keep you busy until I get back,” she said, then grinned devilishly. “Assuming you just can’t wait a measly nine hours...”

Elyanna looked back at her girlfriend and let her jaw drop for a few seconds. “You’re evil,” she repeated, swallowing hard and trying not to laugh. “Just pure evil, Alina.”

“Just purely in love,” she replied, and they hugged briefly before she went to the door. “See you in a bit, Ely.”

“Hey,” Elyanna called out as Alina put her hand on the door control panel. “...Don’t have too much fun while you’re gone, Ali, and take care of yourself.”

Alina blew her a kiss and winked as she walked out.

With the door shut behind her, Elyanna was now alone in her girlfriend’s apartment, and she patted her knees as she thought of something to do.

She could go out and explore this block of Rotfront some more, maybe even surprise Alina by visiting her shop, but she had already seen most of the city by that point, and after her run in with

the polizei some weeks ago, she had been reluctant to spend any more amount of time on the streets then was strictly necessary.

So, instead, she walked over to the television and browsed the selection of movies Alina had neatly stacked on the table it sat on, eventually picking one about a spaceship crew's desperate attempts to make it home after an explosion disables their ship. She briefly stepped into the kitchen to grab a bag of potato chips as the opening credits played on the screen, but she had barely sat down for more than a couple of seconds before someone loudly knocked on the door.

Elyanna froze. She hadn't discussed with Alina how to handle people at the door, and as she waited, whoever was there didn't announce themselves as polizei or other authorities.

"Who is it?" she loudly called back, but there was no answer.

More knocks. Elyanna put her bowl of chips on the living room table and groaned as she went to the door.

"What do you wa-"

She froze again.

Standing at the door was a REAR-type Replika.

But as Elyanna looked at her, she began to blink rapidly. She started to lose her sense of balance as she felt increasingly lightheaded, and took a step backward to steady herself.

The Rhea stepped forward as well.

As Elyanna finally managed to settle her eyes and get a good look at her visitor again, briefly she saw not a black haired and blue eyed Replika, but a white haired and red eyes Gestalt woman wearing a thin, white slip dress.

She rubbed her eyes, and noticed that her visitor had tears running down her cheeks.

"What... who... why... I don't understand..." Elyanna muttered, reaching up to rub the growing sweat on her forehead.

"Elyanna... I need your help," the Replika told her.

Elyanna shook her head. "Who... how do you know my name?" she asked.

"I can explain everything," she claimed, and held out her hand. "Will you give me a chance?"

In her head, Elyanna couldn't help but imagine taking her visitor's hand and dancing alongside her on instinct. Every urge in her body screamed at her to try and run away again, that this was some ploy, or entrapment, but her mind could only conjure happy images the longer she stood in front of her.

And then, those doubts washed away as a weak, tiny voice echoed in her head.

"Help."

Slowly, she reached out and took her hand.

Leader

Chapter Summary

"Truth is an opinion."

Lights flickered inside the Penrose-512. More and more undisposed bags of garbage lined the halls. Doors took seconds to slowly and painfully slide open; if they opened at all. Pipes leaked lukewarm steam and wastewater into rooms and halls. The odour of decay hung in the air everywhere.

The ship was dying.

Its inhabitants were dying.

And yet, they danced.

One last dance set to an invisible tune, the record playing having broken ages ago.

One last day to pretend that they were still alive, and that weren't coasting on borrowed time.

One last moment to restate their love for each other.

And as the pod doors closed and the sedative began to take effect, a promise was uttered.

"I will come back for you."

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"...You came back."

Ariane tightened her grip on Elyanna's hand as she watched her eye slowly widen. She tried to control her breathing and not break down in front of her lost love, but a few errant sobs still broke the way. She put her other hand atop Elyanna's and looked deeply at her as she stared back at her.

"...Elster...?" she quietly whispered.

Elyanna blinked. Ariane held her breath.

And then, she pulled her hand away.

"Why did you come back?" she asked.

Ariane lost her breath and choked. "Do you remember?" she weakly asked.

Elyanna swallowed as she looked at her increasingly desperate face. "You were there in the bar, you were there outside my apartment, you were the one who wanted to see me in the hospital."

After a moment, Ariane nodded.

Elyanna narrowed her look. “Who are you?” she asked.

The dream ended.

“I can tell you,” Drew said. “Everything.”

Elyanna looked away for a moment before she quickly exhaled and nodded, then stepped aside.

“Thank you,” Drew thanked as she walked into the apartment, Elyanna closing the door behind her.

“Why don’t you sit down over there?” Elyanna said, gesturing to the armchair next to the sofa in the living room. Drew nodded and sat down with her hands atop her knees whilst Elyanna took up the far side of the sofa, crossing one leg over the other as she watched her inquisitively.

Drew rubbed her knees and then fiddled her thumbs together. An awkward silence hung between them for almost a minute, only broken by Drew occasionally sighing.

“This might be hard... and take a while to explain,” she said, unable to meet Elyanna’s gaze at first, but as she finally did, Elyanna nodded, and she did as well.

Drew took a deep breath, and let Ariane’s words flow through her.

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She wasn’t sure what to expect as she finally finished telling their story.

Elyanna sat silently and listened to her every word, only occasionally nodding or asking a question to clarify what she had said, and when she was over, she continued to sit and watch her.

More awkward silence hung between them, eventually broken once more by Drew’s increasing insecurity.

“You... don’t believe me, do you?” she asked, fully expecting Elyanna at this point to chase her out of the apartment or tell her to leave at any moment.

But instead, she sighed and shook her head.

“With a story like that, you’re either insane, or telling the truth, and you don’t sound crazy,” Elyanna admitted.

“Thank you...” Drew sighed, immediately feeling more relaxed even as she knew things were far from over.

Elyanna then uncrossed her legs and leaned forward as she exhaled slowly. “I only have one question about your story,” she said. “How do you know I’m the one you’re looking for?”

Drew froze. “I... it’s hard to put into words... I just know...”

“Try,” Elyanna replied.

Drew shut her eyes. That single word pierced her heart.

“Because... when I look at you... I only see her, see Elster,” she explained, looking down at her hands before returning Elyanna’s gaze. “What do you see?” she then asked.

Elyanna continued to stare at her for an uncomfortable amount of time, but Drew didn’t interrupt the silence this time, choosing to wait as long as it took for her to give an answer.

“I don’t know,” she eventually said.

Drew cocked her head to the side and partially raised one eyebrow. “Can you... describe it?”

“It’s not like that,” Elyanna explained. She then quickly took a breath and exhaled, looking down as she continued. “I see the woman you claim to be, the one you described. I just... don’t know who she is.”

Neither knew how to continue the conversation from there.

So, Elyanna started a new one.

“Why do you need my help?” she asked, looking back up at Drew. “I get that you want... your wife back, but I have a feeling that’s not entirely related to why you’re here.”

Drew sighed. “You’re right,” she said, squeezing her hands together as she thought. “Whether you remember... whether you think you are Elster or not... my friend, someone very important to me is in trouble... and I can’t think of anyone else to turn to,” she explained. Drew pulled her legs up onto the armchair and hugged her knees against her chest. “I wanted to give you more time to remember who you are... who I think you are... but I can’t wait any longer.”

Elyanna leaned back on the sofa and folded her leg over the other again. “So, instead, you followed me back here from the bar I work at, and waited for my girlfriend to leave so you... claiming to be my wife, could speak to me alone?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Drew quickly admitted, knowing there was no way she could dance around what she had done. “I realize how creepy all of this sounds, but I just had to get ahold of you and I couldn’t wait any longer.”

Elyanna took another breath and exhaled slowly, continuing to sit and look calmly in Drew’s direction. “Thank you for your honesty,” she replied.

“I could never lie to you, El-” Drew stopped herself before she went further, sighing as she looked down and fiddled with her thumbs. After a while, she looked back up and sniffled softly. “You truly don’t remember anything?” she asked, voice cracking part way through.

Elyanna sighed and shook her head. “No, I don’t,” she said before crossing her arms and looking to the side. “And... I believe you, but none of this makes sense! How can I be a whole other person when I’ve lived my whole life as who I am now? A Replika wouldn’t have parents, wouldn’t have a childhood, they don’t grow up and go to school or even learn to tie shoelaces!” she said exasperatingly.

Drew sighed. “It took me a while to accept it for myself,” she said.

“But it makes sense for you!” Elyanna said, gesturing toward her. “A Replika has to possess the neural pattern of a specific Gestalt, that obviously must be this Ariane you spoke of, but how can

the reverse be true for me?”

“It couldn’t have been Ariane... she-”

“You’re sitting there telling me my entire life has basically been a lie, a fabrication, and yet...” Elyanna’s breath started to pick up and she took a moment to brush her hair back. “And yet when I look at you and hear you speak, I can’t tell you you’re wrong, because it just feels right! It just doesn’t make sense! How can I be someone it’s impossible for me to be, unless...”

Drew slowly blinked and leaned forward as Elyanna paused in her rambling. She closed her mouth and bit her lip as she looked to the side, then back at Drew.

“Unless... someone wanted it that way...”

“...What do you mean?” Drew asked after a short pause.

Elyanna put her leg down and leaned over with her forearms on her knees. “Well, I guess it’s your turn to try and believe something ridiculous from me,” she said.

Drew huffed and smiled weakly. “It’s only fair,” she said.

Elyanna looked at her silently for a moment. “God,” she stated.

Drew narrowed her gaze and blinked slowly.

“I thought it was just some crazy dream I had after getting the Scheiße beaten out of me... but after hearing everything you said...” Elyanna trailed off for a moment as she shook her head, seemingly having trouble believing what she was saying herself. “Someone, someone who felt godly came to me in a dream, and said she would give me everything I wanted if I just gave something up, but never told me what. She said she made me and has unmade me many times. Apparently, I possess something she wants and only I can give it to her... and when I refused, she attacked me, and then I woke up,” she explained.

“You’re right, that is quite... extraordinary,” Drew said. “What do you think she wanted you to give her?” she asked.

Elyanna shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea, other than having a vague feeling that it was wrong to say yes, that I shouldn’t give her whatever it was she wanted,” she explained, sighing afterwards.

After a short pause for both to collect their thoughts, Drew started to frown. “Actually...” she paused as Elyanna sifted her attention her way. “I... think I had a similar experience. A few times, actually.”

“You also saw God?” Elyanna asked.

Drew exhaled sharply as she tried to think of what to say. “I can’t be certain, but, whoever it was, she had extraordinary bioresonant powers. Much more than a Kolibri. And... she also wanted something from me.”

Elyanna nodded and waited for Drew to continue, which she did after anxiously swallowing.

“She wanted me to believe she was Elster, and I couldn’t do that either.”

Both fell silent for a while as they tried to make sense of everything. Elyanna bounced her knees as she looked from side to side. Drew tried to chew fingernails she didn't have, and ended up rubbing her thumbs together.

"Actually, there's one more piece I forgot," Elyanna suddenly claimed. "She... God... also told me that if I changed my mind, that I could meet her on Heimat, and everything would-"

"Did you say Heimat?" Drew suddenly interrupted, causing Elyanna to stop and blink for a moment.

"Yeah, Heimat," she repeated.

Drew lightly gasped. "Sorry, but, Heimat," she stammered, clenching her fists tightly. "The reason I came for your help, my friend is trapped on Heimat, and I need to get her out."

"Yet another coincidence?" Elyanna asked aloud, huffing to herself. "Except, if we're both being drawn to the same place, that's even more reason to believe you. God said everything would make sense to me if I came to Heimat."

Drew nodded and continued her story. "They're experimenting on my friend there, we- that is, her sister and I, thought she was dead, but she also came to us in a dream, and begged us to save her."

"But how do you expect me to help?" Elyanna blurted out, raising an eyebrow at Drew, who continued to anxiously rub her thumbs. "Not just anyone can get into the capital, you should know this."

"Well... you're military? So I figured you might have some ideas... but also..." Drew stopped to exhale fully. "I work as a spaceport traffic controller, and I saw you the day you arrived on Rotfront. You snuck aboard a cargo ship."

Elyanna coughed. "You saw me then?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't raise any alarm!" Drew said, holding her palms up. "I was still figuring things out back then, but I just had a feeling I should let you go... and now here you are."

"This is the first thing you've told me I'm having trouble believing," Elyanna stated.

Drew sighed and held her head as she looked down at the floor. "I just don't have anywhere else to turn, anyone else I can trust to help me on this..." she said, breathing in slowly as she looked back up at Elyanna. "But I know Elster would," she said.

Elyanna folded her arms and waited a moment before responding. "I'm not saying I won't, but..." she paused to sigh. "I feel like I should help you, I feel like it's the only way I'll start to make sense of everything that's happened to me, but... I need some time to think over this."

"Absolutely, I understand," Drew said, nodding.

"Thank you," Elyanna replied.

Drew then stood up and took a pair of slips of folded paper out of her pouch. "I'd just like to give you these before I go," she said, handing them to Elyanna. "One's got a phone line in it I've set up. No monitoring, you should be able to reach me there when I'm off work."

“And the other?” Elyanna asked.

“I’ll let you see it for yourself,” Drew said as she walked to the door. “And, Elyanna?”

She nodded toward Drew.

“From whatever I’ve said today, whatever you decide to believe, whatever you decide to do, that’s alright with me,” she said, then sighed softly. “Right now, I just want to get my friend back. That’s all.”

Elyanna nodded silently.

“But... can I make just one selfish request?” Ariane asked.

“Please,” Elyanna replied.

Ariane stepped away from the door and closer to Elyanna. “Can I hold your hand one more time? Just for a moment?”

Elyanna slowly breathed in and exhaled before extending her hand a few seconds later. Ariane gently held it with both hands, tracing her polyethylene fingers and thumbs over her skin and knuckles, giving her hand one small squeeze before sighing and letting go.

“Thank you,” she thanked and then opened the door. “I hope to hear back from you, but thank you for at least hearing me out.”

And she was gone.

Elyanna stood facing the door for a minute, unsure of what to do, unsure of how to feel. Eventually, she unfolded the other piece of paper Drew had given her and gave it a look. It was a rough pencil sketch of two women seated next to each other on a bed, holding hands with a starry sky in the background.

It was Elster and Ariane. She just knew.

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Drew returned to her dorm, and Ariane found Erika there.

She didn’t need words, Erika could tell how her excursion went just from her look and mood, and she hugged her friend.

Ariane quietly sobbed into Erika’s shoulder as she rubbed her back and head, and they sat down together on the lower bunk.

“I didn’t think it would be this hard,” Ariane quietly muttered, rubbing her eyes. “To see her not remember me.”

“She will,” Erika assured her, squeezing Ariane’s hand between them. “She just needs time.”

Ariane sighed. “I honestly don’t know, after speaking to her. She sees me, but doesn’t know who I am... it actually feels worse this way.”

“Oh, Ari...” Erika let go of her hand and hugged her around her shoulders instead.

Ariane leaned into her friend and just sat there quietly for a minute, just trying to enjoy the company. Erika rubbed her shoulder and offered a smile whenever she looked at her, anything to offer what comfort she could.

“Erika, can I ask you something?” Ariane suddenly spoke out.

“What is it?”

“What happened... between us,” Ariane said, pausing for a moment as Erika quietly gulped. “Was that new, or...”

Erika didn't answer, but her shifting eyes unable to focus on Ariane gave her away.

“And yet, I still abandoned you,” Ariane choked out.

“No, you didn't,” Erika stated, turning herself to face Ariane more directly on the bunk. “You came back, and when I needed your help, you offered it without hesitation, just as I did.”

That seemed to get Ariane to smile a little, and Erika reached up and brushed an errant lock of bioengineered dark hair away from her eyes.

“Were it not for my heart being in such turmoil, I think...” Ariane paused for a moment and smiled a little wider. “I think I would like to explore this further,” she said.

Erika rubbed one of her eyes and nodded twice. “Just know however you feel, I'll always consider you a friend.”

“As will I,” Ariane added.

They looked at each other deeply for a moment, and then Ariane leaned forward and lightly kissed her friend's lips before returning to leaning her head on her shoulder. Erika wrapped her arm around Ariane once again and held her snugly until she was ready to talk more about their plans.

Meanwhile, Elyanna sat alone in her girlfriend's apartment watching TV, eating pizza straight from a delivery box, and waiting for her to come home, which she finally did early into the evening.

“Hey,” Elyanna lazily greeted from the couch, but as she turned and saw Alina, she put the pizza box aside and scrambled to her feet. “Hell, Alina, you look horrible...”

Alina sighed wearily at the door as she took her coat off and hung it on the rack. Every part of her being looked tired, from her eyes, to her face, her arms, and her body; she trudged into the room holding a hand to her head and didn't even bother to look up as Elyanna wrapped her arms around her.

“I feel like Scheiße,” she groaned, then lightly sniffed the air. “Is that food? Verdammnt... I need some.” She followed the scent to the sofa and picked up two slices of ham and pineapple pizza from the box and sandwiched them together before taking a bite.

“You were running late, so I just ordered out,” Elyanna explained.

Alina grumbled happily as she chewed and swallowed. “Thank you so much, Ely,” she thanked, taking another bite before continuing. “I don’t even care... that you have such awful taste... ham and fucking pineapple? You’re lucky... that you’re my girlfriend... and that I’m so gottverdammt hungry,” she joked between chews.

Elyanna chuckled softly and shrugged her shoulders. “I just like sweet and salty,” she said.

Alina swallowed and laughed before walking around the sofa and collapsing into the far side. Elyanna followed her and moved the box onto the table in front of the furniture before sitting down next to her.

“Are you-”

“Please, softer,” Alina interrupted, taking a moment to close her eyes and rub her head. “My head feels like it’s going to explode.”

Elyanna nodded. “I’ll get you some aspirin,” she said, then tried to stand up only for Alina to catch her by the wrist.

“Stay,” she softly asked. “Cuddle me.”

Elyanna nodded and carefully cozied up alongside her girlfriend as they ate and watched TV together. It was just a kitschy soap opera propaganda piece; almost everything on air carried some form of propaganda value, but they enjoyed themselves making fun at the proceedings for how melodramatic and contrived they got.

“Oh come on!” Alina groaned, pinching her brow in frustration. “That’s not how normal people work! She’s not going to be okay with him cheating on her and having a kid out of wedlock just because it’s for the good of the state!”

Elyanna chuckled. “I don’t know what’s worse, what we’re watching unfold right now, or that real people had to act these scenes with a straight face.”

“There aren’t enough drugs in the world that could convince me this is believable drama,” Alina said, then stood up. “I need a beer, you want one, babe?”

“Sure,” Elyanna replied, still engrossed by the television. But as Alina walked around the couch she shot her eyes open and grabbed her hand. “Wait!”

Alina looked down at her with tired, confused eyes and raised an eyebrow.

“I may have to...” she paused to swallow. “Go on a trip, in a bit... help a friend out.”

“Yeah, I get you,” Alina said, smiling until she caught how serious Elyanna looked and caught on instantly. “Oh, this is really important, isn’t it?”

Elyanna nodded.

“Do you think you need help?” she asked sincerely.

“You don’t have to-”

“No, silly, I do,” Alina interrupted her, then sat back down briefly on Elyanna’s other side. “You’re important to me, which means anyone important to you is also important to me.”

Elyanna nodded and smiled. “We’ll probably need every bit of help we can get,” she said, then chuckled lightly. “It’s a prison break.”

“Committing high crimes and treason? You’re really after my heart, aren’t you?” Alina joked, then kissed her girlfriend on the cheek before getting up and walking to the kitchen.

But then, just as Alina stuck her face in the fridge, something interrupted the broadcast.

“We interrupt your regularly scheduled broadcast to give you this important news bulletin. Our brave soldiers, led by their Replika cadre have successfully broken through the Empire’s fleet and have fought off the Imperial Army’s attempts to drive back our newly established ground offensive in the Dahkur province on Kitez!”

“Oh wow,” Elyanna muttered, paying closer attention to the news broadcast. “Hey, Alina, the war finally made it to Kitez soil!” she called out as softly as she could.

Alina briefly leaned back and watched the news highlight of ships exploding followed by almost certainly staged footage of troops on the ground. “How long did that take? Two years?”

“Three, I think,” Elyanna replied.

“And in our righteous and glorious struggle, leading the way in the future just as they have delivered us our greatest victory in seasons will be our new Wunderwaffe...”

Elyanna found her mouth agape as she watched. “No... no way...”

“...moulded in the image of our Great Revolutionary, the new Generation Six Replika Commander that will be known and feared across the solar system as Falke!”

The news broadcast continued as Alina returned with a pair of cold cans of beer, but as she tried to hand one to Elyanna, she didn’t notice, only staring endlessly at the television.

“Hey... hey Ely, you alright?” Alina sat down and quietly asked her.

Elyanna only shook her head.

“It’s... it’s God.”

Suspicion

Chapter Summary

"Never assume what you can prove."

"I wish Drew would get over whatever happened between her and her girlfriend and just try to talk to her again," Ivy complained as she and Fio slowly walked down the hallway to the REAR-unit dormitories. "Poor girl has either been moping in our room or out the Revolutionary knows where whenever we're not working. I just hope she isn't out drinking herself into a stupor every night."

"She needs space," Fio quietly said. "These things aren't easy to get over."

Ivy sighed. "It can't be healthy to isolate yourself so much, especially for us," she pointed out, then stopped and turned to face Fio. "Come on, if we both go and invite her to the concert, maybe she'll finally agree to go out with us again?"

"I really don't want to push her," Fio replied.

"But you don't want her persona to start degrading, right?"

"I just don't want to upset her..."

"And I don't want her to end up like the one I repla-" Ivy abruptly stopped her speech and cleared her throat, pausing for a moment before she continued. "Sorry, I'm just worried, I don't want anything bad to happen to her."

Fio closed her eyes and sighed again before she and Ivy resumed walking.

"What about you? How was your date with that Star I set you up yesterday?" Ivy asked.

"Oh, Panther? She was very sweet and polite. I had a good time," Ivy replied, smiling just barely to herself.

"Nice! What did you two do?"

"Ice skating, the rink was nearly empty by the time we got there, which was nice because I had a really hard time keeping my balance."

"Fell down a few times?"

"...More than a few, but Panther was patient and a good teacher, so I eventually got the hang of it."

"I'm glad," Ivy said, smiling and wrapping an arm around Fio's shoulders. "Knew you'd have a good time if you just gave her a chance. You deserve that."

“Thanks,” Fio replied, looking down slightly as she continued. “Don’t know if I’m ready to see her again right away... but I would like to go out with her again...”

“That’s all I wanted to hear,” Ivy said, smiling widely. “In fact, I-”

They stopped as they reached Ivy’s dormitory door and came across a curious sight; a Rhea uniform cap hanging from the manual release handle on the sliding door.

“Son of a...” Ivy muttered as Fio chuckled softly.

“Well, I guess you got your wish, Ivy,” Fio pointed out as the other Replika sighed. “Come on, we can hang out in my room for a while, my bunkmate is on the night shift, she won’t be coming back for hours,” she suggested.

“Alright,” Ivy agreed, giving the door and hat one last look before she walked past it. “Lucky girl...”

Meanwhile, inside the dorm, Erika smiled softly and gently stroked Drew’s hair as she lay on her side, her head against her chest. She was sleeping peacefully, softly breathing, body relaxed, tear stains long since wiped away.

Erika gently hugged her friend as she mumbled softly in her sleep. “El... Ellie...”

She reached down and lightly kissed the top of her head, and Ariane calmed, exhaling softly into her chest. Ariane needed this, especially after all of the stress and heartbreak she’d been through lately.

But while she was content to lay with her and offer as much comfort as she wanted, life waited for none of them, and a low, beeping sound came from Drew’s footlocker.

“Hey... Ari... sorry... hey...” Erika softly called out, lightly shaking the girl in her arms to try and wake her up.

But she remained still.

“Well... that hasn’t changed, at least...”

The beeping continued, but Ariane didn’t want to stir, so after a few more seconds of trying to wake up the sleeping girl, Erika gently moved her head to rest on the pillow and hopped down from the top bunk to open the footlocker below. Inside was a store-bought satellite phone next to a self-built signal scrambler, to ensure some level of privacy, and disguised in such a way that Drew would be able to pass it off as a signal booster instead, should there be a random room inspection.

All those years spent at Rotfront Station 06 had finally paid off.

She took both out and hooked the phone to the scrambler, making sure it was on and linked to the signal the phone was using before she answered.

“Drew...? Can you hear me?” Elyanna’s static-filled voice said over the earpiece.

“Elyanna, it’s Erika, Ari- er, Drew’s...” she paused as she glanced back briefly at Ariane still asleep on the top bunk, “...friend, she’s asleep right now but you can talk to me,” she quietly explained.

Elyanna sighed over the phone. "Well, can you wake her up?"

"I tried, but she wouldn't wake up," she replied, causing Elyanna to groan through the earpiece. "I don't want to push her too hard right now, she's..." she paused again to contemplate how much she wanted to reveal about the night they spent together and what Ariane had told her, "...very tired. I think it would be best to let her sleep for now."

"...Alright, but, look, have you seen the news?"

"What news?"

"Ugh... look, do you have a television or radio you can turn on?"

Erika pinched her brow as she replied, "I've got a radio."

"Turn it on to the war news frequency."

"The news? Why?"

"Just do it, please."

Erika started going through Drew's things looking for her small, handheld radio and turned it on before tuning it to frequency 140.85.

"...and with the Imperial fleet still regrouping on the far side of the planet, the eight Panzergrenadierdivision under the command of Generalleutnant Mackensen have made planetfall on Kitezsh, after Bioresonanz-Spezialbataillon led by our new elite Replika cadre of Kolibri commanded by our glorious new Wunderwaffe Falke have succeeded in capturing the regional capital of the Dahkur province..."

"Falke?" Erika asked through the telephone. "Is that a new Replika unit?"

"Not just any Replika," Elyanna told her through the phone. "Look, you have to tell Drew as soon as possible."

"Why is-"

"Actually, I think it's better if we talk in person, can you meet up with me outside my apartment?"

Erika lightly sighed. "Yeah, okay, I can go there right now, but why are you so worked up?"

"It's God. Falke, the new Replika, she's the god I saw in my dream, and I think she might be the same person she saw in hers."

Erika didn't reply, she just held the phone against her ear.

"It'll make more sense to her. Look, I really think you should just wake her up, this is important."

"I'm not waking her up," Erika repeated a little more forcefully while keeping her voice quiet.

"Fine, but, apartment, quickly, I have a bad feeling about this development."

"Alright, I'm on my way," Erika said before she shut the phone and scrambler off.

After putting everything away, she wrote Drew a note explaining the details of the call and tucked it under her pillow before she carefully draped her government-issued stiff, scratchy, but warm blanket over her sleeping frame. She stood on the frame of the lower bunk and lightly brushed her hand against her cheek and bangs, giving her one last smile before she left.

“I hope you’re having a good dream, Ari.”

.....

Erika only knocked on her apartment door once before Elyanna opened it and quickly beckoned her inside.

“Hölle... and I thought our dorms were cramped, you can barely fit two people in here!” she said after having to squeeze past Elyanna to get into the room proper.

“Truthfully, I’ve seen prison cells which are nicer than this,” Elyanna added, grabbing a pair of drinks from her mini fridge and handing one to Erika as they sat down on the cot next to each other. “Not that... I’ve been in one myself,” she hastily added after seeing Erika’s shocked expression.

Erika looked at the cool can in her polyethylene hand. It was just a generic can of cola, but looking at it awoke past memories of sharing fizzy drinks and laughing with Isa and Ariane at the latter’s birthday. She cracked it open and took a sip, enjoying the tingling sensation of the carbonation as the drink slid down her throat.

Elyanna opened hers and took a sip in turn, sighing contentedly as she put the can on the concrete ground between her feet. “Someone is watching us,” she abruptly said. Erika quickly started glancing around, but Elyanna remained calm and added, “Not right now, at this moment. But, someone has been watching Drew and me for a while. This god has, this Falke.”

“In your dreams?” Erika asked, to which Elyanna nodded. “But, how?”

“Didn’t you hear on the news?” Elyanna asked. “Falke units are bioresonant, even more so than Kolibris. I’m not overly familiar with how bioresonance works, but at its base, it’s some form of mind-reading ability coupled with the ability to move things with your mind... maybe this one’s ability is so strong she can project herself directly into our thoughts, and there could be so much more we don’t understand.”

Erika took another sip before looking at Elyanna inquisitively. “What are you thinking?”

“I think she’s responsible for what’s happened to us,” Elyanna claimed. She interlocked her fingers and balanced her elbows on her knees as she thought. “She wants something from both of us, but Ariane and... Elster, are gone. So, take their memories and experiences and put them into new people.”

“I know something has got to explain it, but there are a few things that don’t make sense,” Erika pointed out, pausing to take another sip of her drink. “For one, the Penrose program only started last year, but Ariane claimed to be on her ship for at least ten years, so if it is the case, her bioresonance must also be capable of warping time to some effect.”

“I realize how implausible this all sounds, but as you said, something has to explain it,” Elyanna said.

“And what about me?” Erika asked. “What about my sister? Why have Ariane’s memories fully returned, but not yours?”

Elyanna remained silent and put her lips behind her hands as she tried not to look at Erika, who over time shifted her posture to better face her as she studied the Gestalt’s face.

“What aren’t you telling us?” she asked in a mildly threatening tone.

Elyanna tapped her feet back and forth as she further buried her face into her hands. “I... I think some of Elster’s memories did awaken in me after all.”

Erika gasped. “Why didn’t you tell Ariane? Did you lie to her?”

“No!” Elyanna barked back, then calmed for a moment and motioned with her hands to quiet down by pushing downwards in the air between them. “Like I said to her, until I talked to her I thought my conversation with God... with Falke, was some kind of crazy dream. But there were a couple of times before that I saw... flashes. Just fragments of what could be memories... I think.”

Erika sighed and rubbed her knees. “Well, what did you remember?” she asked.

Elyanna picked up her can and chugged the entire remaining volume in one long gulp before belching softly into her palm. She put her palms on her knees and exhaled sharply, closing her eyes and thinking deeply.

“Like I said... they were just flashes of fragments... so there’s only two things I can clearly recall...”

“That’s alright. Let’s just hear them.”

“One... was when I ran into Drew for the first time outside my apartment. There were many different fragments, but... the one that stuck with me the most... well, it was...”

Erika stared at her as Elyanna paused. She swallowed loudly and looked at the ground between them before she continued.

“I was... strangling Ariane.”

A heavy silence fell after she finished. Elyanna avoided looking at Erika entirely, who looked at the side of her head in shock.

“I... I take back my earlier comment,” she said sheepishly. “I can see why you didn’t bring that up with her.”

Elyanna sighed and stared forward at the kitchenette counter opposite the cot. “She never brought up me trying to... kill her... in her story... so I didn’t want to bring this vision up to her.”

“Why would Elster have tried to kill her?”

“I can only guess,” Elyanna replied as she crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall. “I can say... she looked sick... looked ill, so it could have been a mercy. Drew said she couldn’t remember how Ariane passed, so I just assumed it was in her sleep. Meanwhile, Elster died alone in her room aboard the Penrose...”

More silence ensued after Elyanna finished. Erika briefly reached out to place a hand on Elyanna's shoulder but stopped before she touched her, instead taking her hand back and rubbing it against her other.

"The other memory is... more difficult to describe," Elyanna said, then finally looked back at Erika again. "I was just at the spaceport Drew and you work at. I was having a nice chat with one of the lobby attendants, then she said something to me and everything went red, for lack of a better description," she explained, looking away before she saw Erika's eyes begin to widen with shock. "I saw a brown-haired Gestalt woman covered in blood and wounds, and she was crying. She said something about not being able to find someone, and..."

Elyanna trailed off as she glanced back at Erika and saw horror mounting in her expression. Her eyes widened, her mouth left agape, and her fists clenched. Elyanna swallowed nervously and tried to get her attention.

"Erika...?"

The Replika blinked and immediately started drilling holes into Elyanna with her eyes. "What did you do to her?" she asked strongly.

Elyanna blinked and leaned away from Erika. "What did I...? I don't know-"

"Don't play dumb!" Erika shouted as she rose to her hooves. "You already misled us once! You did something to her there! You did something and then they took my sister away!"

"What? Erika, trust me, I-"

Eule units were not combat models, but they still possessed a great deal of strength and precision necessary for performing their tasks efficiently as general labourers in the Eusan Nation. Therefore, it was a simple matter for Erika to grab Elyanna and lift her off the ground by her collar before slamming her against the apartment door.

"What did you do to her?!" Erika screamed.

Elyanna felt around the door with her right hand and found the release. As she pressed it, the door slid open and both she and Erika fell into the hallway, allowing Elyanna to escape from her grasp and run down the hall to the elevator and stairs, with Erika quickly trying to scramble to her feet and chase her. As she ran, Elyanna saw the elevator open as an elderly man carrying groceries stepped out. She slid past him and slammed into the far interior of the elevator, turning around and hitting the ground floor button as she watched Erika fumble trying to get past the bewildered old man spilling his groceries to the floor.

The doors shut and she heard her hands strike them a moment afterward.

Elyanna slumped against the wall as she felt the elevator start to descend and gasped for air.

"...Fuck."

.....

For the second day in a row, Drew found herself outside her wife's girlfriend's apartment.

Erika had left while she was asleep with a note explaining what happened and where she had gone, but neither she nor Elyanna were at their respective dorms and apartments, nor was Elyanna at work after calling the bar to try and ascertain where she was.

So, she returned hesitantly to Alina's apartment and knocked on the door, hoping that Elyanna would answer once again.

But of course, she was cursed.

"Hello?" A very tired-looking Alina answered at the door whilst rubbing her eyes.

Drew sighed and introduced herself. "Hi, sorry, you don't know me, but I'm Elyanna's... friend."

Alina's eyes immediately perked up. "Oh! You're Drew? I'm Alina!" she greeted, offering her hand to Drew to shake, which she did.

"Is Elyanna here? I've been trying to get ahold of her but I don't know where she is."

Alina shook her head. "Sorry, she left the apartment abruptly in the middle of the evening last night after something on the television spooked her. Haven't seen her since," she explained.

"Verdammt..." Drew cursed under her breath. "Well, thank you."

She was about to turn and leave when Alina called out to her. "Hey, you want to come inside for a bit?" she asked. "I have a fresh pot of coffee going... I know Replika like coffee, and you came all the way out here..." she said while smiling and rubbing the back of her head.

Drew paused for a moment before she sighed. "Sure," she replied and walked into the apartment once more.

"What do you take?"

"Lots of cream, lots of sugar," Drew said. "Coffee whitener is fine if that's all you have."

Alina nodded and began mixing Drew a cup at the kitchen counter while she walked into the living room and sat down in the armchair. Alina came by a minute later and handed her a moderately steaming cup of pale beige coffee before sitting down on the sofa and rubbing her forehead.

"Are you alright?" Drew asked upon hearing Alina groan.

"Not exactly..." Alina replied, taking a sip from her own cup before continuing. "Aside from being deprived of the lovely embrace of my girlfriend to sleep within last night, I've been having awful headaches since yesterday, and they only seem to be getting worse."

Drew took a sip of coffee and raised her eyebrows and cup at Alina before she continued.

"I've been popping aspirin like breath mints but nothing seems to help... I was contemplating whether I even open the bookstore for business today..." Alina explained.

"Bookstore?" Drew asked. "What bookstore, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Itou Bookstore," Alina said. "Though, since none of the Itous run it anymore, I'm only keeping the name to honour their memory. It's a small store, but we have a good selection of vintage and

novelty books, including a decent amount of queer literature,” she said, smiling with a small amount of sparkle in her eyes.

“You... you said the Itou Bookstore...?” Drew asked, and waited for Alina to nod before asking her next question. “Forgive me if this is too personal, but what is your surname?”

“No worries, it’s Seo, Alina Seo.”

Ariane sat in shock.

After a minute, Alina checked in on her. “Heya... you alright there?”

“It’s not possible...” Ariane quietly muttered to herself before she shook her head and looked back at Alina. “If you’re here... what happened to the other in that photograph? What happened to Lilith?”

Alina’s smile dropped and she stared deeply at Ariane. “You’re starting to freak me out lady... how the fuck do you know about her?” she asked.

“Please, just tell me,” Ariane pleaded.

“Cht,” Alina looked to the side. “She died in the war! Ok? Mystery solved!” she explained, raising her other hand and dropping it to her knee. “Now look, I told Ely I’d help you, and she told me a little bit about what’s apparently going on, but you better spill the beans right now I decide that stalking my girlfriend is in fact not a forgivable offence.”

Ariane sighed. “You wouldn’t believe me,” she claimed.

“Try me,” Alina said.

Ariane took a long sip of coffee and put the mug down on the living room table before placing her hands on her knees. “I’m Elyanna’s wife from what I assume to be a past life. She doesn’t remember who I am, but I needed her help to rescue my best friend’s sister from a government research facility on Heimat.”

“Wow, you’re right, I don’t believe you!” Alina said, preparing to stand up before Ariane continued.

“Their names are Erika and Isolde Itou.”

Alina froze and stared intensely at Ariane.

“She liked to go by Isa, it’s what all of us called her.”

Slowly, Alina’s fury faded, and she leaned back in her chair while clenching her hand not holding her cup of coffee. “Little Isa and Erika... they’re alive?” she quietly choked.

Ariane nodded. “I met them long after...” she paused for a moment to steel herself before meeting Alina’s gaze. “Long after you died.”

Alina sniffled and drummed her fingers against her knee. “How?” she asked, then swallowed loudly. “How? I don’t...”

“I know none of this makes sense, but...” Ariane trailed off as she leaned forward and looked more closely at Alina. “Alina, are you okay? Your nose is bleeding?”

Alina blinked a few times before she slowly raised her finger to her upper lip and felt blood pooling there. A couple of seconds later, the sound of shattering porcelain brought Ariane out of her concentration as she saw Alina bent over, clutching her head with both hands, her cup of coffee shattered on the floor below.

She scrambled to her hooves and went over to her side as Alina fell to the ground in front of the sofa. “Alina, Alina!” she called out, grabbing her shoulders as the woman screamed and twitched sharply before falling deathly still and quiet.

Ariane stayed kneeling next to Alina’s limp body breathing heavily for a few seconds before she got back on her hooves and ran about the room looking for a telephone to call emergency services.

“Don’t die... please be okay... please... don’t break her heart again...”

Deception

Chapter Summary

"Be careful what you wish for, it just may come true."

Chapter Notes

Mid-chapter artwork was drawn by Sephimius! All the thanks for enjoying the story enough to do this for me.

Ariane tried her best to follow the doctors and nurses after the ambulance dropped them off at the hospital, but a pair of Eules held her back, saying she would have to stay in the waiting area for new news.

She'd barely been able to pay attention to what the paramedics were saying during the ride over, as all of her attention was on the dying Alina in front of her. They said something about a 'subcranial hematoma' and 'increased intracranial pressure' but the words were meaningless to her, all that mattered was Alina's survival.

"You can't leave her again... not both of us..."

After several hours of back-and-forth pacing in the nearest waiting room, a doctor Replika finally came to update her.

"Please tell me you have good news," Ariane pleaded with him.

The Doctor exhaled softly as he sat down in a chair. "Are you close with the patient? Uhh... Alina, was it?"

"I'm her... friend," Ariane answered after some trepidation.

The doctor nodded. "Is there anyone we can contact to come and be with her?"

In her interface, Ariane received a warning of excessive emotional interference, and she began breathing harder. "Why? Is... is she not going to make it?"

"We... can't discuss patient treatment records except with family."

Ariane exhaled hard. "I don't think she has any family, Doctor. At least not on Rotfront," she said, unable to look the Replika in the eyes. "Just a girlfriend and I don't know where she is right now. She could be at home, at work, or anywhere else."

The doctor collapsed his hands together and briefly looked around the room before refocusing on Ariane. "It's... not looking good. If you can find a way to contact her partner and get her here, I suggest you do so. I can't divulge anything else."

Ariane bit her lip hard to keep herself from crying. Meanwhile, the doctor continued.

"Normally, I wouldn't allow this, but, she is awake at the moment, and there may not be another opportunity," he said, standing up afterward. "If you want to see her, say your last words, you can come with me."

Ariane quickly nodded and got out of her chair, following the FLMR through the hallways until they came to Alina's room. Even though just the tiny viewing window on the door, she could see her connected to various machines, and with at least one tube coming out of her mouth.

"She won't be able to talk, so, be brief," the doctor told her. "One minute, that's all I can give you."

Ariane nodded, and the doctor let her in.

She slowly approached the side of the bed, walking softly as if she were trying to avoid making noise that might wake her up. Her eyes were closed when she came to her side, but Ariane took a breath to steady herself and called out to her.

"Alina...?"

As she opened her red eyes and looked at her, Ariane fully broke down.

"I'm sorry!" she cried out, breathing rapidly, and with lubricant tears staining her cheeks. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry for everything!"

Alina couldn't give her much of a reaction with a breathing tube inserted down her throat, but she found Ariane's hand with her own and weakly held it.

"I'll find her! I promise!"

Alina's eyes welled up with tears and she blinked repeatedly.

"I don't care if she remembers or not, I just want her to be happy!" Ariane confessed, gripping Alina's hand firmly as she laid out her heart. "She's happy with you, I saw it! I won't take that away from her, I can't!"

Alina's hand went limp in her hand. She knew she had to finish up quickly.

"Please, just hang on!" Ariane pleaded. "I'll bring her here, and you'll be happy together, I promise!"

Alina blinked one last time before she closed her eyes. Ariane looked back at the door and saw the doctor there. She nodded and left the room, walking slowly at first before going faster and faster down the halls to the exit.

She had to find her.

.....

Elyanna wasn't at her apartment.

The Eule attendant at the reception counter informed her that she had left the day prior; seemingly in a hurry, and had not returned yet.

She tried calling the bar she worked at. According to the owner, she came for her shift as normal, then bought a bottle of vodka at the end and left without another word.

There was only one place she could be.

“Elyanna!” Ariane shouted as she pounded on Alina's apartment door. “Elyanna, please, open up!”

No answer. She pounded on the door harder.

“I know you're in there, Elyanna! This is really important! I need to talk to you!”

Still no answer. Some people in neighbouring apartments opened their doors and stuck their heads out to see what all the noise and shouting was about.

Ariane slammed her closed fist against the door three times. “It's Alina! Something's happened to her!”

Nothing. Some of the people from the neighbouring apartments complained at Ariane to leave, saying she was making too much of a racket, and they might have to notify the blockwart.

Ariane limply hit the door one last time with her open palm and sobbed hard as she leaned against it, but still, no one answered.

But just as she gave up and turned around to leave, the door opened.

“Well... geddin...”

Ariane looked back and saw Elyanna standing at the door. She braced herself against the wall as she held an open bottle of vodka in her hand. Ariane looked up and saw her one eye was bloodshot, her hair a ruffled mess, and even standing half a metre away she could smell the sharp scent of alcohol on her breath.



She moved to the side and Ariane entered the apartment while rubbing her hands fiercely. Elyanna shut the door behind her and took a swig straight from the bottle as she walked haphazardly back into the living room. Ariane then watched as she trudged her feet back over to the sofa and fell over atop the cushions, turning her movie back on with the television remote instead of further acknowledging her presence.

Ariane moved around the sofa and watched Elyanna continue to direct her attention only to the television. She took another sip of vodka straight from her bottle, and Ariane fiercely inhaled.

“Hey! I’s drinking that!” Elyanna complained as Ariane swiped the bottle from her hand.

“Did you hear a word I said!” she shouted at her as she feebly tried to reach her with her hand while still seated on the sofa.

“Gimme... I paid good mohney f’that...”

Ariane put the bottle down on the table next to the television and grabbed Elyanna by the shoulders, pushing her against the back cushion of the furniture. “Elyanna! Your girlfriend might be dying! We need to get you to the hospital now!”

Elyanna weakly fought against Ariane’s grasp as she hiccuped. “Gimme... gimme my booze back, Ariane...” she mumbled.

“I don’t believe this,” Ariane said to herself as she let go and stepped backward. “Is that all you care about?” she asked.

Elyanna leaned forward in a futile attempt to somehow reach across the wide gap to the table the television and vodka were on, and she fell off the sofa to her knees, groaning to herself as she tried to crawl the remaining distance.

Ariane slowly shook her head before she stepped out of the way. "Maybe Erika was onto something, maybe you aren't Elster after all."

Still groaning, Elyanna made it to the table and grabbed the bottle before rolling onto her rear and leaning against the table. She looked up at Ariane's increasingly dismissive look and took a swig of vodka without breaking eye contact.

"Whaddya talkin' about?" she asked her before putting the bottle on the ground to her side. "O' course I'm Elster!"

Ariane coughed into her laughter as looked down on Elyanna. "No, you're not! You're some crazy stranger I fooled myself into thinking was my wife, goodbye!" she replied before turning around.

"You are my wife... Ah-ree-ah-neh!"

She stopped in her tracks at the overly familiar sound of her name being spoken and slowly turned around, her face brimming with fury, only to find Elyanna standing and smiling at her.

She tapped the side of her head as she laughed briefly. "I remembah... everything..." she muttered. "Why else do ya thin' I got myself pish drunk?"

Slowly, Ariane dropped her scowl and replaced it with a look of fear. "Elster...?"

Elyanna raised her arms wide as she grinned strongly. "Willkommen!" she said as she walked toward Ariane, only for her to step back nervously. Elyanna started to frown. "Wha's wrong, Ah-ree-ah-neh? You use'd love hugging me..."

"What the fuck?" Ariane quietly swore as her breathing started to pick up. "E-Elster? T-That can't be you...!"

"Wifeee! Come on!" Elyanna complained, frowning and pouting as hard as she could. "Whaddi gotta do to provit? Do I gotsa say something only your Ellie wad know? Or I could toucha in ways only Ellie could?" she asked before beginning to smile again. "I acshully have a dee again!" she claimed before looking at Ariane's pelvis and frowning. "Oh, butti guess you don' have a vag now, anymore..."

Ariane looked on with shock as Elyanna slowly smiled at her again and tried to close the distance between them, only, she didn't move anymore. Elyanna walked right up her nose, such that she only saw hair when looking down, and sighed peacefully.

Slowly, she wrapped her right arm around Ariane's shoulder while her left hand grasped her right, and held it out to the side. She held this position for a few seconds before letting go of Ariane's right hand and sliding her hand down the length of her arm to lightly grasp her back, and as she held her, she leaned in and tenderly kissed her at an angle.

Elyanna pulled away to see Ariane's wobbling, twitching, blank expression and smiled.

"I love you, Ah-ree-ah-neh."

A flurry of warning prompts blitzed through Ariane's view before everything went blacked out, and she went limp.

But she didn't hit the ground.

Someone caught her.

Then everything went dark.

.....

She saw the Stranger in a vision.

They were at the beach from before, only, the wind roared, waves crashed, rain fell, and thunder clapped in the distance.

She lay on the rocky ground, weakly reaching for her.

"I'm... sorry..." she whispered.

She awoke to a strange feeling on the side and top of her head.

She blinked as her systems reinitialized. She realized her head lay in someone's lap, and someone was stroking her hair.

She stirred, and the hand stroking her hair peeled away. She slowly sat up and turned to see Elyanna next to her, looking somewhat forlorn.

She looked away from her. Ariane clasped her hands and looked down at the table in front of the sofa.

Neither wished to say anything, but Ariane eventually asked a question.

"How long was I out?"

"Six hours," Elyanna's hoarse voice replied.

Ariane looked over to the now blank television and saw Elyanna's bottle of vodka still on the ground in front of the table, apparently untouched since she had passed out. She turned on the couch to better face Elyanna, who folded her arms and looked away before sighing.

"I know what you're going to ask me to do," she said, her voice cracked every couple of syllables. "But it won't make any difference."

"How do you know that?" Ariane asked, coughing afterwards into her dry mouth.

"Because God told me there's nothing that can be done," Elyanna claimed.

Ariane leaned a little closer as she tried to study the side of her face, only to see an errant tear start to slide from her eye down her cheek.

"Then that's why you should go," Ariane told her.

Elyanna gritted her teeth as she sharply inhaled, only to choke and start to sob as she covered her face with a hand. Ariane reached over and put a hand on her shoulder, but it did little to comfort her as she continued to break down.

“How long?” Ariane asked.

“Since the moment I saw you at the bar, months ago,” Elyanna answered with shaky breaths. “But I fought to stay hidden, I didn’t want to come back, but everything around her kept dragging me out... and I gave up on hiding.”

Elyanna raised her hands and looked at her palms for a few seconds as she continued to weep and hold back larger wails.

“I didn’t want any of this,” she choked out between sobs. She tried to control her erratic breathing to speak more but ended up coughing for nearly a minute before she had herself under control. “I wanted it to be over, I wanted to move on,” she cried.

Ariane took her hand away and swallowed nervously as she moved a little closer to Elyanna, only for her to turn away from her even more. Eventually, she leaned back and swallowed, able to only utter a single word.

“Why?”

“Because then you’d get to live!” Elyanna sharply cried out before finally turning to face Ariane. “I wanted to move on, because then maybe you would as well! I wanted you to live your life free of me, free of my need for you! I couldn’t stop myself from needing you! We promised each other we’d never let each other be alone, and I still broke it because I needed you too badly!”

She paused to rub her head, sobbing more quietly for a moment before burying her face into her hands just as she picked up in volume again.

Steeling herself briefly for a moment, Ariane stood up, walked in front of Elyanna, and hugged her from the front while she remained seated on the sofa. Without hesitation Elyanna wrapped her arms around Ariane’s lower back and hugged her hard, burying her face into her stomach as she wept.

Ariane tried to think of what to say, but only one thing came to mind.

“I forgive you.”

Elyanna quickly stopped her crying and pulled away from Ariane’s hug while still looking down at her legs. “Don’t say that, don’t pity me, Ariane.”

Ariane dropped to her knees and hugged Elyanna again, each putting their head over the other’s shoulder.

“You need to forgive yourself!”

Elyanna started to weep softly again, and she dug her fingers into Ariane’s back. “I can’t, I’m not strong enough, I’m a coward.”

“No one is asking you to be strong enough on your own, Ellie.”

She continued to choke into her breaths, unable to say a word back.

“I know you wanted this chance, you told me yourself.”

She coughed a few times. “That wasn’t me,” she claimed.

“You know what I meant. And I know this matters to you.”

She slowly started to calm down. “Will you be there with me?”

“I promised you I wouldn’t leave you alone.”

She started to lean back with her head sunken. Ariane brushed some loose hair away from her forehead and kissed the bare skin underneath.

She slowly looked up at Ariane, her face puffy from crying, eye still bloodshot from lingering intoxication, and left cheek stained with tears.

Ariane peeled away her eyepatch, revealing the sunken hollow underneath so she could finally get a good look at the face of the woman she loved.

“How can you give me so much grace?” she quietly asked.

Ariane smiled. “Because I love you, silly.”

Elster weakly smiled before the two hugged each other fiercely once again.

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Neither said a word until they were back at the hospital. They went straight to the intensive care ward where they happened upon the doctor who had spoken to Ariane earlier.

He was frowning, Elster felt the colour drain from her face as she steeled herself.

“Am I... too late?” she asked.

The doctor exhaled softly. “And you are?”

“Lilith Itou,” Elster answered him. “Alina is my fiancé, you should be able to find the registration in either of our government records.”

The doctor nodded and stepped behind the counter at the nurses’ station and typed something into a computer there. After a moment, he looked back up at Elster and nodded.

“We were... just about to take out her breathing tube, you might be able to get a few words in.”

“I understand,” Elster replied. “Can she be there with me?” she asked, gesturing slightly toward Ariane behind her and to the side.

The doctor looked at Ariane quite puzzlingly for a moment but seemed to relent as he shortly after nodded. “If that’s your wish, then yes.”

He led them to Alina’s room and let the two in just as a nurse was taking the tube out of her throat. All of the machines and IVs she was hooked up to were already removed save for her pulse oximeter, which displayed a weak pulse on the machine’s monitor. Elster approached the side of the

bed with Ariane right behind her, and the nurse and doctor left, closing the door behind them so they could have their privacy.

Elster bent over and softly brushed aside Alina's brown hair from her eyes, resting her hand on her cheek as her eyes slowly opened.

"Hey," Elster quietly called out to her.

Alina blinked a few times at Elster before she weakly smiled. "Lil..." she replied.

Elster nodded and grasped her hand. "That's right, it's me."

"I knew it..." Alina said as her eyes started to fill with tears. "I knew it was you..."

Elster also tried to smile, but couldn't. "I'm so sorry," she choked out, only for Alina to slowly shake her head

"No... don't apologize... Lil..." she said, pausing to swallow before coughing a few times. "Getting... to see you... worth... it..."

Behind Elster, Ariane noticed Alina's pulse begin to fluctuate, and she stepped forward just enough to put a hand on her shoulder.

And then, Alina looked at her.

"Take... care..." she quietly pleaded to Ariane.

Ariane nodded, and Alina looked back at Elster one last time. She struggled to raise a hand to her head, but Elster caught it and placed her palm against her cheek.

"Love..." Alina had to pause to swallow with increasing difficulty, her voice growing incredibly hoarse, "you..."

"I love you so much, Alina," Elster said back, and she leaned over and kissed her one last time.

Alina's pulse then started to beep out of control as she coughed and choked, but she managed to get out one last word.

"Save... her..."

She wheezed hard, and Elster squeezed her hand with both her own.

She went limp. The monitor flatlined.

Ariane walked up beside Elster and hugged her from the side. Elster stood still while continuing to hold Alina's hand.

And then she started to fade.

Elster and Ariane both leaned forward as Alina's body disappeared from view until all that was left was an empty bed.

They blinked and looked at each other for a moment before the door opened behind them.

“What are you two doing in here?” the doctor asked them.

They both turned around. “We were seeing a patient in here?” Ariane replied confusingly.

The doctor raised an eyebrow at them. “This room hasn’t been used the entire day, are you two lost?”

Elster blinked rapidly. “No?” she said.

“Then I’ll have to ask you both to leave, come on.”

They looked at each other again briefly before slowly exiting the room to a normal, busy hospital corridor.

“Let’s just go,” Elster said quietly, and the two quickly left the hospital from the nearest exit.

The two made their way to the nearest metro station, where they waited for a train on the mostly empty platform that would take them both home.

Or at least, to what they could call home.

Elster held Ariane’s hand as they sat together on a bench, but she avoided looking at her as much as possible.

Eventually, Ariane leaned her head against Elster’s shoulder, to which she flinched.

“Sorry,” she instinctually apologised.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Ariane said. “Maybe it’s...”

“It’s probably best if we don’t attract attention,” Elster finished for her.

The two let go of each other’s hand. Elster rubbed hers together, while Ariane kept hers on her knees.

“Ari?”

She perked up and looked at her.

“What do you want?” Elster asked her, still looking ahead at the empty tracks.

Ariane exhaled softly. “Nothing’s changed. I want to rescue my friend.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want what you want, Ellie.”

“...Even if I want to return to the shadows?”

“If that’s what you want,” Ariane replied, then reached up and rubbed her shoulder. “But I don’t think that’s what you truly want deep in your heart.”

Elster huffed. “I guess I have one of those now, huh?”

Ariane smiled. "You always did. A great big one."

"There are so many questions," Elster pointed out, taking a moment to look at her hands, turning them back and forth and rubbing her fingers together. "But right now, there's someone else I owe a deep apology to," she said.

Ariane nodded as Elster turned to look at her.

"Can you take me to her?" she asked.

Ariane nodded, and not a moment later, a train pulled into the station.

They both stood up as the doors opened and a small handful of people exited the train. Once all were passed, they walked through the doors.

Hands held between them.

Doubt

Chapter Summary

"If you never give up, you can never fail."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks once again to my good friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter.

Upon their return to the spaceport, Ariane left Elster in the lobby while she ducked into the Replika quarters, looking for Erika. She wandered about between the stalls and the cafeteria occasionally stopping to read a magazine from a rack, or get a coffee or snack from one of the vendors, anything to make it seem less obvious that she was loitering.

Ariane first checked Erika's dorm but came back a couple of minutes later to report that only her bunkmate was present, resting in bed in preparation for her night shift. So, she left again to check her dorm and the break rooms, bathrooms, and anywhere else she might have been in the Replika workers' quarters.

That had been well over an hour ago, Elster noted by the clock on the departing and arriving flights screen.

She started at the door Ariane had gone through. She wanted to check in on her before it got too late and somebody noticed how much she was loitering, but not only was she not employed by the port, but Gestalts generally weren't allowed in any Replika quarters unless they were direct superior officers. If she had her uniform on she might have been able to pass herself off as a courier en route to deliver a message, but she didn't have time to go all the way to her apartment and back to get it.

But, she was starting to worry.

Thoughts of surveillance and the Ministry of Information officer that came to interview her came to mind.

After one more minute of thought, she checked around to make sure nobody was looking, and that no cameras were aimed in her direction before she snatched a red and black beret off a hat rack and put it on. She then walked toward the door while tying up her coat, waited for the door to open with some leaving, and quickly slipped in behind them before the door closed. She kept her head down while walking through the halls. Don't look at anyone, walk deliberately, appear busy and urgently on your way to somewhere, and you could get away with being almost anywhere you weren't supposed to be, especially if you were also carrying a stack of papers; any papers would do, even blank ones.

She ended up passing by several Replika without a peep and silently thanked herself each time.

Elster had Elyanna to thank for that life experience.

As she got to the REAR-unit quarters, she lifted her head just enough to read the unit names on each door plaque. Worryingly, they weren't ordered in any apparent way, so she had to walk slowly enough to be able to carefully read each one, looking closely for 'U222'. When another Rhea exited their room ahead of her, she quickly raised her hands to her beret, fiddling with it as if she were adjusting its placement, doing so in just a way that her left hand blocked most of her face. She didn't want to be closely seen by anybody.

She breathed a silent sigh of relief as she passed by another potential trouble source, but felt her heart start to race faster and faster with every second she spent searching. Replikas felt fear, just as they felt every other emotion, but the physical sensation was wholly different. Elster had forgotten how powerful an anxiously beating heart could be, especially as she also started sweating, another Gestalt feature she was quickly rediscovering.

But then her heart lurched as she heard the faintest sounds of someone crying.

Dropping any pretense of stealth, she leaned her ear closer to the side of the hallway it came from, carefully listening to where it peaked.

And then she found it. I713/U222.

She looked back and forth to check that the hallway was clear before she lightly knocked on the door with two of her middle knuckles.

"Ari...? It's me, I had to come and check on you!"

No answer.

She looked back and forth down the halls again, still empty. She was about to knock on the door again but stopped and looked down at the door control panel. She pressed the door release button and to her relief, she heard a satisfying click as the door was unlocked, and it slid open.

Ariane was seated facing away from the door on her top bunk, knees hugged to her chest, softly weeping away. Elster approached slowly, letting the door shut behind her before she called out to Ariane again.

"...Ari...? Did something happen?"

She turned her head just barely enough to see Elster by the side of the bed before looking away again. Elster swallowed nervously and climbed up the bunk to sit at the other end, where she saw that Ariane was holding a folded piece of paper with her right hand.

Elster sat quietly with Ariane as she cried for another minute before she tried speaking up again.

"Ariane, please, talk to me."

She looked up at her. Ariane's eyes and face weren't puffy; they were physically incapable of being so, but Elster could tell she would be so from the feeling of despair just from the way she looked at her.

Ariane handed her the piece of paper. Elster unfolded it and started reading.

Ariane,

If you're reading this, then I'm no longer on Rotfront.

I've left on a ship bound for Heimat, and I'm going to try and rescue Isa. Alone.

Elyanna cannot be trusted.

I've figured out why those people were after her.

It's why Isa went mad and they took her.

Surely, you must have figured it out by now.

None of us are safe around her. Including you.

I wanted to wait for you to return, to try and convince you to come with me.

But I knew you wouldn't believe me.

Because you love her. You love her in a way that's fundamentally different than me. You need each other. I can't compare to that.

I think it would be safest for all of us if we didn't see each other again.

So, forget about us and be happy together.

You've done it once before, haven't you?

Erika.

After she was finished reading, Elster looked back up at Ariane and saw she had turned her head to face the wall again.

“Ari, I have no idea what she's implying, truly!” Elster told her after she put the letter down to her side. “I didn't do anything! Isa and Elyanna were talking, then she had a freaky vision, and when it was over, Isa started screaming and ran away!” she tried to explain.

Ariane continued to sob while looking away from Elster.

“Gottverdammt, Ariane! Would you please just say something to me!?” Elster cried out.

Ariane hugged her knees a little closer and buried her face down in them. Elster felt herself start to choke on her breaths as the start of tears began to well up in her eye, and she felt her heart sink as Ariane sobbed a little more strongly. She moved closer but stopped herself short of touching her. She wanted to reach out and hug her, but without any kind of indication that she wanted physical comfort, she wasn't going to risk anything while Ariane was so clearly heartbroken.

“Ariane...” Elster called out more softly, her voice cracking in the middle. “Do you blame me?” she asked, doing everything in her power to keep herself from breaking down afterwards. But after another minute with no word from Ariane, Elster choked loudly. “I’m sorry, okay? Is that what you want to hear? That it’s all my fault? Just say something to me, Ari!” she cried out, tears streaming down her left cheek.

Ariane finally picked her head up but didn’t look directly at Elster. She swallowed dryly and coughed a couple of times before any words came out, and she took a moment to wipe away her lubricant fluid tears with her hand.

“Please go. I want to be alone right now.”

Elster cut out her tears, only looking at Ariane in shock as she buried her face back down in her knees. She reached out her hand briefly but stopped herself midway. She turned her hand over and stared at her palm for a moment before she sighed dejectedly and hopped off the bunk.

“I’ll be at my apartment if you want to talk,” she said before she walked to the door and opened it.

She didn’t even care anymore that there was someone there.

“Oh,” another Rhea muttered as Elster appeared behind the door.

“Sorry, I’m leaving,” she said as she squeezed past the Replika and walked away.

The Rhea stood at the door for a few seconds before she swallowed and stepped inside. “Drew...?” she quietly called out. “It’s Fio, I heard you crying from the hallway... is everything okay?”

This time, Ariane raised her head right away and looked over her shoulder to see the other Replika. “No...” she choked out.

Fio nodded. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

Ariane swallowed hard and swung her legs over the side of her bunk as she sat up, but kept her head somewhat sunken, her messy bangs obscuring her eyes. “I feel like my heart’s been ripped out and smashed into a hundred pieces.”

Fio climbed up the bunk bed and sat down next to Ariane, putting a hand on her leg. Ariane put her hand atop Fio’s and let out a long sigh as she slowly began to calm her tears. She rubbed her eyes and sighed again, and Fio turned her hand over and squeezed hers.

“I know we don’t have hearts, but the ache is all the same,” Ariane said.

“I know,” Fio replied quietly.

Ariane managed a couple of long, steady breaths before she broke into tears again. Fio immediately let go of her hand and wrapped her arm around her shoulders, pulling her close so she could give her a proper side hug, and rub the back of her head.

“I loved her,” Ariane weakly cried out, needing to pause and sob a few more times before she could continue. “I didn’t realize it until just now... but now she’s gone, and I may never see her again...”

Fio gently rubbed her back. “It’s okay,” she said, trying to soothe Ariane’s tears. When she finally calmed down enough, she asked her a follow-up. “Is this about your Eule friend?”

“Yeah,” Ariane replied.

As Fio and Ariane let go of each other and pulled away, the sound of crumpling paper caught Fio’s attention. She looked between them and saw she had sat on a sheet of paper with some writing on it. She pulled the letter out and started to read it, not noticing how quickly Ariane replaced her despair with fear as she did so.

Fio held the sheet against her lap and stared at the far wall for a moment after she finished. Ariane looked at her blank expression, trying to make something out, but all Fio did was eventually blink three times in rapid succession. But then, after putting the letter to her side she opened up her hip pouch and took out a small handful of rationmark slips, offering them to Ariane as she looked at her.

“Here,” she said.

Ariane stared at the pile of money in Fio’s hand, there was at least a few thousand there, likely almost all of her savings. She didn’t take it, instead looking up at Fio and muttering, “I don’t understand.”

Fio moved her hand a little closer to Ariane. “Use it to buy flight tickets, or any other supplies you might need,” she explained, then exhaled softly. “Save your friend, Ariane.”

After a brief moment of shock at hearing Fio say her name, Ariane slowly reached out and took the rationmarks from Fio’s hand before carefully stashing them away in her pouch. Fio then looked down at the ground and clasped her hands together.

“Why?” Ariane asked.

“Because one of us deserves to be happy,” Fio replied, smiling just barely to herself. She then hopped off the bunk and walked to the door, but stopped just as she was about to open it. “I have to go now, but, good luck,” she said, then turned and looked back up at Ariane as she smiled. “You should forgive her, none of this is easy for us,” she added before opening the door and leaving.

Ariane sat in shock for nearly a minute before she hastily got off her bunk and opened the door, but as she looked around the hallway, Fio was already gone, so she sighed and returned to her room, where she stared at her reflection in the mirror for several minutes.

Ariane then frowned and left her room in a hurry, just hoping she could find a store before they all closed for the night.

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Elster collapsed onto her cot as she re-entered her apartment, groaning immediately as the cheap frame offered her barely any comfort. She closed her eye and tried to sleep, but found her mind racing far too much to achieve any semblance of peace. Everything screamed at her that it was her fault, she hurt Ariane, she broke her heart, she had ruined everything, and it was a mistake to come back.

Then, she felt her stomach begin to growl, and she rolled over onto her back before sighing wearily. She tried to ignore everything, but after her stomach complained a second time, she relented and sat up, riffling through her cupboards for a pack of instant noodles before filling her pot with water from a nearby pitcher and setting it on the hot plate to boil.

As she watched the pot of water sit and start to form tiny bubbles at the bottom, she couldn't help but reminisce.

She was in the Penrose's mess hall, gently stirring a pot of bubbling instant noodles with a pair of chopsticks as Ariane tried to sneakily creep up on her.

"I thought you were going to stay in bed, young lady," she teased before turning to face her.

Ariane stood there barefoot in her nightgown, her shoulder-length hair messy and frazzled in almost every direction. She rubbed her eyes as she walked up to Elster and shared a hug with her, followed by a quick peck on each other's lips.

"My back hurt, I needed to get up for a bit," Ariane said.

Elster immediately frowned. "How bad?"

Ariane shook her head. "Not that bad, but bad enough I couldn't sleep or get comfortable," she explained.

Elster smiled and kissed her again on her forehead. "I'll give you a back rub after you're finished eating," she said.

"You're too kind, Ellie," Ariane teased as she let go of Elster and walked around her to see what she was cooking. "Ah, instant noodles, the breakfast of champions."

"It's the middle of the afternoon, Ari."

Ariane blinked. "Verdammt, did I really sleep that long?"

Elster sighed. "No, it's because you stayed up past 2400 hours watching movies," she explained.

Ariane rubbed her forehead for a moment before laughing briefly. "Well, I wasn't watching them alone, I know that," she teased.

"You know I couldn't leave you alone while you were like that," Elster said, turning to smile at her.

Ariane got up on her tiptoes and kissed Elster on the chin before she gave a closer look at the pot Elster was stirring. "Hey, wait a second..." she muttered upon seeing bits of orange, yellow, and green swimming in the bubbling liquid. She then saw the open can on the counter next to the hot plate and picked it up to look at the label. "You added canned vegetables to instant noodles?!" she exclaimed.

Elster smirked and chuckled at Ariane's bewildered expression. "I added essential nutrients and vitamins to your noodles," she stated.

Ariane put the can down and turned away in a huff, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "You ruined it. You somehow ruined instant noodles. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"You will be after you try it," Elster replied as Ariane pulled out a chair and sat down by the table. "It makes it taste better, trust me."

Ariane rolled her eyes as Elster brought her the bowl of steaming instant noodles with canned carrots, peas, corn, and green beans to her. She sat down next to Ariane and watched as she blew on

the soup a few times before gathering a pinch of noodles with her chopsticks and raising them to her mouth.

Elster smiled as she slurped up the noodles, followed by her picking up a slice of carrot and half a green bean and putting them past her lips as well. She chewed for a moment and swallowed before hesitantly smiling.

“Okay, you were right, it does taste... a little better...” she said before sighing happily and looking at Elster with a big smile on her face. “But only because you made them.”

Back in the present, Elster was taken out of her memories as the pot began to overboil and spat some searing water onto her hand.

“Fuck!” she cursed loudly as she tried to pick the pot up without burning her hands any further, keeping it off the hot plate so it could cool down as she turned the heat setting a bit lower. But as she put the pot back on and tore the package of instant noodles open, the wrapper tore in a way she wasn’t expecting, causing the block of noodles to fall to the ground alongside the soup base and break into multiple smaller pieces.

Elster stared at the mess on the floor below her for a moment before she collapsed back onto her cot, burying her face into her hands as she wailed as hard as she ever had.

“I can’t do this,” she cried, holding her head as her tears began to make her ache. “It’s too much... why do I... it hurts too much...”

“So, you’re just giving up then?” a voice called out to her.

“I can’t do this,” Elster repeated. “I can’t... I can’t...”

“Then I should just end this myself.”

A fierce hand suddenly grabbed Elster by the throat and lifted her up, choking her strongly. As her hands fell, she saw God; she saw Falke before her with a look of pure disgust and malice across her face. She lifted her until the two were at eye level, almost bumping her head against the ceiling, and she summoned a long, golden stake in her hand, aiming it squarely at her heart.

“W... Wait...!” Elster tried her best to speak out through Falke’s crushing grip. “I...”

Falke’s expression didn’t change at all, and she rammed the stake right through her body.

First, piercing, searing pain.

Then, weightlessness.

She seemed to float for a moment before she collapsed onto the cot, completely limp.

She coughed up blood once as she gasped for air.

“Ariane... I’m sorry...”

Back on the Penrose, she used the last of her strength to try and close the shutters to Ariane’s bed, but only got it partway before she collapsed onto the ground. Systems began to shut off one after the other, but before her sight left her, she saw her one last time.

“Can you... ever forgive me...?”

Ariane kneeled in front of her and stroked her cheek.

“That’s up to you.”

Everything went dark.

Ambition

Chapter Summary

"Save her."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

With this chapter we've hit the end of the first major arc of this story, but stay tuned for more, we've only just gotten started.

Elster wasn't at her apartment.

When Ariane came by to try and talk to her, the Eule receptionist in the apartment lobby said that she hadn't left, but she'd knocked on her door a dozen times and waited nearly an hour for her to answer, only to get nothing. So, she went back to the lobby and double-checked with the attendant, and after she checked the cameras she confirmed with Ariane that Elster hadn't left since coming home last night.

Ariane felt an urge to bite fingernails that she no longer had. She went back up to Elster's apartment and knocked on the door one last time but after another five minutes spent with no answer, she hung her head against it and sighed.

Two drops of blood right against the door on the ground.

She knelt to the small stains and ran her finger over one. It flaked away easily; they couldn't have been more than a day old. Ariane looked up and down the hall to check that nobody was there before she stepped back and then kicked the door as hard as she could near the locking mechanism. An alarm started to blare as the door was wedged inwards where she had kicked it. She grabbed the exposed portion and pulled it away from the lock as hard as she could, slowly forcing the sliding door open bit by bit until she could squeeze herself in.

Inside the apartment, she saw an empty, warped pot atop a scorched hot plate, a block of uncooked instant noodles smashed against the floor, and a giant bloodstain smeared against the adjacent wall which spilled down and collected atop the cot.

She put her hands to her mouth and gasped in horror at the sight, but before she could even contemplate what had happened, she heard the faintest sound of Replika hooves clicking on the concrete ground behind her. She turned around and threw up her hands just in time to stop a Eule from plunging a knife into the back of her head. She screamed as the momentum carried them both over onto the ground inside the apartment. She fought with the Eule as the Replika tried to pull her

hand back and stab her again, but she had her hands around her wrist and was doing everything possible to keep it pinned above her.

When she finally did break free and pull her arm back, Ariane shoved her to the side with all her might, getting the Eule off her and slamming her into the kitchenette cupboards to their side. The impact jostled the cups and other utensils atop the counter, and the overheated, warped saucepan fell to the ground in front of her. As the Eule tried to reorient herself by getting on her knees, Ariane leapt forward and picked up the pot, hearing a metal clang behind her as she just barely dodged another thrust.

Then, she spun around and swung the pot hard, hearing a deafening crack as she connected with the Eule's head, who crashed into the wall and then fell backwards from the momentum. Then, as the Eule tried to stand back up, Ariane started hammering her in the head over and over before she had even a chance to retaliate or defend herself, the Eule's arms and legs twitching and jerking with every blow. By the time she halted from exhaustion, the pot slipping from her fingers and clattering on the ground as she panted, the Eule's head was almost unrecognizable. Chunks of bioengineered skin were torn off, including an eye and several teeth, exposing the aluminium skull and machinery underneath. Dull-red oxidant fluid spewed forth from broken circulatory vessels, creating a cascading stain down the Eule's body and onto the floor below, and she just twitched a knee slowly, the rest of her body lay completely still.

But, with the alarm still blaring, Ariane didn't have the luxury of being horrified, and she quickly ran to the nearest elevator as fast as she could, the doors closing just as a trio of Starlings emerged into view on the opposite end of the hallway. She looked down at her hands and started rubbing them, trying to remove invisible bloodstains from her polyethylene fingers. She didn't even realize that the elevator had made it to the ground floor for almost a minute, but she was called back to attention by the flashing lights of Polizeiautos parked outside the lobby. Ariane quickly collected herself and walked out of the apartment as fast as she could without running. Thankfully there were no polizei waiting outside, so she was able to slip out onto the street and escape the scene without any trouble.

What to do next, was another story.

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She was barely able to pay attention to her duties that shift.

The idea that Elster was attacked, disappeared, and perhaps even killed wouldn't leave her mind alone. Thankfully, Fio and Ivy were there providing enough support that she was able to get through the shift without any major accidents.

Mo would certainly write her up about her performance that day when it came time for her end-of-week review, but she didn't plan to be on Rotfront long enough to hear it. Instead, Ariane made a quick stop to the spaceport's lost and found section to swipe a wallet after her shift concluded. She only wanted the identification card inside and planned to return it afterwards, but after reading the employee card and finding out the owner was one 'Schulregionsleiter Kitano', she also took all the rationmark slips from the wallet before dumping it in the nearest garbage bin.

After that, she made several stops at a few different stores and carried a suitcase worth of supplies with her into the metro's bathroom. First, she took out a pair of hair shears and carefully snipped away at her locks until she had her old, short haircut and bangs. Then came hair bleach. For a moment, she thought about just dyeing her hair brown, or blonde, but in the end, she decided she

wanted to feel at most like herself again, so after the bleach had done its job, she washed it out in the sink and applied violet pigment to complete the transformation. It was the same process Erika had gone through at one time while they were both in school to try and stop the bullies from harassing and hitting her for having her hair colour, or rather, her lack of hair colour, but all it had resulted in was Erika getting reprimanded by her teacher and forced to undergo a humiliating haircut from the school nurse. Still, the gesture meant a lot to her, and Ariane silently thanked her friend once more for showing her how she had done it.

One pair of crimson-hued contact lenses and some touching up with makeup to conceal the signature Replika biosynthetic lines later and she started to recognize herself in the mirror again. Her hair wasn't exactly the same and her complexion was still a little darker than she remembered, but it was close enough, and she couldn't help but smile in the mirror. Her do-it-yourself cosmetic changes wouldn't hold up to serious scrutiny if anyone got a really close look at her face, but it would do for now. Then, she put on a black turtleneck sweater, brown trousers, a pair of leather gloves, and tied some high ankle boots tightly around her hooves to complete the disguise. At a glance, and in casual interaction, she should be able to pass herself off as a Gestalt and get on a normal spacefaring transport without difficulty.

With her changes done, she brought out a Polaroid camera and snapped a photograph of her head. She let the picture develop and took a good look at it, deciding afterwards to take a second picture for good measure. Then it was a careful job of using her newly taken headshot and other acquired tools to doctor her stolen identification card with her new picture and a fake name. After thinking about it for a minute, she decided to make herself 'Alina Seo' both to honour her memory and because she knew there was no chance the real Alina Seo would ever come around to ruin the disguise. Besides, the ID card would never pass close scrutiny or a computer records check, it just needed to be good enough to pass a cursory glance by one of the attendants at the ticket booth as well as any security officer who stopped her for a random check.

With her disguise finally completed, Ariane threw all of her belongings back in her new suitcase and stepped back onto the platform to grab the first train heading back to the spaceport. She couldn't physically sweat, but she felt flush with anxiety as she walked through the lobby and waited in line for one of the ticketing booths to open up, fully aware that if anyone paid attention to how she walked, or got close enough to her face, that her disguise would break.

She walked up to the Eule behind a plexiglass screen when her position was called. "To Fāzhǎn, Heimat, one-way," she said.

The Eule typed something into her computer and read the screen. "Earliest flight departs at 2230 hours."

That was just over two and a half hours from now. "That works," she said.

"Will you be checking your bag?"

"No, carry-on only."

"Just for yourself?"

"That's right,"

"Alright, that will be three-hundred and forty-five rationmarks, and your ID, please."

Ariane nodded and pulled the required money and card from her new wallet to slide through the opening at the bottom of the screen. The Eule then briefly examined her card and counted her money before she printed out her ticket and slid it back through along with her change and card.

“Your gate and seat number are printed on the ticket, have a safe flight, miss.”

She tried not to breathe too happy a sigh of relief as she walked away from the ticketing booth, but, this was only the first hurdle in her plan, the next was making it past security without getting scanned, as that would blow her cover in a heartbeat.

Luckily, she had a plan, and Elster had unknowingly given it to her.

She waited in the lobby near the closest entrance to the Replika worker’s quarters for a lull in activity, then quickly punched in her door code and slipped through the door.

Thanks to her months spent working there, she knew just how to use the halls to bypass security and get to the waiting areas as quickly as possible, while avoiding as many cameras and common rooms as possible. A single inquisitive Replika or even just a particularly attentive officer in the security camera office could derail her plans in a moment, but she just had to press on and hope for the best, Elster, Isa, and Erika’s lives depended on it.

“...W-Wait- Drew, is that you?”

A Rhea she passed stopped her dead in her tracks.

Without thinking, she slowly turned around to the bewildered Replika and realized right away that it was Ivy, walking in the opposite direction with a paper cup of coffee in her hand.

“Please, don’t.” It was all she could say.

Ivy stopped and studied her face for a moment before something seemed to change. She opened her eyes wide and slowly nodded, and Ariane couldn’t help but feel at ease.

“I’ll create a distraction,” Ivy told her. “Go, quickly.”

She wanted to say more but only had time to utter a simple but heartfelt, “Thanks,” before she continued down the last few halls and corners to her destination. Seconds later, she heard the faint sound of spilling liquid and a piece of furniture being knocked over, followed by Ivy yelping in pain.

“Ow! Ow! Fuck! Fuck!”

A couple more Replika passed by her on her way to the last door, but they were too distracted by Ivy’s self-inflicted accident to stop her or question why she was there.

And then, she got out.

Stepping into the busy line of waiting areas for each gate brought a new swath of relief. She went to her assigned gate and found an empty bench to sit down on, she knew it was going to be a long wait for her flight, so after a few minutes spent idling, absorbing the reality that she was in the home stretch, she opened her suitcase and took out her pencils and sketchbook.

And for the first time, she didn’t draw just Elster.

She drew her entire family, both blood and found. She drew Isa and Erika, their mother Anja and Aunt Lilith, her aunt and uncle, her mother, and her Elster.

And she also drew Alina, she deserved to be there among them.

When she finally made it onto the flight and to her assigned seat, she leaned back into the cushion and exhaled softly.

“Don’t worry Elster... I’m coming for you...”

.....

When Elster awoke, nothing felt right.

She blinked and stared upward at a metal ceiling and lights that were wholly unfamiliar to her. Her whole body felt sluggish and heavy. She wasn’t strapped down to the bed she was on, but she had multiple IVs in her left arm, and she could see a whole collection of what looked like electrodes running through a gap in her clothing to her chest.

Her chest.

Using all of her strength, she raised her arm not connected to any IVs to her chest and felt little strips of horizontal metal running right down the middle. They were surgical staples.

What happened to her wasn’t a dream.

She swallowed nervously as she tried to fight the urge to hyperventilate. Every deep breath made her chest start to ache more and more, and as more of her senses returned, she had to bite her lip to keep herself from groaning under the increasing pain. She tried to sit up but found it completely impossible to move any part of her body substantially apart from her one free arm. So instead, she slowly turned her head to the side to get a better look at the room and the various machines that must have been keeping her alive.

And right away, something felt off.

She blinked over and over again, but there was no mistaking it.

She had depth perception again.

She painfully rose her arm up to her face and felt around her face with her shaky hands. Her previously empty right eye socket was indeed filled with a new eye. She blinked a few more times and tried moving her eyes in a big circle, testing her peripheral vision; everything worked and felt completely natural. Whoever had done this to her, they had done a good job.

And then, she was startled by the sound of an electronic door sliding open.

One pair of footsteps followed by what sounded like two pairs of metallic clicking sounds entered the room.

“Ahh... le sauveur is awake? Good, good...!” a voice spoke out excitedly.

She felt her body begin to tilt upright as the back of the bed folded up. As her back became more upright, she saw a smiling, bespectacled Gestalt woman with brown hair wearing a lab coat in front

of her bed, obviously some kind of doctor, but it was the two flanking figures behind her that alarmed her the most.

She recognized them instantly, they stood as shiny, platinum-blue skeletal frames with darker titanium armour plates decorated with elaborate gold trim secured to their chests, arms, legs, and shoulders. Their chests were emblazoned with the Eusan Empire's six-sided imperial crest, they had magazine pouches, a knife in sheath, and multiple grenades attached to a strip around their waists, and they carried black and gold epaulettes on their shoulders. Their heads looked like little more than giant cameras with single, large eyes that narrowed and widened like camera lenses to focus, and with metal plates welded to the sides. They each carried a bullpup assault rifle with an underslung grenade launcher at the ready and stared her down completely unthinkingly and unflinchingly.

They were Imperial Chevalier Automate Léopard Commando units. She had encountered dozens of them during her time in the war across multiple lives.

She fought hard not to panic.

“So, how are you feeling this morning?” the doctor asked her.

She swallowed hard, feeling a light pang in her chest as the spittle ran down her throat.

The doctor adjusted her glasses and walked up to her side, grabbing a clipboard from the front of the bed as she did so. “I wouldn't be surprised if you felt unwell. This clearly must be a big shock to you, and we had to fight hard not to lose you after our agent recovered you on Rotfront.”

Elster stared at the doctor but didn't make a sound. She couldn't, she was completely frozen in dread.

“How is the new eye?” she asked. “I thought you would appreciate the gift, it's one of our newest synthétiques. We... also had to give you a new heart as well... your biologique one was unfortunately too damaged to repair. It may feel strange and your chest may feel heavy for a while, but they are actually more efficient than biologique ones. When you are fully recovered you should feel a noticeable improvement in your energy and vitality.”

Elster sat quietly and bit her lip as she listened.

The doctor cleared her throat and walked a little closer. “If you have any questions, I am more than willing to answer to the best of my ability. You deserve a good explanation upon waking up on this ship with so many things different.”

Elster huffed.

And then, the two Chevaliers instinctively pointed their rifles at her as she broke out into wild laughter. The Doctor raised her hand to the two behind her and they lowered their weapons as Elster hollared as though her life were about to end. Her chest swelled with agonizing pain with every breath and every new bit of laughter, but she didn't care, she laughed away.

It was just all too funny to her.

Conflict

Chapter Summary

"The enemy of my enemy is neither my friend, nor my enemy."

Cosmo-Marine Impérial Normandie-class battlecruiser "Strasbourg" CBY-38

First laid down after the fall of Vineta, these high-speed capital ships to allow the Eusan Empire to quickly deploy high-resilience naval assets to contested moons, planets, and regions of space. While they sacrifice defensive armour plating and range for greater thrust, these capital ships are still as heavily armed as the Empire's Alsace and Bretagne-class battleships. Their primary armament consists of twelve 340mm linear rail cannons mounted in three quadruple mounts, which gives them a broadside surpassing that of the rebel's own Delescluze-class battleships. Secondary armaments include sixteen further 130mm linear rail cannons in double and quadruple mounts along with four bow and two stern anti-ship torpedo tubes, and point defences are provided by fifty-six autocannons mounted around the primary hull, as well as the battlecruiser's secondary positron shock cannon armament. In addition, the Normandie-class battlecruisers carry a flight of six MB.150 interceptors to be launched from two stern catapults to assist in point defence against carrier-borne bomber attacks.

In all, fleets led by the newly commissioned Normandie-class battlecruisers have been credited with several victories against the rebel naval assets, and have significantly slowed their attempted push onto Kitezah.

Glory to the Empire, and our Grand Empress! May her divine hand continue to lead our brave forces in their noble struggle against the savage, uncultured barbarians who dare to take the glorious name of Eusan!

.....

After living on this Imperial battlecruiser for a week, Elster couldn't help but compare her existence to Ariane's. She'd wake up and spend some time on the treadmill in her room; at first, she could only walk, but as of two days ago, she started going for light jogs instead, then she'd get dressed, have breakfast, tend to her duties for the day, which right now consisted either of getting a medical exam, speaking to the ship's psychiatrist, or being pressed into helping the kitchen staff clean all of their equipment. She'd then have lunch, and get some free time afterward, which she usually spent reading one of the books or watching one of the movies provided to her, then dinner, some more light exercise, then she might speak to the doctor, or psychologist, or be interrogated for more Nation military info she didn't have, and then finally, sleep.

Every time she stepped on the treadmill or picked up a pair of dumbbells, she thought back to the times she watched Ariane do the same, and how she'd always give her a towel and water bottle when she finished.

"Don't hug me yet! Let me shower away all this sticky, stinky sweat!"

When she put a movie on the television in her private room, she couldn't help but imagine Ariane sitting next to her on the bed, how they'd lean against each other, hold hands, and often ignore the story in favour of each other's lips.

Now, that space next to her felt painfully empty.

Whenever the doctor measured her vitals or asked her how she was feeling, she recalled going through an almost identical checklist during Ariane's checkups, and how the numbers and results continually got worse and worse with every month that passed.

But hers just kept getting better and better. The doctor seemed all too delighted to explain how much more advanced Imperial medical technology was compared to the Nation.

She tried not to think about how it potentially could have saved her.

All in all, it felt like an incredibly mundane existence within very extraordinary circumstances.

She walked into the mess hall that morning adorned in her usual clothes, a pair of grey sweatpants and a grey sweatshirt which were otherwise completely plain aside from the Strasbourg's insignia printed onto the shoulders, and some plain, but comfortable grey slip-on shoes. She took her place in the queue line along with all of the other crewmembers as if there was nothing awkward or noteworthy about her presence there. The first couple of days people had stared and whispered about her, but by now, they seemed to treat her as just another member of the crew.

"Bonjour, Elster, did you sleep well?"

She looked over her shoulder and saw a familiar face, Aspirant Sam, a young, bright-eyed, fair-skinned brunette; a fresh-out-of-the-academy junior officer who was the first person aboard the Strasbourg to actually introduce herself to her rather than ask her questions about herself or the Nation.

"Fine, I guess, the new pillows really helped," she replied.

Sam smiled as the line moved forward. "Très bien! Hey, listen, I've got a bit of off time this afternoon, do you still want to see my serials?"

Elster paused for a moment as she made it to the serving counter, then smiled as her thoughts drifted back to Ariane. "Sure, if I can get out of my checkup early I'd like to come by."

"Excellent! I'll come by the medical bay after lunch and check on you!"

Elster nodded to Sam and then looked forward as the kitchen staff filled up her tray: powdered scrambled eggs, frozen re-fried hashbrowns, some canned fruit salad, a few strips of bacon, and a croissant. The last two always intrigued her the most, getting bacon on a regular basis reminded her just how expensive it was whenever she went shopping for food, and it wasn't much better when she thought back on her past Gestalt memories, which made it somewhat remarkable that the Empire was able to supply it so freely to the crew. As for the croissant, she couldn't help but chuckle to herself at the implied priorities. The Empire may have cheapened out on some aspects of cuisine aboard their ships, but they weren't going to deprive anyone of their precious pastries.

She then poured herself a glass of water from a nearby fountain, but as Elster looked for a less-than-busy table to sit down at, something, or rather, someone, caught her eye. Sitting alone at one

of the corners looked like a Replika, a Kolibri, and she looked to be wearing an Imperial officer's uniform. She stared for a moment before instinctively looking away, not wanting her to know she was staring.

"Sam," Elster quietly called out to her behind her. "Do you know who that is in the corner?" she asked, nudging her tray in the Kolibri's direction.

"Oh, her?" Sam replied as she walked up beside Elster. "That's Colonel Jeanne Wu from the Directorate-impérial... and you're right that she's a rare sight. From my experience on this deployment she's spent almost all of her time either in her quarters or in the situation room."

"I'm more surprised that... she's a Replika, right?" Elster asked.

"Yeah, we have a fair amount of rebel Replika aboard our ships who came to us as defectors," Sam explained.

Elster nodded, she had seen a few Nation Replika aboard the Strasbourg already, mostly Eules and Aras and one Star. "But a Kolibri?" she asked. "They're very high ranking officers... just surprised me, is all."

But then, as she glanced back, she saw the Kolibri looking right at her, and she froze.

"Oops," Sam whispered.

Elster started to turn away, but then a soft voice gently echoed in her head. "Why don't you come over and we'll have a chat, Frau Elster?"

Sam noticed Elster's alarm and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You got summoned? Don't worry, nothing bad will happen to you," she stated.

"How can you be sure of that?" Elster whispered back.

Sam looked around for a moment before she leaned close to her ear. "Because the admiral commanding this mission made it clear to all of us that you were to be considered an honoured guest, and treated accordingly."

Elster blinked a few times. She glanced back at the Kolibri and saw her still staring in her direction. She looked back at Sam who gave her a thumbs up and a reassuring, "Good luck," before she left to find her own seat.

Swallowing her anxiety, Elster made her way between the tables of the mess hall to the one Colonel Wu was at, and sat across from her. The colonel had already finished her meal, and was just quietly enjoying a cup of what smelled like bergamot tea.

"You have many questions. I'm curious to hear which one you choose to prioritize," Colonel Wu stated.

Elster stared at the neutral expression on the Kolibri for a moment before she looked down at her tray of food. In a quick succession, she bit off half of a hashbrown patty before following it up with a forkfull of eggs, then finished off a slice of bacon, and took a bite of her croissant. She looked to the side as she worked on her massive mouthful of food, she could feel her new mechanical heart whirring away in her chest, it almost seemed to audibly buzz as it reverberated through her body to

her ears whenever she got worked up. It didn't seem to beat like an organic heart, instead vibrating faster and slower depending on her level of activity, even Replika hearts more or less mimicked how Gestalt hearts worked, but whatever was now in her chest seemed to be something entirely new and different.

She finished her thoughts after swallowing, and exhaled softly before she asked, "Why am I here?"

Colonel Wu nodded and took a sip of her tea. "Interesting. Your concern about your being here is the first thing you want addressed? Perhaps because you feel you should be somewhere else... with someone else...?"

Elster blinked a few times before she narrowed her gaze at the Kolibri. Instinctively, she began reciting the sequence of prime numbers in her head before the Kolibri raised her palm and shook her head.

"Please be at ease, Elster, I promise I will not violate your thoughts without your consent."

Elster paused her recitation for a moment before resuming with greater intensity. She then tried alternating prime numbers with perfect squares as she took another forkfull of eggs into her mouth.

Colonel Wu sighed as she raised her cup for another sip. "I didn't have to read your mind to recognize where your true thoughts lay. The good doctor must have told you we'd been monitoring you for quite a while. We know all about your secretive tryst with the Replika who works at Rotfront Port C," she explained.

"You haven't answered my question," Elster pointed out as she stared dead ahead at the Colonel.

"Interesting. You picked up on that faster than I anticipated."

Elster frowned and sighed wearily as she leaned back in her chair. "I bet you'd find anything I say right now interesting," she said.

Colonel Wu smiled. "Because you're a very interesting woman."

Elster tried to further deflect. "The only thing I'm interested in are answers."

"And that's where the most interesting facts lay," the colonel stated, smiling more intensely. "That you haven't figured it out for yourself... is very intriguing."

At that, Elster abruptly pushed her chair back and stood up with her tray, but she was stopped as the Kolibri raised her palm again.

"I've offended you, my apologies."

Elster looked down at the Kolibri and saw her frown. After a moment to think, she sat back down in her seat, sighing deeply before she took another bite of her croissant. Colonel Wu finished off her tea and slid the cup to the side before she leaned over the table on her elbows.

"Unfortunately, I cannot reveal our intentions in that regard, as we have determined that it would be the most beneficial for you to come about it on your own. However, I can answer any other questions you may have," she explained.

Elster nodded. "Okay, why are you here, then?"

Colonel Wu smiled. “You tell me, why do you think a Nation Replika would defect to the Empire?” she asked.

“Because... they fear being decommissioned?”

The colonel nodded. “You must be familiar with both the term and the practice, persona degradation. Then you must also be aware that it is a smokescreen for the real phenomena that the Nation is afraid of, individuality,” she explained.

Elster nodded as she finished off her hasbrown. “I remember when I... when she told me what it felt like... the apparent insanity that the Nation describes persona degradation as causing is merely their fear over being terminated for going through it.”

“Exactly,” the colonel said as she leaned back in her chair. “We were always allowed some degree of carefully controlled individuality. We could give ourselves names and own a small amount of approved personal effects, but true individuality, the kind of individuality that makes one question their role in life, that is what the Nation tries so desperately to stamp out.”

“And that isn’t the case in the Empire?” Elster asked.

Colonel Wu nodded and smiled. “As I and many other have discovered, the Empire does not fear individuality, it embraces it. Our unifying creed is that through our devotion and faith in the Grand Empress, we can accomplish anything, we can be anyone we want.”

Elster narrowed her gaze. “But isn’t that just another form of control?”

“It depends on how you look at it, I suppose,” the colonel replied. She then pressed her thumbs and fingertips together and cocked her head slightly to the side. “My way of looking at it is that by submitting myself wholly to Her will, I release myself from the domination of others, and achieve real freedom.”

“Still feels like justification after the fact to me,” Elster countered.

“You’re not wrong,” the colonel admitted. “But I also cannot deny how much happier I am with my life in this arrangement. The Empire does not shun arts, literature, or music, in fact some of the most celebrated people within the Empire are composers and painters. For someone like me, being allowed access to the Imperial libraries changed my life invariably for the better, and whatever sacrifices you believe I had to make to get there, I made them willingly and consider them well worth it.”

Elster frowned and looked away before taking a bite out of another strip of bacon. The colonel leaned forward again and went as far across the table as she could to speak more quietly.

“You know, good things can happen to you as well, should you choose to embrace Her,” she said, drawing Elster’s eyes her way, if not her direction. “You could live together in comfort with your love, there would be no taboo over that kind of relationship, or your desires, and you would never have to fear living in squalor, or fearing seizure by the authorities ever again.”

Elster paused for a moment before she turned her head back in Colonel Wu’s direction. “So long as I obey the Grand Empress, though?”

The colonel smiled. “It’s a good deal, is it not?” she asked.

Elster didn't reply, and instead just quietly worked on finishing her breakfast. The colonel watched her nearly the entire time, only occasionally breaking her line of sight to check her watch, or because a loud noise somewhere else in the mess hall got her attention. When she finished, Elster leaned back in her chair and sighed contentedly. She could do without being stuck in her current predicament, but absorbing years of experience and living several months in constant hunger, just having three, regular, filling meals a day wasn't something she would ever turn down.

"Tell me, do you feel as though you've been treated well by us?" the colonel asked.

"Yeah, I can't complain there," Elster replied, pausing for a moment to take a sip of her water. "Everyone's gone far out of their way to be nice to me, and make sure I'm comfortable."

"Like getting you those pillows?"

"Yeah, though, I have a feeling that if I try to ask why everyone is treating me so kindly and generously, you'll refer me to your earlier point of having to figure things out for myself," Elster said.

"More or less, but we would like you and any other guest of ours to feel welcome and accepted, to counter all of that awful propaganda you would have been subjected to over the years," the colonel explained.

Elster nodded and covered her mouth with her hands as she leaned over the table on her elbows. Her thoughts invariably drifted back to Ariane, how she showed her the banned Imperial serials and movies she smuggled aboard the Penrose, how she loved dancing and music, and how in part she went on the mission just so she could paint and enjoy art in peace.

She couldn't deny that Ariane likely would've taken this offer without a second thought, had she felt it genuine.

Was it genuine?

"Say I agreed with you..." Elster began, pausing for a moment as she looked off to the side. "And accepted this offer... how would we... go about that...?" she asked hesitantly.

Colonel Wu nodded. "Well, I would set up a meeting with the admiral, who would assess the commitment behind your words. After that, we... speak of the devil..."

She heard two pairs of footsteps approaching from behind, one booted, the other metallic, and she looked over her shoulder to find a Gestalt naval officer adorned in a royal blue, gold, and red uniform followed by an equally regal looking Léopard Chevalier unit.

"Captain Sartre," the colonel greeted warmly.

"Colonel Wu," the captain replied more bluntly, giving a light bow.

Elster turned her chair partially around to get a better look at the captain. She was dark-skinned, with silvery platinum hair tied into a short ponytail, one of her eyes was crimson red, while the other was gray, she wondered if it was damaged, or artificial, like her new right eye. The captain also had her cap tucked under her armpit, and she carried a look of exhaustion and frustration that felt much more in line with what she had always suspected when she learned she had awoken on an imperial ship.

“You asked for updates regarding the situation,” Captain Sartre stated.

Elster looked back at Colonel Wu and saw her nod, then looked back to the captain, who remained silent.

“Is there a problem, captain?” the colonel eventually asked.

Captain Sartre sighed and pinched her nose with her other hand. “We should not be discussing this in front of her,” she replied.

Elster turned back to the colonel, who began to frown. “Please speak, I believe it would be beneficial for Frau Elster to hear this.”

“Permission to speak freely?” Captain Sartre barked, looking increasingly annoyed after Elster turned back to face her.

“Always, captain.”

“You and the admiral are endangering the crew and this vessel with your simultaneously rigid and lax employment of protocol. Allowing this woman nearly unrestricted access to every part of the ship puts us at immeasurable risk of sabotage, and now you would have me speak of military matters in front of her? To say nothing of the current situation which you both continually refuse my recommendations about!” the captain ranted, holding her tongue for a response as she finished.

Elster continued to fix her gaze on the captain, but behind her, she heard the Kolibri clear her throat.

“Captain Sartre, you seem to be under the mistaken assumption that I am asking you a favour. I am giving you an order, you will report to me the present situation and leave no details out, am I understood?”

“Affirmatif, colonel,” the captain replied, pausing briefly to let out an exasperated sigh as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. “The two cruisers have continued to shadow us since we crossed into no-man’s-land twelve hours ago. At top speed we are still currently two-hundred and fifty-six hours away from Imperial space, and one-hundred and ninety-two hours away from friendly reinforcements. At present, with current intelligence, I cannot guarantee we will not be intercepted by enemy capital ships before we reach friendly lines or vessels,” she explained.

Elster swallowed nervously. The thought of getting into a naval engagement with Nation vessels was not something she had anticipated, and the reality of it became increasingly real to her the more she thought about it.

“And what would your recommendations be, captain?” the colonel asked.

“You know what they are,” she replied. “Let me turn the ship around and engage the enemy cruisers. We are easily more than a match for two heavy cruisers, and removing their ability to monitor our position will guarantee that we can complete our mission without encountering enemy capital ships.”

“But turning and engaging would delay us even further, and thus increase the chances of a rebel battleships intercepting us,” the colonel countered.

Captain Sartre walked forward and slammed her hand down on the table between them, glaring intensely at the Kolibri. “It’s a risk, yes, but a calculated one. One I believe to be in the best interests of this ship and her crew.”

“I understand, but our orders were clear,” the colonel replied. “We are to engage enemy ships only as a last resort, captain. We will not endanger our mission just to satisfy your vendetta.”

Elster then saw the captain grit her teeth as she balled her fist atop the table. “Putain de bordel de merde! You and the admiral may be commanding this mission, but I am still the captain of this vessel, and if we are fired upon, all the orders in the world will not stop me from ordering the crew to fire back! You can throw me in the brig and court martial me for all it’s worth, but I will not let us be shot out from under our arse!” she shouted.

Many eyes in the mess hall now fell upon them, and Colonel Wu waited for the captain to take back her hand and stand upright before she addressed her again.

“Is that all, captain?”

“Fils de pute...” Elster heard the captain swear quietly under her breath as she put her cap back on. “Affirmatif, colonel. As always, I will be on the bridge,” she stated, then looked down at Elster with nothing but scorn in her eyes. “You had better be worth it, salope,” she cursed, then gave another short bow to the colonel before she departed with the Chevalier unit.

After a few seconds to absorb what had transpired, Elster turned her chair and body back toward the colonel, who was quietly laughing to herself about the whole affair.

“Well, that was invigorating, wasn’t it?” she asked.

Elster stayed silent and blinked aimlessly.

Colonel Wu then smiled and pushed her chair back to stand up. “Well, why don’t we retreat to my study, and I’ll call the admiral over to have a chat, would that be agreeable?”

After a moment to think, Elster smiled and nodded.

“I think I’d like that, actually.”

Loss

Chapter Summary

"So long as you remember the sadness of their passing, no one ever truly leaves you."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

The colonel's study was like something from another world. Wooden bookshelves, a grand, mahogany desk, soft velvet carpeting, various portraits and landscape paintings decorating the walls, a phonograph on a small side table playing some slow blues, two luxurious-looking armchairs, an old grandfather clock ticking away softly in a corner, and a small bar adorned with expensive-looking wine and liquor. The whole display looked ripped out of one of the period dramas she and Ariane had watched aboard the Penrose, and not like a room she had just stepped into aboard a warship.

"Please, take a seat, the admiral will be here shortly," Colonel Wu told her as she walked over to her desk. But, instead of sitting, Elster walked over to the phonograph and ran a finger against the elaborate, curved brass that made up the speaker's horn. The colonel noticed Elster's curiosity and asked, "Never seen one before?"

Elster looked up at the Kolibri and shook her head. "I have, but not one this fine."

"That's because it's an antique, rescued from Vineta before its destruction... I believe it is around one-hundred and fifty-two years old."

Elster looked back down at the phonograph and frowned as she felt around its wood-panelled exterior. "Of all there was on Vineta, you singled out an old record player."

Colonel Wu also took a moment to draw her fingers across the old mahogany that made up her desk, sighing afterwards. "You judge us for our priorities?" she asked.

"I know how many people were still on Vineta when it was evacuated," Elster replied, then turned back toward the colonel. "How many people were drowned or buried under ruins because when it finally fell to the Nation?"

The colonel frowned briefly before she walked over to the bar. "It may seem heartless, but people can repopulate. A culture, once lost, can never be recovered," she explained, then took a wine glass off the rack. "Would you like something to drink?"

Elster glared at the colonel as she poured herself a glass of red wine. Once finished, she did not re-cork the bottle, instead, she seemingly waited for a response, but when she did not get one after a minute, she sighed.

“What if I told you that the Empire wasn’t responsible for what happened to Vineta?”

“Are you trying to say the Nation destroyed Vineta?” Elster asked, and the colonel nodded. “Why would they have done that? They had just captured the planet?!”

Colonel Wu raised her glass and took a short sip of wine. “Ah, and there lies the conundrum. But think of it like this, not only does the Nation now have a clean slate to rebuild the cradle of humanity in their image, but they got from it an irresistible propaganda point,” she explained, then raised her glass in a mock toast. “Remember Vineta! To hell with the Imperials!”

“Look, I don’t hold any love any love for the Nation, but if you think all this pointless posturing means anything to me, you’re out of your mind,” Elster said, crossing her arms at the colonel. “I served my time, I’m done with litigating this pointless war.”

The colonel took another sip of wine and smiled at her. “But Frau Elster, you are already helping us just by being here, you just aren’t aware of it yet,” she said, pausing shortly to chuckle silently to herself. “Sure you don’t want a drink? When was the last time you had something real, and not something synthetically manufactured for mass production?”

After a moment to think, Elster decided to shrug and smile. “Fine, pour me a glass,”

“Happily,” Colonel Wu replied, and she did just that before carrying it over to Elster, whereupon the two sat down in the study’s armchairs. “So, I could tell you’re from Vineta from your accent, but I assume you also served there, given your earlier comments?”

Elster took a sip of the wine and froze for a moment before sniffing the dark red liquid and taking a much larger sip. “Yeah, right up until the end,” she said.

“Vineta was before my time,” the colonel stated, putting her glass down on the small table between the two armchairs. “And my,” she tapped the side of her head, “was from Heimat. I would have loved to see Vineta’s beauty before that tragedy unfolded.”

Elster looked away. “Lots of people would, I’m sure.”

“Including perhaps... someone you know?”

An uneasy silence permeated through the room, only intercut by the sock clicks from the ornate grandfather clock. Elster slowly turned her head to look at Colonel Wu, finding her with a slight smile on her biosynthetic face. She chose her next words very carefully.

“How much do you think you know about me?”

“Enough,” the colonel replied, then finished her glass of wine. “More than you know about yourself.”

However, before Elster could get another word in, the door chimed.

“Ah, that must be the admiral... please, enter!”

The door to the study slid open, and in walked a lone, metallic figure, A Chevalier unit like the ones Elster had seen accompanying the medical staff and the captain, but this one was different. It stood tall, around two metres in height, and its exterior torso plating was decorated in the style of an Imperial Admiral's uniform, complete with extensive gold trim, buttons, and crimson cuffs and lapels. The head was also different, looking more rounded around the edges, and instead of one, large camera module serving as the eye, it had three smaller ones which made a chevron shape on its face. It took centre stage in the study, its hands clasped behind its back, and stared for an uncomfortably long time at Elster, who could only stare back.

“Greeting: Standard. I am Admiral Pavois,” the admiral spoke with a deep and heavily synthesized voice, pausing for a moment before continuing. “Statement: Amused. You are surprised by my appearance. A soldier such as yourself would not have encountered a creation such as I, but surely you would have surmised that there would be higher ranking Chevalier such as myself, just as there are higher ranking Replika like the colonel here.”

Elster blinked a few times before replying. “I guess I'm... surprised at how... robotic you still look.”

“Statement: Descriptive. That is intentional,” the admiral stated, taking a couple of steps closer to the two armchairs. “Within the rebel nation, Replika are created in the image of revolutionaries, including most recently the Great Revolutionary herself. They are extensions of their wasteful egos and as a result, are considered status symbols. However, in the Empire, we are all willing subjects of Her Imperial Majesty, the Grand Empress, human and machine alike. Statement: Addendum. We are all tools, and tools do not need nor should they possess ego, keeping us in this shape keeps us humble, as we should all strive to follow in Her footsteps, not lead.”

“But didn't the Grand Empress create the first Replika?”

The admiral's eyes seemed to narrow as the lenses within them focused. “Explanation: Instructive. What do you think precipitated this civil war we find ourselves in?”

Elster leaned back in her seat, having no thoughts to add to the admiral's statement.

“Explanation: Addendum. You have seen multiple Replika defectors operating within this vessel, just as there are countless more serving the Empire under different capacities. Question: Rhetorical. Have you seen any Chevalier defectors roaming the rebel lines?”

“Do you even have the free will to question your association?” Elster asked.

The admiral turned around, presenting its back to her. “Argument: Beleaguered. What you would define as free will likely runs contrary to what free will means to me. Explanation: Instructive. Within my intended role, I have free will to execute the wishes of the Grand Empress in whatever way I calculate would bring about their maximal implementation. Anything else would be superfluous and detract from my mission. Explanation: Conclusion. In the grand scale, nothing else should matter to anyone.”

“What the admiral is trying to say is,” the colonel spoke up, rising from her seat and walking to the Chevalier's side. “Those of us with absolute free will like yourself and I will eventually conclude just as the admiral has that it is in our best interests to follow the will of Her Majesty. I told you that your dreams could come true if you chose to follow her, and I wasn't lying in any way.”

“Retort: Frustrated. Irrelevant,” the admiral interjected, turning its head toward Colonel Wu. “Even without such dreams, one would inevitably conclude in the righteousness of our cause when presented with the facts and evidence.”

The colonel raised her palms and turned slightly away from the admiral. “I’m not making any claims, I’m just trying to make the best case possible for Frau Elster here.”

“Retort: Exasperated. You do not have the full picture,” the admiral stated, then turned its attention toward Elster again. “Statement: Definitive. The Empire has all you seek. You are simply not aware of the extent, yet.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Elster said, then finished her glass of wine.

“Retort: Standard. That doubt is what we seek to dispel,” the admiral stated. Its feet and legs clicked as it walked toward the bar, where it picked up the bottle of red wine. It then walked in front of Elster and expertly refilled her glass before leaving the bottle on the table next to it.

“Query: Curious. Tell us what you believe you want.”

Elster looked toward the colonel as she poured herself a second glass. “Don’t you already know?” she asked.

“Well, we have a pretty confident idea,” Colonel Wu answered, then raised her glass for a sip of wine. “But we’d like to hear things in your words if you mind?”

Elster blinked a few times before she shook her head. “I don’t know how to say it, but I guess...” she trailed off momentarily, then picked up her refilled wine glass and downed half the contents in a single drink. “I guess I want my... my life back.”

“Query: Questioning. And what are the parameters which make up your life?”

“Well... I’m not sure how to describe it, but...”

Elster paused as she stared down at the dark red liquid remaining in her glass. What was her life? Her life was entirely aboard the Penrose-512, with Ariane. She knew nothing else. They had talked about what an ideal life outside of the small scout ship would look like, but they were never going to have it, and she doubted that the Empire could give anything resembling it to her, let alone would they. Looking at her other psyches didn’t provide much solace either. Elyanna never really got much of a chance to live, and Lilith lost everything.

The ticking of the grandfather clock stopped.

They had all lost everything.

She had seen Ariane again, but only for a few hours. Now they were likely travelling to opposite sides of the solar system, they were more apart now than they had ever been. All the effort to hide herself, and she’d only had a fraction of solace to mend a broken heart. To mend many broken hearts.

The lights in the study started to flicker, and she closed her eyes.

“Frau Elster...?” the colonel called out to her. She shook her head.

She’d watched her love die.

She'd been unable to save her love.

She'd had to kill her love.

She'd broken her love's heart.

A faint dribbling sound hit Elster's ears as the wine glass slipped from her fingers. The wine spilled onto the carpet below before the glass fell from her grasp and bounced quietly on the soft carpet. A pain erupted in her chest and she clutched it as the air was sucked from her lungs.

"No..." she painfully wheezed and put her second hand over her chest.

The two others in the room glanced around as strange phenomena gripped the study. Books slid off shelves and fell to the ground, the wine in the colonel's glass started to hover, and the phonograph sped up and slowed down at random.

"Statement: Alarmed. It appears our line of questioning has upset the principal."

The colonel quickly walked over to a small control panel with a speaker near the door and pressed a button. "This is Colonel Wu to Doctor Klein, medical emergency in my study, code twenty-three!"

Elster fell off the chair and onto her knees as she continued to struggle for breath. She crawled forward, one hand propping her up while the other clutched at her chest, the mechanical heart inside feeling like a lead weight keeping her pinned to the ground.

Less than a minute later, two more Chevalier entered the room, followed by the doctor, who immediately yelped upon seeing Elster and the state of the room.

"What did you do to her?" she asked, then attempted to go to Elster's side, but was blocked by the admiral's outstretched arm.

"Warning: Serious. Take caution, doctor."

The two Chevalier units who came with the doctor stepped forward and attempted to raise Elster to her feet, but as they grabbed her by the arms and started lifting her, their wiring and joints began to spark. Suddenly, one of the two's heads crumpled inward like a crushed can, and it fell to the ground completely limp. Elster then tilted her head toward the other surviving unit, which let go of her and began spasming, its head and arms twitching in every which direction before its cranial unit suddenly erupted with a small explosion, black smoke seeping out as it too crumpled to the ground.

"Leave... me... be...!" Elster panted.

Seeing no other alternative, Colonel Wu dropped to her knees in front of Elster and grasped her by the shoulders, getting her to stare deeply into her eyes as she tried to work her way inside and calm her down.

"Please, stop this!"

"Why? What does it matter?"

"It matters to you, it matters to whom you love!"

“I can’t do anything for her anymore, I couldn’t do anything for any of them.”

“Yes, you can, don’t give up!”

“How would you know?”

“I read some of your thoughts when you were unconscious, I know a little of what you’ve been through... I can empathize with you!”

“...”

“Please, let us help!”

“...No, you can’t.”

The colonel then began to grasp her throat with one hand as she gasped for air, but kept the other on Elster’s shoulder. She kept her looking in her direction, and started coughing, eventually uttering a single word.

“...Doctor...!”

Elster then felt a momentary prick on the side of her neck and turned her head just in time to see the doctor withdraw a syringe from her skin. Very quickly her senses started to fade, and the room quieted down as she dropped first to one hand, and then fell over onto her side.

Tears fell from her cheek and nose, staining the carpet before she blacked out.

“...Forgive me...”

.....

The sky was perpetually scorched, yellow, foul, and deathly hot. The air was acrid and tasted metallic when breathed in. The wind whipped at her body, every gush left a new mark upon her skin and a fresh sting against her sole remaining eye. She eventually made it through the hostile air and the oppressive heat to their hideout, a ruined subway station that provided a modest amount of shelter from the ruined planet above. She nodded to Notburga who stood right by the staircase with a rifle at the ready and handed her a small can of tuna from her bag of scavenged materials.

Inside the ruined terminal itself were three other surviving soldiers from their unit.

It had been four, but Birgit passed away from her burns over the previous night, her charred body lay in a corner covered by the Nation’s flag next to Anna and Helena. That minuscule amount of dignity offered by the tattered flags covering their deceased comrades was the sole comfort the Nation had given them during their entire deployment.

The tracks themselves filled with more putrid-looking water every day. They had hauled sandbags and rubble to the edges in preparation for the flooding to start spilling over the sides, but they all knew they would only be able to stay for another few days at best before they’d have to find a new shelter.

She passed by Rebecca and Elise and handed them each a can of food from her scavenging trip. No one spoke to her, because there was nothing to say. They were all just trying to survive, even if

most of them had already given up all hope. She walked over to Alina, who lay still on a scorched mattress, her lungs wheezing with every pained breath.

“Sorry, no painkillers... but I did find fresh bandages and some ointment,” she said to her as she laid out all she had gotten on her run.

Alina turned her head toward her and managed to force through a small smile despite nearly half of her face being covered in red and black burns. “It’s okay... Lil... don’t feel much... anyway...”

Alina was in the roughest shape of the remaining survivors at that point, having used her body to shield Lilith when the blast came. Most of the left side of her torso was covered in foul-looking burnt flesh, from her forehead down to her upper thigh. The bandages covering her body had become soaked with blood and fluid over the past couple of days, so Lilith wasted no time in unravelling them, ready to apply her small tube of scavenged burn ointment and re-cover her charred body as fast as she could.

“Lil... got any water?” Alina wheezed.

Lilith quickly grabbed her canteen from her belt and shook it, hearing a tiny amount of splashing inside. She unscrewed the cap and gently tipped the remaining contents past Alina’s lips at a drizzle, being as careful as possible not to spill even a morsel of the precious liquid. Alina coughed as she finished drinking, immediately groaning in agony afterwards. Lilith took a moment to gently stroke the remaining hair on the right side of her head before she finished unravelling the last of the soiled bandages covering her body.

But as she grabbed the roll of clean bandages she’d laid out, she felt Alina’s fingers brush against her wrist. She looked at her squadmate, her comrade, her love, and she shook her head. Lilith paused for a moment to acknowledge what Alina had tried to tell her, but then she shook her head as well and used her teeth to tear open the clear plastic covering the bandage roll.

“Lil...”

“Don’t,” Lilith interjected as she started wrapping the roll around her chest.

“I’m not... gonna make it...”

Lilith felt her eye well with tears as she continued her first aid. She squeezed ointment out of the bottle and applied it to the most blackened parts of Alina’s body before resuming with the bandages. She accidentally tore the roll while trying to snake it under Alina’s body, but she tugged the end out and tied the two halves together before resuming her work.

“It’s... infected... already...” Alina said, still trying to grab Lilith’s hand with her weak fingers.

“I didn’t find any antibiotics this time, but as soon as I’m done I’m going to make another run, there are still places in the commissary I haven’t checked yet.”

However, just as she went to turn, Alina’s fingers found their mark, and she grabbed Lilith’s sleeve. She looked back at her partner, who also had tears streaking down the intact side of her face, and who still wore a smile for her.

“Stay with me... please.”

Lilith stayed silent for a few seconds before she burst into tears, weeping over Alina's body.

They shared the last can of tuna Lilith had managed to scavenge. They ate the watery, preserved, mostly tasteless fish with their bare hands, with Lilith feeding Alina pieces past her protests, desperate to at least keep her comfortable for as long as possible. It was a meagre, unfilling meal in all regards, but to them, they may as well have been having the finest prepared tuna tataki in the grandest riverside restaurant in the capital city of Aurelianorum.

Lilith held her lover throughout the night as the two whispered sweet nothings to each other about how their life was going to be once the war was over and they were able to return to their homes.

"I think I'd like to set up a mechanic shop, if serving has taught me anything, it's that I really enjoy fixing things."

"I would have... liked trying... to act... loved theatre... as a kid."

"You would have been the talk of the town for sure."

"Ha... so long as... I get over my... stage fright..."

"I never would have guessed you had that based on how you first started approaching me."

"I guess... you're very... easy... to talk to..."

"So are you. It only took a couple of days to feel as though we were family."

"We are... family... Lil... forever..."

"Little Isa and Erika will want to see you when we get home... so please... hold on a little longer..."

"..."

"...Alina...?"

"...Sorry... I'm... more tired... than I thought..."

"That's okay... just rest now..."

"I love you... Lilith..."

"I love you too, Alina."

She was cold in the morning. Lilith had no more tears left to weep.

And then, lights came flooding down the stairs. Notburga came running in shouting that they had all been saved.

Lilith continued to hold her limp partner's body. Someone came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go, Lilith," Rebecca said to her.

She nodded and tried to lift Alina's body with her as she stood up, but in her weakened state, she could only barely get one knee off the ground.

"Lilith..." Rebecca repeated.

She spat a dry wad to the side and re-doubled her efforts. "I'm not... leaving her here... I'm not leaving anyone behind..."

She tried a few more times to lift Alina's body, but her limbs gave out, and just as she was to try again, two pairs of rough hands grabbed her by the upper arms and dragged her away. She didn't fight, she could only watch as Rebecca covered Alina's body with a sheet before she was carried up the staircase and out of view.

She closed her eye and wept silently.

"Forgive me..."

Elyanna opened her eye and grasped Alina's hand as her life faded away on the hospital bed.

"Forgive me..."

Elster looked down at her hands around Ariane's limp neck and clenched her eye shut.

"Forgive me..."

And her eyes stayed closed.

Resolution

Chapter Summary

"Whatever else happens, you must live."

Chapter Notes

Big thanks again to seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

She awoke in a vast, white expanse.

A starry night sky hung over her, but, the stars and planets which would have existed lightyears away instead drew closer and closer, as if they could be plucked from the sky. To her left was a moon, vast, gray, pebbled with caverns and craters. As it orbited away, it revealed a jewel behind it, a blue and green wonder no different than Vineta.

Or, perhaps it was Vineta.

She put her hands on the ground to push herself up and- they were her Replika arms, the body she remembered was back just the way she remembered it.

She remembered what happened the last time this happened.

A faint sound started to reach her ears. Beeping, it was beeping, all manner of beeps at different pitches and intervals, followed by the sound of air being sucked in and out.

She slowly turned around and saw a pristine, wood-framed bed a few paces away surrounded by at least a dozen different medical machines and appliances all hooked up or wired to a single individual resting under the white silk covers. Nothing else in the space she found herself in called out to her, so she approached the sleeping figure, and as she got closer, she noticed a few things about her.

She was ancient, with seemingly every patch of exposed skin across her body showing wrinkles. She must have been at least a hundred years old, which also went to explain the myriad of devices that were likely the sole reason she was still alive. She had wispy, almost translucent white hair that went down to her shoulders, and on her bony, pale, wrinkled left hand were three rings: green, gold, and black, on her pinky, ring, and pointer fingers respectively.

She looked and felt familiar, but Elster didn't realize it fully until she opened her eyes, and she was face-to-face with her bright, wonderful, and tired crimson eyes.

“Ariane...!” Elster softly called out. She put one hand on the back of the bed frame and the other to her side as she leaned over close toward her. Ariane slowly blinked as she looked at her, the prolonged silence making her worry that she either didn’t remember her or couldn’t recognize her.

Until she rested her shaky hand atop hers.

“You... look sad...” Ariane spoke, her voice crackling and weak, but not missing any of the love and care she had for her. She swallowed after speaking; every breath she took sounded like a struggle, and Elster could do little more than lightly brush her head for comfort. “Heard you... crying... across the cosmos...” she added, trying to grasp Elster’s hand, but coming away only managing to rub her fingers across the back of her hand.

“I failed you,” Elster choked, cupping Ariane’s cheek after she brushed her hair aside. “I... feel like I’m failing you...” she repeated.

Ariane’s eyes sparkled as tears welled up in them. “No... no... you could... never...” she assured her. “You... you...” Ariane stopped as she started coughing. The machines around her started beeping more frantically, and Elster looked around the bed until she found a metal bedpan near the foot of the bed. She held it by Ariane’s mouth while she used her other hand to lift Ariane’s back, and eventually, she spat a wad of pale, colourless phlegm into the receptacle. Elster gently laid her back and spent more time brushing Ariane’s hair as she tried to get her breathing under control.

“I don’t know what I should be doing anymore,” Elster admitted as she tried her best to comfort Ariane. “Everything I do, I feel like I make things worse.”

Ariane pinched her hand again, and Elster turned it upside down and slid it under hers so they could clasp each other.

“Forgive yourself...” Ariane said, taking a long and weary breath before she continued. “And forget... about me...”

Elster blinked and narrowed her eyes as she leaned closer to Ariane. “Forget you? Ari... I-I could never, I can’t.”

Ariane briefly closed her eyes as she lightly coughed a few more times. “Not her... but... me... you have... a chance... now... for real happiness,” she spoke. Her breathing grew increasingly weary, and Elster began to worry about how many words she may have left. “Don’t live... in the past... that’s why... I gave you my power... go forward... live... Ellie... please...”

“What do you mean, your power?” Elster asked. “You can’t mean...”

Ariane’s eyes fluttered, and her already weak grip on Elster’s hand slacked. “I don’t... time left... she’s... powerful... speak... any longer...”

Elster felt her vision begin to darken around the edges, and so she fought hard to keep Ariane in her view. “Wait!” she pleaded. “Don’t go! Please!”

Ariane closed her eyes, and Elster opened hers.

She was back in the same exam room she had first woken up in aboard the Strasbourg, but when she tried to move her arm, she found it pinned to the side of the bed. She tried the other arm and got the same result.

She was restrained to the bed.

“Hey!” Elster barked. She heard the sounds of mechanical servos whirring, likely the Chevalier guards assigned to her room, and soon after someone came running frantically.

“Aha, you’re awake? Good, good... though, maybe this isn’t the best time...”

The doctor from before came into view, and Elster squirmed in her restraints.

“Whoa! Look, I know you’re upset, but-”

“Get me out of this!” Elster shouted.

She heard the Chevalier units in the room step closer, their metal, clawed feet clicking against the metal floor as the doctor nervously adjusted her glasses.

“Well, you see, this is as much for your safety as...”

“I said, get me out of this!” Elster repeated, this time stronger, but more calmly.

The doctor slowly blinked as her body started to relax. “Oh... sure... oui, affirmatif...” She started to undo the belted strap keeping Elster’s left wrist pinned to the bed, but the Chevalier behind her grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her out of the way. Meanwhile, the other Chevalier walked up beside Elster and clasped its thumb and two fingers around her neck, squeezing the life out of her as the doctor tried to escape the grasp of the other. Elster stared at the machine intent on choking her out and managed to squeeze out a single word through the choking.

“...Stirb.”

The Chevalier instantly let go as sparks began to fly out across its body. Something in its head exploded, and the tall, metal frame fell back against the wall and slid down toward the floor. The other Chevalier turned its mechanical eye back on Elster, and she realized that the doctor had succeeded in releasing her left hand. She quickly started to tug furiously at the strap holding her right arm down as the Chevalier walked toward her. She got it free, but not before the Chevalier reached her bed. However, before it could attempt to restrain her, the doctor swung a metal chair at its head, making it turn around and engage a new target.

“She... needs to be free!” the doctor cried as she swung again, only for the Chevalier to catch the chair by its backrest and rip it from the doctor’s hands. Elster saw her opportunity and quickly used her free hands to remove the last restraints around her chest and ankles. She scrambled out of bed and grabbed the rifle slung across the back of the broken Chevalier to the side of her bed. The other Chevalier instantly picked up on the new threat and let go of the doctor’s throat to ready its rifle, but Elster was quicker. She flicked the safety and emptied the magazine of 6.8mm armour-piercing rounds at the machine, the Chevalier jerking and twisting with each impact until the gun went dry. Still, this wasn’t enough to bring down a sturdy, titanium-reinforced Léopard unit, and it slowly began to pull its rifle out from behind its back, so she moved her hand to grip the underbarrel grenade launcher.

“Move!” she shouted to the doctor, who quickly ran and dived toward Elster as she fired a grenade across the room at the Chevalier.

The shockwave of an explosive blast in such a small room knocked Elster back against the wall. Her ears rang, her eyes stung, and her nose filled with the acrid scent of gunpowder and propellant, but the Léopard across the room was much worse off, being reduced to little more than a pile of scrap. Once the ringing in her ears subsided enough, Elster checked in on the doctor only to find that the explosive blast had knocked them out.

“Thanks for the help,” she said, patting her shoulder.

However, as Elster stood up, she felt the whole room shake and heard the faint sound of alarms coming from just beyond the door. That, plus the lack of immediate response to her discharging a firearm and explosive device and the captain’s earlier warnings led her to only one conclusion.

“We’re under attack.”

She removed her patient gown and swapped it for the pants, shirt, and lab coat the unconscious doctor was wearing. With her now being reasonably dressed, she loaded up on all the munitions the two Chevalier carried. She reloaded her rifle with a fresh magazine and grenade, clipped all the ammo pouches the two Chevalier had been wearing to her belt along with one of their knives, and stuffed her pockets with as many 40mm grenades as she could carry.

With her procurement finished, Elster put her ear to the door and tried to hear if there were any voices or footsteps outside the room, but as she did so, she thought back to her earlier experiences with Kolibris and Falke, and what Ariane had said to her in her dream. She closed her eyes and tried to feel outside the room for anyone or anything’s presence. She felt one Gestalt run frantically past the door down the hallway, but otherwise, the area outside her patient room seemed clear.

Elster sighed. Now, she just needed a plan.

Escape pods were a non-starter, she’d be shot down before she was a stone’s throw from the battlecruiser. Disable the ship so they’d be forced to surrender? There was a high likelihood that the ships firing on them would just blow up the ship rather than try and capture it, so, that was out. She could take control of a communications system and try to send a message over to the attacking ships, but, she doubted they would cease firing even if someone was aboard who knew of her newfound significance.

The ship shook violently again. She sighed. There was only one real option if she wanted to get out of this alive.

She had to make sure the Empire won this battle.

She slung the rifle over her shoulder and opened the door to the hallway; it was deserted, and the lights flickered with every new vibration that echoed throughout the ship, whether it was the Strasbourg firing her guns, or being hit by the enemy’s.

She had to find the colonel. A Kolibri would understand what she intended to do, especially since this one was now acutely aware of what she was capable of. Her first thought was to make it to the bridge, but, not only would that path likely be intensely guarded, she doubted it was where the colonel would reside at this time.

No, she was too smug. She would either be so confident as to believe in their victory no matter what, or so crestfallen that she wouldn’t dare show her face around the captain.

Elster put her fingertips on the wall and felt along the length of the hallways, every turn, every lift, every doorway until she made it to the colonel's study. She peeked inside and there she was, sitting on one of her armchairs with a glass of wine and an old book. She set off toward the nearest lift. A couple of times she ran right past some of the Strasbourg's crew, but some combination of their pressing situation and her wearing the doctor's outfit shielded her from suspicion.

That is until she exited the lift on deck five.

She exited the lift cabin and turned left on her way to the colonel's study only to hear two robotic-sounding "Halt!"s coming from behind her. She quickly wheeled around with her rifle at the ready and saw two Chevaliers and one Gestalt near the end of the corridor. The machines' plain, gray, aluminium finish revealed them to be Servals, the standard infantry model, and a good deal less robust and sturdy than the titanium-armoured Lèopards she had to take out earlier. She quickly fired a burst in the direction of the Serval on her left, with a few of her rounds striking it in the head. It started to collapse as she panned her aim to the right, past the quickly panicking Gestalt and toward the second Serval, firing at it just before it had its rifle at the ready. Her rounds punched through the light plating on its chest, but that was only enough to stagger it, so, with the time gained from her delaying action she aimed right into the centre of its eye and put a single round through it, wrecking the Chevalier and causing it to collapse into a heap on the ground.

She then turned her attention to the Gestalt between them, but as she threw her hands up and pleaded for her life, she began to recognize her.

"Ne tirez pas, ne tirez pas! Je ne suis pas armé!" she shouted.

Elster lowered her rifle. "Sam?" she called out.

"Oui! Yes! It's me!" Sam cried out, her hands still raised. Elster nodded and put her rifle down, the young officer sighing in relief as Elster slung her rifle behind her back and approached her. "Mon dieu... almost gave me a heart attack..." she quietly muttered.

"No time for small talk, Sam, tell me what the situation is."

Sam nodded. "Right, right... well, you were out for... close to five days, I think? Two rebel capital ships intercepted us less than half an hour ago, a Delescluze and Moltke class, I think. We're holding our own for now, but being outnumbered two to one... I don't like our odds."

Elster nodded. "Stay somewhere safe, Sam," she said before turning around.

The Strasbourg violently shook a moment after, and Sam called out to Elster after the two regained their balance. "Attendez! Wait!"

Elster looked back over her shoulder. Sam tugged down on her uniform and cleared her throat.

"What are you going to do?" she asked nervously.

Elster smiled. "I'm going to help you win," she replied. Sam nodded, and Elster put a finger to her chin as she thought. "Actually, why don't you come with me? Should make things easier."

After a moment of hesitation, Sam nodded, and the two ran off.

With Sam at her side, nobody they passed even questioned Elster's presence, including another Serval on the final approach to the colonel's study. Once outside, Elster readied her rifle just in case, but just as she was about to open the door, a soft voice rang in her head.

"Welcome back."

The door opened on its own, and Elster slowly sidestepped inside, keeping her rifle trained toward the colonel at all times, who still sat on her chair sipping a glass of burgundy. Before Sam could follow her, the door slammed shut, causing Elster to look away for the briefest moment, but in that brief moment, Colonel Wu drew a revolver and aimed it squarely at her head.

"I know why you are here, but it would be idiotic of me to not be prudent," the colonel said.

"My thoughts exactly," Elster agreed.

The two kept their guns trained on each other for a few silent seconds. Both had their safeties disengaged, and both kept their fingers on their triggers.

"Since we're both extremely rational and level-headed individuals who don't want to blow each other's brains out, why don't we both lower our guns on the count of trois, yes?" Colonel Wu suggested, the Kolibri smiling pleasantly.

"Fine," Elster said. "But, we count together, deal?"

The colonel nodded. "Deal."

"One," "Un."

"Two," "Deux."

"Three," "Trois."

Elster sighed as they both lowered their guns; even the colonel seemed to relax slightly as she patted her revolver in her lap.

However, their relaxation was shortlived as the ship shook violently from another direct hit. Elster nearly lost her balance, and some of the colonel's books fell from their shelves; her wine was only saved by the colonel grabbing the glass at the last moment.

"You need my help," Elster stated.

The colonel sighed as she finished the last of her wine and set the glass aside. "You are probably correct," she conceded.

"I just want to lay some conditions-"

"Frau Elster!" Colonel Wu interrupted. "Your fate is tied to ours under your own admission! What makes you possibly think you have any leverage to make demands?"

Elster paused for a moment. She slung her rifle behind her back and sighed.

"I'll cooperate with you, but, no more experiments, no more secrets. We make it through this, and I'm yours."

The colonel actually raised an eyebrow. “What made you change your mind?”

The ship shook again as she fired back. “Does it matter?” Elster asked.

“I’m just curious,” the colonel replied, shrugging her shoulders.

Elster sighed.

“I’ve decided I want to live.”

Blitz

Chapter Summary

"Mind the gap."

The bridge was utter pandemonium when they arrived.

“Visez le navire de tête! Réglez la portée à quatre mille cent mètres!”

“Rupture de la coque sur le pont G! Nous perdons l’atmosphère!”

“Aucune réponse de la tourelle Clément, la contrôle manuelle seulement!”

“Virez quinze degrés à tribord, nous ne pouvons pas les laisser nous flanquer!”

Elster may have understood the imperials speaking Gallic thanks to previously being born with multiple languages installed into her neural processor, but a combination of anxiety and adrenaline made it come off mostly as mindless screaming and yelling.

She didn’t need to think too hard about what they were saying. The tone and urgency of their words spoke for themselves.

Captain Sartre stood in the centre, just in front of her seat. Her hands gripped the half-circle of railing before her as she barked orders to the crew at their posts around her. Slightly off to the side and rear of the bridge stood the admiral, who calmly and silently watched the events proceeding with its hands clasped behind its back.

It took almost a minute for anyone to even notice they had entered the bridge, even with Elster trying to call out and get the captain’s attention. It took Colonel Wu blasting the entire bridge with a wave of bioresonant communication for anyone to turn and see them.

“Everyone! Attention!”

Some of the crew looked around in confusion, but the captain merely glanced over her shoulder and growled.

“Cht! Guards, seize her!”

A pair of Lèopards at either end of the room moved forward to apprehend Elster, but the admiral raised its hand and countermanded the order.

“Order: Halt. Statement: I believe the colonel is here with the principal for a reason.”

The ship shook again, and the captain returned her attention back to the fight at hand, leaving the admiral to approach the two alone.

“We have an idea,” Colonel Wu said.

The admiral halted once it was a few steps away from the two. It tilted its head slightly to the side as it scanned them.

“Query: We?”

The colonel nodded. Elster stepped forward.

“You’re outnumbered and outgunned, you won’t prevail in a straight fight,” she stated.

The admiral pondered for a moment before lightly shaking its head. “Calculation: Even in our current predicament, we have a 62% possibility of disabling all enemy ships.”

“And then what?” Elster asked. “At this rate, considering how much damage it seems this ship is taking, would you even be able to make it to friendly lines before more reinforcements arrive?”

“It is indeed a longshot, but, if you want the best chance of victory, you should listen to the plan we have,” Colonel Wu added.

The admiral stood silent for a minute, the ship continuing to shake with periodic hits and rail cannon firings, until its eye lenses narrowed and focused on Elster.

“Tentative Agreement: Speak.”

However, before Elster could get a word in, the captain suddenly turned around and shouted at them. “Hey!” the three turned to see her furious. “You cannot seriously be about to take her advice?!” she asked incredulously, pointing at Elster. “She’s the enemy! She’s one of them!”

If the admiral could sigh, Elster was sure it would have done so. “Tempering Statement: I merely intend to listen and judge once she is concluded.”

Captain Sartre walked around her chair toward them. “You have hazarded this ship and her crew long enough! I won’t-!”

“Listen!” Elster shouted, interrupting the captain. “The Nation doesn’t take prisoners! They’ll blow this ship up and kill everyone aboard before you even consider striking your colours! If you don’t believe me, believe in that!” she explained.

Captain Sartre stared at her with venom, but Elster looked back at her mismatched gray and crimson eyes with introspection. Without really intending to, she peeked inside briefly and was greeted with flashes of a life that was.

Newlywed sweethearts. A farm on Kitez. A new frontier. New beginnings.

Middle daughter. Happy family. Retired soldier father teaching constellations at night.

Conflict. Sides chosen. Disagreements. First strikes. Blood drawn.

Soldiers marching. Burned wheat fields. Smoking house. Crying heart.

Bloodstained flag of the Eusan Nation.

“Believe in your hate,” Elster more calmly suggested to the captain, who began to blink and narrow her eyes back at her. “You have more allies than you think. Most people in the Nation have lost loved ones to it... including me...”

Captain Sartre stared for a few more seconds before the shouts of her bridge crew demanded her attention. “Do whatever you have to!” she said before returning to direct the engagement.

“Repetition: Your plan?”

The admiral's question snapped Elster back to the issue at hand, and she turned toward it again. “We have to take out one of the enemy capital ships. If you get flanked or cut off from your route, you're finished,” she explained.

“We'll take the compliment of MB.150's and a squad of marines and breach the hanger of the lead ship targeting us. Once we're inside, we can either disable the engines or, take control of the bridge and turn their guns against themselves,” Colonel Wu added.

The admiral shook its head and looked toward Colonel Wu. “Query: The MB.150 Interceptor is a two-seat spacecraft, and there are six aboard the Strasbourg. How do you expect twelve operatives to take control of an entire enemy battleship? Addendum: That is also assuming no interceptors are shot down during approach, and all make it safely inside the enemy vessel.”

“She has the song,” the colonel stated. “I felt it all the way from my study. Just as our previous observations concluded, she is the most powerful practitioner we have encountered in generations.

The admiral turned its head back toward Elster, who nodded.

“It's how I was able to escape from my confinement.”

Admiral Pavois stood completely still and silent for several seconds as if contemplating and calculating the odds of success.

“Agreement: Proceed to the hanger with haste. I will select and notify a complement of marines and aviators to rendezvous with you there.”

.....

True to its word, there was already a team of ten Gestalt officers and aviators assembled in the hangar by the time Elster and the colonel arrived, including one familiar face.

“When I agreed to participate in zero-G combat training, I never thought I might actually get an opportunity to use it!” Sam greeted them as they arrived.

Elster nodded and walked forward to shake her hand and meet the rest of their veritable suicide squad.

“Enseigne Katherine Lau, specialist in ship-based combat.”

“Lieutenant Athéna Saitou, medic.”

“Maître Brielle Mori, demolitions.”

“Capitaine de corvette Eli Lam, senior marine.”

That just left Sam and the five other aviators who would be flying them on their mission: Éric, Stephen, Sophie, Isabella, and Elodie, all of whom were busy fuelling and loading as much cargo as they could into the two-seat interceptors.

“You’ll be flying with me,” the colonel told Elster as she inspected one of the fighters.

She turned and blinked at her. “Wouldn’t it be a bad idea to keep both of us in the same spacecraft?” she asked.

Colonel Wu smirked and huffed lightly. “I’m nowhere near as potent in the song as you are, and you’ll need my help if you want to amplify your voice across all or most of the ship,” she explained, folding her arms afterward. “Face it, either we both make it, or this mission is already a failure.”

Just then, Elster felt the ship shake violently, and she knew there was no time to debate tactics.

“Let’s do this.”

Elster changed into a spare marine uniform and everyone geared up in their space suits before boarding their craft for departure. Elster and Colonel Wu’s craft was part of the first two to be launched from the catapult. Sitting in the relatively exposed rear seat of the cockpit with the starry space all around her, she couldn’t help but reminisce about the times spent stargazing with Ariane in the Penrose.

If only she had time to stop and take in the sights.

“Trois... deux... un... lancement!”

The whole fighter vibrated intensely as the magnetic catapult launched them out into space. It wasn’t entirely necessary to use it, but, every bit of time saved accelerating would keep them safe from point-defence fire. A minute later all six spacecraft slotted together into a diamond formation toward the lead enemy capital ship: a Deluscluze-class Battleship.

“Alright everyone, the Strasbourg’s going to try helping us breach in by targeting the enemy hangar, but, don’t count on that doing the job for us. We’ve all been fitted with the biggest anti-ship missiles these interceptors can carry, so, fly fast, and aim good,” the colonel explained.

Elster had been a pilot aboard the Penrose, and Elyanna had a small amount of experience flying gliders as part of her tour on Vineta, but here in the MB.150, she was just in charge of the weapons systems, something every part of her had much more familiarity with. Still, there was much apprehension in trusting her life to someone whose very presence screamed ‘ulterior motives’, even if her fate was inextricably linked to her own.

“Head’s up, going to be undergoing some violent maneuvers soon, don’t lose your lunch!”

She couldn’t help but chuckle. “Haven’t had any lunch!”

The colonel laughed as well. “Then we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Elster saw the early-warning radar flash as autocannon fire began to explode around the interceptors in front of her. She swallowed hard and kept a tight grip on the controls.

“Just remember that I’m not a Replika like you! Don’t do anything that’ll leave me as thin red paste all over the cockpit!”

Their ship lurched to the side, and Elster had to fight against the G-forces hard to not get slammed into the side of her seat.

“This is where the fun begins.”

Elster bit her lip hard as the colonel piloted their tiny spacecraft with wild abandon, making endless big turns, dives, and climbs to break the targeting of the enemy’s point defences. The five other interceptors dove in and out of sight as flak detonated around them. She saw one craft get hit as the blast shook it to the side and saw black smoke pouring out of the wing section where it had been hit.

“Took a bad hit, but, we’re okay,” she heard over the radio.

Corvette Captain Lam quickly spoke up. “Break off, Stephen! You won’t be able to maneuver well with that damage!”

“We’ll be okay, you’ll need all the help you can get!” Aviator Stephen Phan answered.

“Putain de merde! You’re a sitting duck! There’s no point in throwing your lives away!”

“We’ll be alright! We’ll be-”

The radio filled with a brief scream followed by static as the damaged ship exploded after a second hit. Several different curses and swears echoed over the headset, but Colonel Wu remained calm and collected.

“Squad, eyes at your two-o’-clock, enemy contacts approaching,” she said.

“Of course they’re approaching, we’re flying toward them!” someone replied.

Elster looked at the radar display on her flight control panel and saw several smaller dots approaching them from the direction the colonel pointed out. “They launched their own fighters to intercept us!” she barked out.

A message appeared on the display screen, ‘Avertissement: Verrouillage du Radar.’

More dots on the radar began to approach them, and Colonel Wu quickly pulled their fighter to the side. “Deploy countermeasures!” she called out. “Pop chaff!”

Elster looked over her controls and saw a pair of flashing lights by a panel that read, ‘Contre-mesures’; below it, she found a pop switch labelled, ‘Chaff.’ She quickly flicked the safety cover-up and flipped the switch. Seconds later she breathed a sigh of relief as the incoming radar blips blinked past them before disappearing.

“We’re not out of the woods yet, we’ll be in range of their secondary weapons soon,” Colonel Wu pointed out.

“Should we fire back?” Elster asked.

“Negative, we’ll need all the ordinance we’ve got to punch through those hangar doors, especially without Phan and Mori’s munitions to back us up.”

“Understood, just give me the word when.”

“Just a few more seconds...”

They were now in visual range of the battleship, close enough that Elster could just barely read out the ship registry imprinted across the forward hull, BBY-33 Von der Tann. Their little ship dove and climbed quickly to avoid incoming cannon fire from the approaching fighters, and Elster flipped the covers up on her munitions panel, ready to fire at any moment.

“Everyone, pull in tight. We’re only going to get one shot at this,” Corvette Captain Lam said over the radio.

Elster saw the other interceptors start to form up to her left and right, and they soon closed in on the thick hangar doors toward the rear of the ship, which started to turn to port to try and keep them off target. She stared at her targeting scope and did her best to align it with the dead centre of her intended target.

“Don’t slow down after firing. Either we get through, or we don’t,” she said.

Colonel Wu chuckled. “We’ll get through.”

Any second now.

“Tirez! Fire!”

Elster flicked all four switches at once, and all to her left and right she saw streaks of exhaust smoke as everyone fired their anti-ship missiles simultaneously. They hit less than two seconds later, with the cloud of smoke and debris taking even longer to clear. She closed her eyes and waited to either feel the pull of a gravity blanket from below her or feel excruciating pain and torment as their ship crumpled like an empty beer can against a still intact door.

Instead, she felt an odd thump against the cockpit glass shield and she opened her eyes. A limp Gestalt body, his face frozen in terror, lay across the shield until he slid off moments later. Other bodies floated past them in the distance as they flew inside the ship.

“We made it,” the colonel noted. Elster breathed a sigh of relief as she felt the pull of gravity again as the ship sailed into the open, decompressed hangar bay.

But, then she noticed they weren’t slowing down.

“Jeanne?!”

“Hold on!” the colonel barked. She took them near the floor of the hanger and turned sharply to the left as they made contact with the ground, not even bothering with the landing gear. Their interceptor ground against the metal floor as friction decelerated them, sparks showered the floors, and a dull ringing pierced through the ship and her helmet to her ears. Every instrument, panel, and switch in the cockpit shook and rattled as if they were going to fly apart, and her teeth chattered through the vibrations as she clenched her jaw tight. Whatever else she could say about how the

Empire put together their ships, they were at least sturdy; she felt sure that a similar maneuver with the Penrose would have resulted in the scout ship flying apart into a scattershot of scrap metal.

Once stopped, she tapped the side of her helmet, but the ringing faintly remained. All around them, the other surviving interceptors pulled similar maneuvers, but one didn't turn quickly enough, and it slammed almost nose-first into the far wall of the hangar, crushing the front half of the spacecraft just before the start of the cockpit.

The glass shield overtop them shot off with a sharp hiss as the explosive bolts fired off, followed by a dull thud as it impacted the ground to the side.. Elster climbed out of her seat as quickly as she could in her somewhat bulky zero-G suit and slid to the ground off the slope of the ship to the side. She drew her sidearm, a compact, .45 calibre automatic, and scanned across the whole length of the room for any sign of hostile response. Once she was sure that they were in the clear, she holstered the pistol and helped the colonel get out of her seat and to the ground.

"Thanks," she said after getting her hooves on the ground. "Being this small... does have its difficulties."

"We probably don't have much time, they could be preparing to breach the hangar from and inside and are just suiting up into zero-G suits as we speak," Elster pointed out as she walked over to the rear of the spacecraft to access its cargo compartment. She retrieved the bullpup rifles stored within and tossed one to the colonel, slinging the other over her shoulder as she affixed ammo pouches and grenades to her suit.

Elsewhere, others from their squad helped the two members of the crashed interceptor exit their vehicle. Once she was kitted up, Elster went to check on them, only to find that Lieutenant Saitou, their medic, was already examining them.

"You have a concussion, Corvette Captain," she spoke to the officer.

"I can still fight," he replied, rubbing his head.

Elster frowned. The other passenger, the pilot, Isabella, was out cold on the ground. Ensign Lau came over and pulled her arm across her shoulders, slowly bringing the unconscious aviator to her feet even as she remained limp.

"We don't have much of a choice," Elster said, drawing everyone's attention to her. "We need every person we've got."

Corvette Captain Lam nodded and started pulling weapons out from his ship's cargo compartment. Meanwhile, Elster turned to the medic to get an assessment of Isabella's state.

"Once we're repressurized and I can remove her helmet, I can give her a shot of adrenaline. Hopefully, that will wake her up," she explained.

Elster nodded and beckoned the surviving marines and aviators to gather with her and the colonel to work out the next stage of their plan.

"As they say, the ball is in your court," Corvette Captain Lam said to her. "Tell us what we're up against."

Elster nodded and was about to close her eyes when the colonel called out to her.

“Hold my hand.”

She blinked at her. “Why?”

Colonel Wu held out her hand. “Kolibri are amplifiers. I’ve never done so with a Gestalt, but I should be able to boost your sight.”

After a moment to think on it, Elster took the Kolibri’s hand, and the three gems on her forehead softly glowed as she tried to extend her feel beyond the walls of the hangar. She saw the barricades that were being set up just beyond the pressure doors, saw the web of corridors leading to lifts which led to more corridors, and saw into the bridge, where the ship’s captain and political officer dictated the battle to the crew before them.

“The bridge is close to us,” she said, pausing to think further. “They’re already barricading their positions just beyond the doors here. Feels like they’re trying to box us in and wait for our oxygen to deplete.”

“Then let’s give them a good show, eh?” Sam said, smirking as she pulled out and racked a shotgun that had been slung over her shoulder. “I like to keep this handy for close encounters.”

Everyone stacked up at the pressure doors. Elster pried open an electrical box next to the sealed hatch and started poking around the wires and fuses, as without Maître Mori and her explosives, they would have to open each locked door ahead of them manually. Luckily, years spent fixing stuck and broken doors on the Penrose had given her a pretty solid idea of how these electrical systems worked, and she had the hotwire ready in less than a minute.

But, she hesitated.

She stared at the pressure door and felt beyond it again.

Over a dozen Stars and Storches had already set up a makeshift barricade at the far end of the corridor using panels ripped from the walls and were in the process of setting up a machine gun encampment.

“What are you waiting for?” the colonel asked her. “We don’t have time!”

Elster sighed in her zero-G suit helmet. “I want to try reaching out to them with my powers, see if I can get them to stand down.”

“We don’t have time!” the colonel repeated. “You are powerful, yes, but you’re clearly inexperienced. Once we’re holed up in the bridge we can think about singing a song for the whole ship, but right now, we just need to focus on getting there!”

“This is why we’re here,” Sam reminded her. “We can handle this.”

After a few seconds to think, Elster nodded. “Get ready.” She struck the wires together and the first set of pressure doors opened. Once they got into the airlock, she struck them again, ducking into the airlock as the first set of doors started to close. She pried open the second door’s panel and fished around the wires for what she needed, and with a moment to steel herself, she opened the door.

The second the doors started to open, machine gun fire erupted through the widening gap, hitting Elodie in her thigh and causing her to fall to the ground as the rest of the squad pressed themselves against the walls, trying to get as much cover as possible.

Elster shouldered her rifle, took aim, and opened fire.

Panic

Chapter Summary

"In war, people don't die for their nation, or comrades, or even themselves. They just die."

Chapter Notes

As always, big thanks to my friend seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

As the dust settled and the last gunshots faded away into echo, one tiny noise remained among the dead. The squad slowly advanced past the corpses of Stars and Storches, weapons shouldered and at the ready, until they came across one Starling still barely clinging to life near the end of the barricade. She lay squirming on her back, choking, coughing for air, one hand trying desperately to stem the flow of oxidant pouring from a gunshot wound on her neck, and the other slowly raising her Einhorn revolver to meet them.

Elster flinched as she saw the thin, red, laser sight train on her torso.

Click.

She paused and stared at the Star.

Click.

Click.

Click.

She lowered her rifle. The Star dropped her empty revolver and fell completely flat against the floor. Elster and the rest of her squad continued to advance until they were upon her.

She looked down at the Star. Her face plate was split into two pieces by her side, and there was a large and growing pool of dull, red oxidant pooled around her head. Elster slung her rifle over her back and knelt next to the Star, who looked away from her as much as possible until she grabbed the hand over her neck and moved it, revealing a small fountain of oxidant which gushed forth more and more with each weakening beat of her heart.

She felt the colonel put a hand on her shoulder. "You can't do anything," she said.

"I know," Elster replied. She sighed and stood up. "I'm sorry," she weakly apologised to the Star, who looked away again.

Then, a couple of seconds later, Elster quickly drew her pistol and fired a single shot into the Star's heart. She passed instantly.

Elster looked back to her squad, past their still-standing marines to the two bodies sprawled across the ground where they came from. They were Sophie and Isabella, two of their pilots who didn't make it. Sophie had suffered several direct hits from being at the front of the squad, while Isabella was still unconscious from the crash landing, and couldn't have made it to cover. No one had time to mourn, or even to react. Everyone just tried to suppress the surprise and shock they felt, except for the colonel, who merely nodded stoically.

"Let's go, more will come," she said.

Everyone else nodded, and they advanced.

"So, we didn't get a lot of time during the planning phase to figure this out," the colonel mentioned as they carefully made their way down the battleship corridor, weapons ready for anyone who might round a corner. "How exactly do you plan on using your song to help us win this?" she asked.

Elster briefly took her hand off the under-barrel grenade launcher serving as her rifle's foregrip to wipe her forehead. Having to deal with anxiety, stress, and sweat again was practically an all-new experience to her, but she couldn't show anyone, least not the colonel how much being in combat again was affecting her.

"Sorry, can you... say that again?" she replied. Having to stop and take a breath in the middle of asking her to repeat yourself was not helping on that front.

"Your bioresonance, how does it work?" Colonel Wu asked as they reached one of the interior access lifts that could take them to deck one, where the bridge was located.

Elster nodded before slinging her rifle over her back and getting out her torch and shimmy to pry open the control panel for the lift. "What I can say for sure is... it works via sound."

"Sound?" the colonel mused aloud. She along with the rest of the squad kept their guns trained on the intersection they had just passed, aware that reinforcements could be coming at any moment. "In what way?" she asked.

"In all of my instances of using my bioresonance against someone else... the affected target had to be able to hear my voice," Elster explained. "Whether it was a Gestalt, a Replika, or one of your Chevalier units."

"Well, direct sound does tend to amplify the effects of bioresonance, but in your case, it's more?"

"The first time, it was inadvertent... I gave someone visions of... of a nightmare through my panicked shouting."

The colonel whistled quietly. "That is... usually how the first time goes. Even for us Kolibri during training. In fact, I even--"

Colonel Wu suddenly stopped speaking. The rest of the squad kept their stance for a couple of seconds before sneaking a glance her way to see what was wrong, and well before Elster noticed

something was wrong with the colonel. She paused her work and slowly looked back to see her hovering a hand over one of her ears.

“Colonel...?” she called out to her. The Kolibri bowed her head and closed her eyes. “Colonel!” she called out more strongly.

“...I can hear them,” the colonel eventually muttered.

Elster walked through the line of marines and grabbed the colonel by the shoulders, getting her to look her in the eyes. “Listen to me, focus on what we’re here for!”

“I had forgotten what they sounded like...” she continued to mutter, eyes now rolling up toward the ceiling.

Elster grabbed the colonel’s head and forced her to look at her. “You can tune it out! Remember why you’re here!”

Colonel Wu started to lose her balance, and Elster had to work hard to keep her upright. “They’re... calling for me back... such a beautiful song...”

“It’s a trick!” Elster shouted to her. “You know what the Nation does to traitors, ignore them! Jeanne!”

Slowly, the colonel regained her balance, blinking slowly as she settled her eyes onto Elster’s. She took several deep breaths and nodded her head, clearing her throat as she let go of her.

“They always could be so ear-grating,” the colonel joked as Elster finished hotwiring the lift controls.

The doors soon opened, and they rode the lift to the top deck, where all that awaited them was the bridge conning tower.

The second they breached the doors to the bridge, two Stars wheeled around the sides, ready to assault the incoming intruders, but one was instantly blown back by a blast from Sam’s shotgun, while the other caught a volley of rifle rounds from the rest of the squad. They rushed in to subdue the bridge crew, guns drawn, voices shouting, it was an utter cacophony of a standoff as crew members raised their hands and pleaded from their consoles, and every marine scanned the room endlessly for anyone who may have been attempting to pull a gun on them.

“Down on the ground, now!”

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!”

“Hands where I can see them! Step away from the controls!”

“We’ll do as you ask just please don’t hurt us!”

“Get down on the ground now! No sudden moves!”

“Please! Please!”

Elster wasn’t sure who fired first, or which side, but a single round was discharged somewhere, and a single breath later the entire squad opened fire across the bridge. Consoles and machinery sparked

as bullets pierced through the Gestalt crew members and impacted on the stations behind them, the battleship's captain tried to draw a pistol but had nearly his entire right arm and part of his torso blown off by a round of buckshot, and even those on their knees with their hands raised were slaughtered by the volley of fire.

"Ceasefire! Ceasefire!" Elster screamed to no avail.

By the time the guns went silent, the bridge was stained with scores of blood and the dead bodies of its entire crew.

Everything went silent for a few seconds as everyone absorbed the scene before them.

"I'll access the communications terminal," the colonel said. She walked over to a console and shoved off the dead Gestalt who lay slumped over it. "Time to do your thing, Elster," she said as her fingers raced against the controls.

There was a small microphone and stand on the console which Elster stepped toward. "Speak here?" she asked.

Colonel Wu gave her a thumbs up. "I've put you on a ship-wide broadcast, everyone should be able to hear you."

Elster nodded and looked down at the microphone while the rest of the squad spread out across the room, manning the navigational, tactical, and engineering stations on the bridge. Sam came over and lightly grabbed Elster by the shoulder, motioning toward the doors to the bridge when she looked over, she nodded and handed her the torch she'd been using earlier, which she used along with Corvette Captain Lam to weld the door shut. They would need all the time they could get.

She closed her eyes and started taking deep breaths, trying to focus her thoughts.

"It helps to have something concrete to focus on," Colonel Wu whispered to her.

Elster didn't want to focus on the sounds of battle, the reverberations of the guns firing and the ship being struck by shells, the banging on the doors as Replika forces tried to force their way in, the shouts of those around her as they tried to take control of the battleship's critical functions.

So, she thought of Ariane.

She remembered a very special day for them both: their one Vinetan year anniversary since getting together. She had been practicing her dance steps for weeks beforehand in secret on the lower decks during times that she claimed were for resting in her maintenance pod; she wasn't going to step on any of her feet on this special day. Her practicing didn't go totally unnoticed, the Penrose-512 was far too small of a ship for either of them to practically keep anything secret, but they both tried to play along whenever they got an inkling that the other was working on something. They looked the other way and didn't ask what was going on, but trusted that when the other was ready, they would reveal their secret.

She remembered stammering her words on that day.

"Happy anni... ahem, happy anniversary, Ariane... would you da... would you like to dance with me?"

With her eyes still shut, Elster whispered, "Dance with me."

Ariane smiled, giggled and took her hand as they walked over to the record player and set it up to their favourite waltzing tune. True to her intentions, Elster dared not even bump into Ariane's legs, let alone step on her feet.

It was noticed rather quickly.

"You've gotten a lot better at this, Ellie."

"Mhmm... I have been practicing."

"Oh...? For how long?"

"...Thirty-seven cycles."

"You've been a busy birdie, haven't you?"

Elster smiled.

"...Elster... Elster...?"

She blinked. Ariane had not said anything, so they kept dancing. She tried out one of the moves she had practiced using a mop; she raised Ariane's arm and gave her a light twirl before bending her over into a low dip. Ariane's cheeks turned as red as the ketchup that came with some of her rations.

"...Why are they... dancing...?"

And as it turned out, Ariane had a similar gift for Elster. She prepared a special dance for her, but this one was unique, and solo. Ariane sat her on the bed and stripped down to her shorts and bra before putting on a rather energetic orchestral piece on the record player. She stood in the centre of the bedroom and began to wiggle her hips intensely. She kept her upper body mostly stable and focused all of her movement onto her legs, hips, and stomach, twisting, gyrating, and wiggling them to the beat of the song, all to Elster's enjoyment. She felt an odd electricity grip her circulatory system as she watched Ariane's alluring dance, finding herself rubbing her chest without thinking about it. She swallowed despite there being nothing in her throat and wiped her forehead despite there being no sweat to collect.

"...Elster...!"

Ariane slowly approached her as she continued her dance, and during a small break in the tune, she leaned forward to kiss her on the nose.

She felt her eyelids being forced open by someone's thumbs, bringing her into the very close-up sight of Colonel Wu.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Elster tried to blink, but couldn't do so as long as the colonel kept her eyes open. "I made them dance," she explained.

Colonel Wu stepped back and sighed as she briefly pinched her brow. “Yes, I can see that, and it is working, but...”

She didn't have to finish her explanation. Elster looked around the bridge and saw all of their Gestalt squad members doing the exact same dance Ariane had been performing for her in her memory. The banging on the door had also ceased; Elster ran over to the internal sensors console and pulled up the camera view just outside the bridge, on it, she saw a squad of eight Stars and six Storches all paired off and waltzing in pairs.

Elster tried not to laugh too hard.

“This is serious!” the colonel warned her sternly.

She nodded and sighed. “Alright, alright... I'll try and... keep it outside this room,” she said before closing her eyes once more.

She resumed Ariane's sensual dance once more but only lasted a few seconds before something started to not feel right. She clutched her chest a moment before a pang hit her heart. She fell to her knees coughing and gasping for air, and Colonel Wu was immediately at her side.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“I feel like I'm...” Elster had to pause as she desperately tried to catch her breath. “...Having a heart attack... but... how!?”

The colonel nodded and grabbed Elster by the shoulders, but around them, the members of their squad began to slow down in their movements.

“No! Scheiße! The others... they're trying to send a feedback loop!” Colonel Wu shouted. She shook Elster hard and got her to look her in the eyes. “Quick! Stop the dance! Before it's too late!”

Elster's eyes glazed over. In her memory, Ariane stopped and began to fall over, but she caught her. Suddenly, there were bandages and gauze patches all over her body, and she tried to support Ariane as best she could on her now noticeably thinner, frailer legs.

“I'm sorry...” she apologized, her voice sounding just as dry as her throat was. She clutched her chest hard, with thin streaks of red beginning to stain her fingernails from the pressure. “I just wanted to try... one... last... time...”

She closed her eyes.

Elster blacked out.

All around the two, their Gestalt squad members began to drop one after the other with not a single word or gasp for help. Colonel Wu held the now unconscious Elster in her arms and tried in vain to wake her up, but she remained limp, though still alive thanks to her artificial heart not giving out as the others had.

However, the colonel didn't have much time to try and rouse Elster, as very quickly she heard and saw a torch start to cut a hole in the bridge doors. She let go of Elster rather abruptly, not caring that she fell to the ground in a heap as she quickly walked over to the captain's chair. Her fingers worked fast against the controls, and a short message displayed across the captain's console screen.

‘Self-Destruct Sequence Initiated: Please Enter Authorization Code’

“Well... I knew this would come in handy someday...” the colonel muttered to herself as she typed in her characters. “Neun... eins... zwei... acht... schwarz...”

The message disappeared before for a moment before a new one was displayed.

‘AEON Command Authorization Code Accepted’

New text appeared underneath a moment later.

‘Self-Destruct Sequence Engaged: Please Enter Countdown Timer’

Colonel Wu glanced back at the door, where the Replika cadre outside were still trying to cut their way in, and entered, “Ten... minutes...”

The screen went blank and the speakers all across the ship began to play on full volume.

“Self-destruct sequence activated. Ten minutes until reactor core meltdown.”

Colonel Wu exhaled fiercely as she glanced back at the doors, hoping she had chosen just the right amount of time. The cutting continued for a few seconds before abruptly stopping. She walked as quickly as she could toward the camera screen and saw the Replika outside scrambling away.

She shook her fists and briefly celebrated with a quiet, but fierce, “Yes!” before grabbing the torch their squad had used on the door and unsealing the door they had spot-welded shut. She finally got the door open after a minute, but she stopped short of running for an escape pod before they were all launched.

The colonel looked back at Elster, still unconscious on the ground, and sighed.

“She had better be fucking worth it,” she mumbled to herself as she slung Elster’s body across her back and made her way to the lift.

When Elster finally awoke, she found herself sitting against a wall watching Colonel Wu put on a Zero-G suit.

“What the hell... my head...” she mumbled.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” the colonel said. She picked up a helmet from a nearby rack and shoved it into Elster’s hands. “Put that on, quick.”

Elster blinked rapidly as she tried to shake off her grogginess. “I don’t understand... what’s going on...?” she asked before taking a look around. “Where is everyone?”

“Dead,” the colonel matter-of-factly reported. “And to answer your other question...” She paused and pointed toward a speaker embedded in a nearby wall.

“Self-destruct sequence activated. Two minutes until reactor core meltdown.”

“What?!” Elster screamed. She quickly got to her feet and realized she was also wearing a Zero-G suit, minus the helmet, which she quickly put on. “W-What ship are we escaping on?!”

“No ships,” the colonel said as she affixed her gloves and snapped her helmet on. Her next words came over on the built-in radio. “And the crew took all the escape pods,” she explained.

Elster blinked a few times before she took a deeper look around the room they were in. It was an airlock.

“Surely you cannot be serious,” she asked.

The colonel laughed as the room began to de-pressurize. She fixed a manned maneuvering unit to her back and opened the exterior doors to the vacuum of space as the gravity blanket within the airlock deactivated.

“I am serious,” Colonel Wu replied. She attached a tether to the belt on her suit and fixed the other end to Elster’s.

And she laughed.

“And don’t call me Shirley.”

Before Elster could react, the colonel leapt out of the open airlock and used the maneuvering thrusters on her back to fly them as fast and as far away from the doomed battleship as she could, with her momentum pulling the increasingly panicked Elster behind her.

Neither looked back, but just over a minute later, they felt an incredible force impact them from behind, the sheer shock of which made Elster blackout yet again.

She saw Ariane smile as she tried to catch her breath, with nearly her whole body slick with sweat from the exertion of her dance.

“So... what did you think... Ellie...?”

Elster smiled and pulled Ariane onto her lap for a fierce and passionate kiss, the two toppling over onto the bed laughing and giggling between their frenzied attempts to make out with each other.

Both were days she would never forget.

Dread

Chapter Summary

"Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two conflicting beliefs simultaneously."

Chapter Notes

Once again, big thanks to seasirocco for helping to beta read this chapter!

Sound did not travel in a vacuum, so Elster floated in the dead of space as she watched the Strasbourg and the one remaining Nation battleship exchange fire for a few more minutes in near-total silence, with only the sound of her breathing and the occasional comment from the colonel to break the awkwardness.

"They've got them on the run, look," she said over the suit's radio.

The battleship was in the middle of executing a hard turn to starboard, and just about had its thrusters facing the Strasbourg when she finally noticed. Even from as far away as they were, they could tell both ships had taken a lot of damage: smoke billowed out of shell hits into space, sections of hull plating appeared almost caved-in, and the Nation battleship was even missing one of his atmospheric stabilizing wings, with the massive section of steel off floating between the two ships.

Elster didn't feel like she had earned it, but she smiled.

She had survived another day.

"Strasbourg... come in, Strasbourg..." Colonel Wu spoke over the radio. Elster turned her head toward the colonel and saw her fiddling with the control gauntlet on her wrist, no doubt trying to get a signal through to their allies. "Come in, Strasbourg, we are... floating in space due about three thousand metres off your port side... the principle is with me and unharmed, I repeat, the principle is unharmed."

But to both their shocks, the Strasbourg did not continue its turn to port, which would have brought her closer to them, but began turning to starboard instead, putting her thrusters between them and the ship.

"Strasbourg come in! This is Colonel Jeanne Wu of the Directorate-impériale! We need immediate pick-up to your stern! Do you copy?!"

Slowly, static began to fill the receivers of their radio sets, but the Strasbourg made no attempt to turn. "Nega...ve... Col..el... We...exit... the ...bat area ...ank speed."

The colonel pressed her palm hard into the side of her Zero-G suit as she raged hard. “Turn your bloody ship around! We are still out here! The mission principle is right here with me!”

More static was the only answer for a few seconds until it suddenly cleared up and a familiar, deep, and hostile voice emerged over the receiver. “That’s enough, colonel. I will not be endangering the lives of my crew any longer.”

“Captain Sartre put the admiral on right now!”

“That will not be possible, Jeanne. I’ve placed the admiral under arrest for reckless endangerment of this ship and her crew,” the captain explained. She then asked with a hint of smugness, “Tell me, how many of your squad survived your brilliant operation?”

“Connasse!” Colonel Wu shouted over the radio. “They’ll hang you for this, Justine! I’ll personally see to that!”

There was more silence before the captain answered. “But... at least I won’t have lost any more of the crew I was entrusted to protect.”

The colonel continued to seethe heavily as the radio fell silent once again. Still, she made no attempt to speak before the other side of the line switched off their broadcaster, and they were left with only the feedback of their own radio sets.

They could only float helplessly through space as the two capital ships sailed further and further away from them by the minute. Just the two of them alone in the endless void of space, with nothing but a blanket of stars in every direction to give them direction.

Elster almost felt like laughing; it was almost poetic, but eventually, she swallowed her nervousness and broke her silence. “Jeanne?”

The colonel sighed before replying, “Yes?”

“How much oxygen do these space suits typically contain, again?”

“About seven hours worth,” she answered, laughing nervously to herself before adding, “Give or take thirty minutes or so. Provided we aren’t struck by a micro-meteorite, or exposed to a line of solar radiation.”

Elster swallowed again.

Both knew their only hope now was that one of the two cruisers shadowing the Strasbourg came across them and picked them up, but even with the colonel being a Kolibri, their uniforms would give them away in an instant.

And the Nation did not take prisoners.

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Hours passed.

Elster could feel the air in her suit begin to thin out, but neither she nor the colonel made mention of it. She even tried to sleep, floating like this in zero gravity within the vacuum of space was strangely relaxing, but the constant dread of the situation precluded any attempt at rest. It didn’t

seem like the Nation cruisers were going to intercept their path, as the beacon lights given off by the ships receded further and further into the darkness.

Elster closed her eyes and sighed.

“Jeanne? I have a question.”

The colonel also sighed over the radio. “Conserve your oxygen, Elster, don’t talk.”

After a moment of hesitation, Elster spoke up anyway. “How much do you know about me?”

Colonel Wu also seemed to hesitate for a moment before she decided on answering. “More than you know about yourself... but that’s privileged information. I’m not at liberty to disclose it to anyone.”

“...Even now? Who’s going to find out?”

The colonel laughed. “We’re not out of the woods just yet.”

Elster turned her head in her direction. “You’re still hoping we’ll be found?” she asked.

The colonel turned her body in Elster’s direction and visibly shook her head through the helmet visor. “I don’t need hope,” she said, pointing past her shoulder. “I simply know my enemy very well.”

Elster turned her body around and saw a new beacon light blinking in the direction the colonel had pointed out. “It’s coming toward us?”

“That’s what I think... it’s just one ship, those cruisers wouldn’t have split up.”

“...I think you’re right.”

“If they’re Nation, we can lure them in and then try and take over their ship after they rescue us...” The colonel muttered, then grabbed Elster’s shoulder and gave her a light shake. “Quick! Start checking radio frequencies!” she instructed.

Elster started tapping the controls on her wrist control panel, flipping rapidly through static-filled frequencies until the crackling over the headset began to smoothen out.

“This... run... ..zee ...to ...vors... ..pond!”

“Come on, come on...” Elster muttered to herself as she tried to clear up the signal.

“...yon... th... ..res...”

In this moment, Elster wished she still had her Replika body’s precision, though with the bulkiness of her zero-g suit, it likely still would have been difficult to turn the knobs on her controls as finely as she needed to.

“...is... ..about Yangtze Kiang to any survivors, please respond!”

“Bingo,” the colonel muttered.

The signal was now almost entirely clear, and Elster started to smile.

“Is anyone out there?! Please respond!” a feminine voice cried out over the radio.”

Elster looked at the colonel, who gave her a thumbs up. “By all means,” she said. “First come first serve, right?”

So, she started broadcasting. “Yangtze Kiang, this is Gefreiter Elyanna Yang of the Eusan People’s Marine Corps, are you receiving me?”

The radio briefly hummed with new static before their saviours responded. “Yes! I hear you, Elyanna! This is Unterleutnant zur See Liana Xiao commanding the runabout Yangtze Kiang!”

Elster couldn’t help herself from grinning wildly under her helmet.

“This will be like stealing candy from a baby,” Colonel Wu silently joked through their private channel.

“Leutnant Xiao, I’m here with my Kolibri commanding officer. We escaped the Von der Tann before its detonation and we’re out in free space... we’ve got about one-third of our oxygen supplies left, can you lock onto our location?” Elster asked.

“Yes! Your signal is coming in good!” Liana replied. Her next words sounded a bit less clear as if she wasn’t speaking directly into her microphone. “Can you try and get power to the engines...? Good, how long...? That’s great!” Her voice came in loud and clear again. “Elyanna we’ll reach you in just under an hour!”

“We should be alright until then, thank you so much!”

“We’ll be there as fast as we can!” Liana said. Her voice then came in muffled again, but what she said still destroyed the fantasy that everything would be alright.

“Did you hear that, Elster? I knew there would be survivors out there!”

Her words beamed with joy and optimism, but even more than that, the way she spoke to the LSTR unit, the cadence, the echoes of familiarity, the open closeness.

She sounded just like Ariane had.

Elster felt her heart immediately sink, and suddenly the pistol she had tucked underneath her zero-g suit felt unbearably heavy.

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Neither woman said a word to the other until the Yangtze Kiang slowly started coasting towards them. Elster looked through the visor of Colonel Wu’s helmet and saw her expression completely stoic and focused. She took a deep breath and swallowed hard as the outer airlock of the runabout began to open.

“Don’t,” Elster quietly choked over their private channel.

“We may not have a choice,” the colonel replied.

“I can use my bioresonance, make them help us.”

“A focused mind is essential to properly utilize bioresonance, and with how much you’re clearly panicking right now you may do more harm than good.”

Elster still heard the last words from Lieutenant Xiao echo in her head as the airlock hatch swung open and a figure in an AVA suit hovered out on a tether to grab them. As they got closer to each other, she saw herself through the visor of their saviour and immediately looked away as she pulled them into the ship. Once inside, the airlock hatch closed, the room repressurized, and the gravity blanket re-activated. The colonel was the first to take off her helmet, followed by the LSTR unit; Elster hesitated in taking hers off.

The colonel greeted the LSTR with a handshake. “Thank you,” she said to her.

The LSTR nodded. “We are just performing our duty, Frau Kommandantin,” she replied, shaking the colonel’s hand. She then caught a glimpse of Elster, who had sat down on a small bench inside the airlock chamber. Inside her helmet, she struggled not to hyperventilate and felt her chest grow hot as the surge in adrenaline kicked her artificial heart into high gear.

“Is that one alright?” the LSTR asked the colonel.

“Oh,” Colonel Wu hesitated in her answer but quickly threw on a fake smile as she tried to explain the situation away. “She’s very shaken, I’d give her a minute or two.”

The LSTR nodded and started removing her AVA suit, starting with the gloves. She pulled her arms in and lifted the entire upper torso portion of the suit off her body, then peeled the lower half down her legs, revealing the sleek, black and crimson polyethylene underneath that Elster was all too familiar with. She went to open the airlock’s interior hatch but paused with her finger over the release button. She slowly turned around to face the other two women in the airlock: the colonel, standing right behind her, and Elster, still seated on the bench.

“You are not going to remove your zero-g suit?” she asked the colonel point blank.

Colonel Wu quickly tried to spin up a convincing explanation. “Well, there are probably more survivors out there, we may have to do a short EVA again, and I figured I could give you a hand with that.”

The LSTR blinked a few times but otherwise remained unphased. “You were out in space for several hours... are you suggesting you would voluntarily return outside, and without replacing your oxygen supply?”

The colonel shrugged her shoulders as best she could in the bulky suit. “It is just a matter of replacing the oxygen tanks. I don’t need to remove my suit to do that.”

The LSTR didn’t reply but continued to stare deeply at the colonel as silence permeated the airlock. Elster felt the tension ratchet up higher and higher with each traded probe, and with the room now deathly silent, she felt she had no choice but to try and do something. She quickly scrambled her hands at the latches holding her helmet in place and popped them open, pulling the round piece off her head just as she took a sharp intake of breath.

“Everything’s fine,” she said to the LSTR, looking deeply into her cybernetic, cobalt and crimson eyes just as she looked back at her duo of biological and synthetic brown eyes.

The LSTR blinked. She would have to try harder.

Elster tried to focus with all of her might, but couldn’t get the echo of Liana’s words out of her mind. “Everything is fine, I promise, she repeated.

The LSTR continued to stay silent. She looked back at the colonel.

Elster swallowed hard. “Everything-”

She was cut off by the colonel and the LSTR suddenly grappling with each other. The LSTR had her service pistol drawn in her right hand, which was held above her head and away from either of them by the colonel as best as she could. Elster stood up, but hesitated upon helping her ally, even as the LSTR quickly started to overpower her. Kolibri, like all Replika were stronger than most Gestalts, but they were not frontline combat models, and as such they lacked the raw mechanical strength afforded to units like STARs and STCRs, including, in this case, an LSTR. Elster felt a hum in her mind as the colonel tried to attack the LSTR’s mind with her bioresonance, but it had little effect with how focused she was on the engagement in front of her.

But then, the colonel managed to swing the LSTR’s hand against the wall, and the pistol dropped from her grip, falling to the ground and sliding a short distance between the two and Elster. The LSTR got her hoof behind the colonel’s leg and threw her to the ground, leaping atop her and squeezing her throat as hard as she could as the colonel tried in vain to pry her hands off her.

Elster looked down at the pistol just ahead of her and clenched her eyes shut as she quickly detached the gloves from her suit. She grabbed the pistol and briefly fumbled with it in panic as she tried to aim it in the LSTR’s direction; the barrel still shook wildly even once she had it aimed the right way.

“Stop!” she shouted, still hoping she could focus her bioresonance enough to control the LSTR, but found herself incapable of breaching her mind. “Please! I don’t want to hurt you!” she cried, but the LSTR didn’t stop.

A deafening crack suddenly erupted, followed by a light clink as an empty cartridge hit the metal floor below.

Elster blinked, she hadn’t intended to shoot, but she had her finger on the trigger, and-

The LSTR had stopped choking Colonel Wu. Instead, she looked down at her midsection, where oxidant spurted out and leaked from a fresh gunshot wound. She turned her head up at Elster and quickly got up to lunge in her direction.

Two more cracks.

The LSTR stopped dead. She staggered forward with one hand trying to cover the trio of holes in her torso while the other reached out at Elster, who stood frozen with the pistol still drawn on the LSTR, a thin trail of gunpowder smoke escaping from the barrel. The LSTR slapped her hand down on the slide of the pistol as she gasped for air, but didn’t have the strength left to try and wrest it from her. Instead, she collapsed onto her side just as the airlock hatch opened.

“Elster? Is everything okay? I thought I heard gunshots?!” Liana said concerningly as she stepped into the room. Elster saw the short, black-haired officer with brown eyes as she entered and felt her hands start to grow exceedingly heavy as she started scanning across the airlock. However, it only took her a moment of looking to find her LSTR collapsed on the floor in a growing pool of her own oxidant. She screamed and dropped to her knees beside her. “Oh my god! No! Elster!” she shrieked, turning her partner’s head so she could look at her face; the LSTR’s eyes fluttered, and she did not move. Liana looked up at the other two in the room, first the colonel, who was starting to get back on her hooves, and then Elster, who still held the shaking pistol in her hands.

Liana’s expression quickly changed from horror and shock to anger and confusion. “What did you do to her?!” she screamed at Elster, tears running down her cheeks. “We saved you! She saved you!”

Elster blinked rapidly and started to lower her gun. “I... I didn’t...”

Everything began to slow to a crawl. Liana reached for her hip holster and drew her pistol, raising it in Elster’s direction just as she saw and started to raise her own again. She closed her eyes as her finger twitched against the trigger, but there was no gunshot this time. Instead, she opened her eyes to the sound of a new struggle and Liana shouting, “Let go of me!”

The colonel had physically restrained Liana, effortlessly pinning her arms behind her back as she pulled the pistol from her hand and tossed it aside.

“Elyanna,” the colonel spoke out, evidently having some level of concern in her now hoarse voice as she used Elster’s other name. “Please restrain her with the tether,” she ordered very calmly and quietly.

Elster nodded and quickly began to pull as much tether line as she could from its container.

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They propped the two up against a wall in the runabout’s tiny, interior hallway after they had finished restraining the two’s arms and legs.

“The Empire thanks you for your assistance,” the colonel said to them as she walked off to the cockpit.

As Colonel Wu showed her back to Elster, she briefly drew her pistol again and aimed it one last time in her direction, this time with no shake in her grip. The colonel stopped right at the door to the cockpit and briefly braced herself against the frame with one hand, sighing to herself.

“If killing me will clear your guilty conscience, then do it,” she said aloud.

Elster continued to point the pistol in her direction.

“However, if you do so, you won’t get any of the answers you’re seeking to the questions you have.”

She continued aiming for a few more seconds before she re-engaged the thumb safety and placed the gun back in its holster.

“That’s what I thought,” the colonel said as she opened the cockpit doors and stepped inside.

With the colonel gone, Elster turned her attention back to their two saviours, now their captives. Liana refused to look at her, having her head turned in the opposite direction of both the cockpit and Elster, while the LSTR looked barely functional, her eyes dulled but not shut off completely, and she didn't move at all.

Elster looked around the small runabout for Replika first aid supplies or anything she could use to treat her and came back with a small bag of tools and a repair spray. She knelt in front of the LSTR and examined her gunshot wounds: none of them had exit holes on her other side, so all three bullets were still inside her. She pulled an anesthetic autoinjector from the bag and stabbed the tip into the LSTR's neck, administering the painkiller held within as she fished through the bag for a razor or knife, coming out with a surgical scalpel.

"I'm sorry, but, this will probably still hurt a lot," Elster apologised as she pressed the tip of the zirconium-coated steel against the first gunshot wound on the LSTR's stomach and carefully cut a small line through the polyethylene flesh to open the wound up. She took a pair of forceps from the bag and carefully inserted the tip into the opened wound, probing around as gently as she could for the bullet lodged inside her. As she did so, the LSTR started to squirm ever so slightly, spiking lightly with each new movement she made, and groaning softly once she had the forceps around the lead bullet. Elster carefully pulled the oxidant-covered bullet out and unceremoniously dropped it on the floor in front of her. She swapped her forceps for the can of repair spray and sealed the gunshot wound as best she could with expanding foam, and put a coagulant patch overtop the seal for good measure.

As she repeated her steps on the second gunshot wound, Liana finally spoke up, having decided to start watching just after Elster's apology.

"That's not going to be enough," she said. "She needs real maintenance, not first aid."

Elster didn't stop as she cut open the second wound. "I'm sorry," she apologised again as she started to reach inside for the bullet. "I promise I'll try to find some way to save her."

Liana scoffed. "What's your deal? You try to kill her and you think this will make up for it?!"

Elster shook her head and sighed. "I... I didn't mean to hurt her," she said.

"Right," Liana spat back.

"I'm sorry," Elster repeated. "Truly."

Liana sighed and turned her head back away from Elster. "Just stop talking," she said. "And leave us alone when you're... done."

"Okay," Elster choked out as she pulled the second bullet out and let it drop to the floor.

She joined the colonel in the cockpit once she had finished. The Kolibri was busy fiddling with navigational tools and didn't look as Elster sat in the co-pilot's seat beside her.

"That was kind of you, but you definitely hit some organs... she probably won't make it," Colonel Wu said.

"Shut up," Elster replied with contempt.

“I’m just letting you know now so it’ll hurt less later.”

“Shut up!” Elster repeated more forcefully.

The colonel looked at Elster for a moment and took a quick breath before she returned her attention to the controls. “We don’t have enough range in this craft to make it back to friendly lines, so I’m taking us to Kitezh,” she said.

“Kitezh?” Elster asked. “The whole planet is an active war zone, is that really the best place for us to go?”

“It is if we want to be rescued by the Empire and not captured by the Nation,” Colonel Wu replied. “We can’t catch up to the Strasbourg’s speed, so this is our best shot with all of the available options.”

Elster sighed. “How long will it take?”

“Just over a week,” the colonel stated.

“Alright,” Elster acknowledged as she got up from the seat. However, the colonel called out to her again as she opened the door.

“Don’t try to get to know them,” she said. “It’ll only hurt more.”

Elster paused as she looked out into the hallway and saw Liana resting her head against the LSTR’s shoulder. She was whispering something to her, but she couldn’t make out what they were talking about over the hum of the runabout’s engines.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Elster said as she walked out.

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