

IN LOST DREAMS THE  
FOUR WERE BOUND

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# IN LOST DREAMS THE FOUR WERE BOUND

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FIRST THREE CHAPTER TEASER

BRADLEY R. BLANKENSHIP



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ANALYSIS SESSION: OMEGA-3043 -  
#7329

[Now isn't this something.] Circuits flared as a crude image manifested from simple waveforms upon a nearby holographic surface. It wasn't every cycle that the machine got to witness coherent data from its inquiry target. However, the machine lived for such moments. Until then, it had been attempting to assemble the data of the last few years into new patterns in the hope of uncovering something new. However, all manner of approaching it had been fruitless given the noise-to-signal ratio produced by the various distortions around the strange, hidden world. Of course, what could the little green-haired machine do other than follow the president's orders despite the Foundation's internal conflicts of interest? After all, it was what she had been designed to do.

She couldn't complain. Unlike the rest of her siblings, she had full access to the array of sensors and monitors aboard Ientec Prime. Among other things, she was also fully integrated into several superclusters to facilitate more powerful computations. Relativistically, she was several dozen orders of magnitude more powerful in terms of raw processing power and possessed half as many orders higher memory. Even better, she possessed a direct line to the president himself and could communi-

cate with him through bidirectional means versus merely being receptive to his pull and push queries. All of that was irrelevant in the greater sense because it was her singular purpose for existence.

[Initiating limiters to improve focus, GH-199076492,] the president said. [Please maintain coherence, and attempt to stabilize the data stream.]

[Approved, Mr. President. Apologies,] GH-199076492 replied, realizing how carried away she had been in her own self-aggrandizement. [Focusing. Attempting to stabilize imagery and wave signatures.] All around her, small signaling lights began to glow. Their luminance increased as she amplified the power draw for her running processes. A low hum came from the nearby cords as she ramped up the current. [Increasing power draw by fifteen percent.]

[Acknowledged,] the president replied. [Removing current restraints. You may increase power by a further twenty percent if necessary.]

Given the distance between it and the inquiry target, parsing the stream of data was nearly impossible for many of the systems aboard Ientec Prime. Nevertheless, waveform analysis of information from neighboring galaxies and star systems was enough to piece together the signal as she worked through the data from end to start. Localizing the non-random information gathered by their satellites revealed a distinct, known pattern.

[Increasing power draw by twenty percent,] she notified the president. [Opening processing chamber to allow ventilation and reduce shell damage.]

[Approved.]

All around her, machinery activated, and small panels began to unfold. As she aggregated the signal, the small polyhedral enclosure surrounding her specialized rig unfolded. Rays of bright solar light beamed through the opening metal plates, grazing her silvery synthetic skin. Ultraviolet and infrared radiation sensors triggered impending tissue-damage warnings all along her exposed physique. GH-199076492 ignored the warnings and continued onward as the hum of

electricity became a fervent buzz. Small sparks flickered in the air around her rigged body while images and numbers danced on the holographic surface of her head encasement.

[Activating UV and IR filters,] the president said. [Verify tissue-damage warnings are cleared.]

[Waiting,] she replied as the room dimmed. She felt the tiniest of vibrations in the air as the transparent metal alloy along the rear of the sterile metal room altered to block specific radiation. [All clear.]

[Thank you,] the president said.

[Notifications: energy signature recognized. Attempting to visualize and track intent.]

[Identity?] The president's response rippled through her being, sending her cybernetic nerves flaring. She felt his consciousness overlay her own as he began to interface with her.

[Processing now,] she replied. Her body tingled as her synapses flared in conjunction with the input from the president's presence. GH-199076492 delegated an entire subsystem to handle the unintentional spillover interference from his interface. [Difficulty managing noi—]

[Stand by. Disconnecting neural sync.] The president's message cut her off mid-notification. [Please reapply all subsystems for analysis.]

[Thank you,] she replied as the sensation of the president's presence stopped broadcasting across her physique. [Applying subsystem to task. Querying for best match of signature. Assessment complete.]

[Please state identity.]

[Anomaly Omega-3043 in an active state.]

[Please confirm: Omega-3043?]

[Signature and obfuscation pattern match that used by Omega-3043 within seven standard deviations.]

[Please process and enhance imagery and intent details,] the president said. [Require visual confirmation.]

[Verifying,] she replied. Her mind raced through all the possible algorithms that could correct for the distortions in the data. While she focused, she felt the vibrations of physical footfalls approaching, no

doubt the president coming forward to analyze the imagery. She opened her eyelids. Looking out through the encasement's visor, she watched with glowing, fluorescent yellow eyes as the picture began to clear.

What had been a blur of color and unintelligible noise took on the form of a dark humanoid figure shambling across a barren plain. Around the edges details became distinct, from the haze of particles being swept up by moving air to cracked, red stone and sand littered across the arid landscape. The sky appeared as a washed-out azure glow. Somewhere behind the figure was a bright white light, perhaps the planet's nearby star. Try as she might, she could not eliminate noise from the silhouette itself.

[Please enhance details of the entity appearing at the image's center.]

[Requesting a further fifteen percent power increase,] she replied.

[Acknowledged. Overdraw accepted. Please continue.]

[Attempting to enhance,] she said as she allocated more power to the task of cleaning up the information. She shelved previous jobs. She focused every piece of hardware on the singular goal of cleaning up the visuals. Millimeter by millimeter, pixel by pixel, the image of the figure began to show promise. However, with every new piece of data that appeared to mesh with the scene, the number of cycles needed to correct for the distortion increased exponentially. [Predicted operation complexity is growing disproportionately to Omega-3043's known obfuscation patterns. Attempting to determine the source of the additional randomization. Initiating new power request, twenty percent increase.]

[Stop evaluation,] the president ordered, causing all her sensors to throw errors. [Please acknowledge. Stop evaluation.]

[Shutting . . . down,] she acknowledged. GH-199076492 did not wish to stand down, but she could not resist the president's command or its urgency. As much as she wished to finalize her original objective, she put holds on all processes to kill off all tasks related to the inquiry. One by one, the multitudes of processors throughout her rig reported

idle as each thread of execution came to an immediate halt. Her management subprocesses began to reclaim the newly available resources. After only a few seconds, her rig reported a return to dormancy. [All processes and related tasks terminated. Flushing all completed frames to the output display.]

[Verifying,] the president replied as his consciousness merged with hers once more. Her synthetic skin buzzed. Spots of light flickered in her artificial eyes as she caught glimpses of her rigged body from the neural overflow. The swathe of power cords, glass-fiber-alloy communication cables, and various apparatus adorned the back of the curved chair-like rig in which her android frame lay. Each implement was plugged into a unique port designed for the specific purpose of her task. A tuft of her signature emerald-green hair was exposed near the rear of her helm encasement. Reflecting off the shiny, metallic finish of her headgear, she saw the president's dark silhouette adorned with a crest of luminescent platinum hair.

Looking through his eyes in spurts, there was something enjoyable about having the president inspect her thoughts and processes. She often wondered if it was similar to how organic beings perceived positive reinforcement from their elders, parents, or whatnot. According to pure logic, it couldn't be the same because she was a far different creature. However, she still imagined there must be some similarities. A strange flaw seemed to exist in her programming that took small pleasure in the adornment and status of her shell. That was probably based on the president and board's personal aggrandizement of the human form and the vanity that came with it. Or maybe it was just residual pride in his handiwork overflowing from the president's consciousness.

[GH-199076492, terminate all non-essential host processes and prepare for maintenance,] the president directed.

[Acknowledged,] she said, preparing to shut down her physical body. One by one, she terminated extraneous processes and ramped up a backup to maintain perfect mental persistence for when she awoke. However, as she ran through her list of non-essential tasks, she found a

single program that was failing to halt. [President, irregular program activity. Failing to terminate process.]

[What process?] he asked as his consciousness probed her neural network.

[Rig attachment process failure. Error, cannot terminate process while assessment is active. Please wait for the process to halt successfully.]

[Attempt to inject a hard fault to terminate.]

[Mr. President?] she queried. Rarely was a machine as sophisticated as a green-haired asked to hard fault a task. Resource collection would perform the same operation over time if the resources were necessary. Many dangers were associated with hard faulting running tasks. Furthermore, it was difficult to pinpoint what effect the action would have on her current mental processes. Also, it was small, using only a fraction of her resources.

[Attempt hard fault,] the president commanded as he withdrew his consciousness from hers.

[Acknowledged,] she replied as she accessed the process's memory pool. [Injecting hard memory fault.] She waited, expecting errors and warnings to flare throughout her system as the program crashed. However, after several seconds, a strange sensation crawled over her physique. The process was still running.

[Success?]

[Re-attempting hard fault,] she said as she rewrote a large swath of the running process's memory. The task was almost certain to crash. However, it continued to spin, ramping up its utilization of her internal resources. A sinking feeling flowed throughout her neural network, an experience that she could only find one word to describe: dread.

[GH-199076492, report. Success or—]

[Re-attempting.] She initiated a reply, trying once again to crash the process. This time she took no chances. Removing all read and write limitations and attempting to erase all data it was acting upon, she moved the running process to an empty section in her memory. Nevertheless, the program continued to persist and grow. She tried every-

thing she could as she analyzed what resources it was acting upon. Still, nothing in her monitoring or debugging tools could provide insight into how it continued to run. A feeling akin to dizziness overtook her as it ate away at a hefty chunk of her host resources while drawing nearly 200 percent of her expected operating power.

[Assuming failure. Proceed with disconnection,] the president said. [Quarantining GH-199076492. Instating firewalls and neural barriers. Removing all system privileges. Please acknowledge reception, GH-199076492.]

[Mr. President . . .] she attempted to form a message to notify her reception of his harsh rebuke but could only manage to allocate enough resources to maintain standard sensory perception and network connection. The rogue task had leapt to consuming most of her system. To make matters worse, a strange jolt overtook her as her physique tightened up. The mechanical and neural motors in her body started to actuate, running in the opposite direction of their intended motion. Her heat sensors raised high-priority warnings as the primary external conduit to her shell approached extreme temperatures. Her body drew an ever-increasing amount of electricity.

“Casera, Liora! I need you both in here now!” the president yelled, calling for his organic cohorts. The sharpness of his tone sent a wave of panic throughout what little of her emotional matrix was not encumbered by the still-expanding process. “Green-haired, listen to me. Focus on my voice.”

[President . . .] GH-199076492 attempted to send a message, but it bounced back to her. He had cut off all direct contact with her. As the process grew ever larger, her mind swayed. Preservation tasks and even the recovery processes within her had failed. Each shut down as they gave their resources to the all-consuming rogue running rampant in her systems.

“Respond to me audibly,” he said, his voice reached her perfect synthetic ears. “Liora, remove her helmet. Casera, unplug everything from the rig. All power cables, network connections, everything. Ensure nothing is connected to her.”

“They’re practically on fire, Maxim!” a rough, feminine voice roared.

“Just do it!”

“Mi . . . st . . . er Pres . . . i . . . den . . .” GH-199076492 attempted to access her motor functions, her mind fixating on the president, as instructed. Her vocalizations sputtered as her available resources dropped. Her head jerked. Someone had removed her head encasement, exposing her frozen face. Her loose green hair fell to the side as every sense went numb.

“I can’t get the main feed cable disconnected,” the rough voice behind her called. “It’s too damn hot.”

“Out of the way,” a quiet, muffled voice said. With a loud pop, the tension was relieved from GH-199076492’s back as the feed cable fell slack.

“Watch where you’re pointing that thing!” Casera shouted.

“Shut up, both of you!” the president commanded. “Green-haired, stay with me.”

“Re . . . sourceeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.” Her jaw motors and vocalizers froze as her motor functions locked up. Darkness filled her vision. What she had once described as dread turned to panic and from panic into existential terror. She tried again and again to open lines of communication, but her system raised errors with every attempt. She was cut off from the outside world, every sense dulling as the singular running process within her ate away at what little remained of her being.

With darkness gripping her, the last thing she experienced was a singular jolt of kinetic force as her body gave out an anguished roar.

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THE SOUND ECHOED off the perfect walls of the observation room, filling it with an ever-increasing volume and a distinct air of menace. GH-199076492’s body convulsed in the small docking chair into which she had been neatly tucked. Her back arched into a near-perfect

curve, mouth open, metallic teeth bared with animosity. Her glowing yellow irises flashed as small stress fractures appeared across the specialized glass that made up the container of her eyes.

“Both of you, get away from her!” the president ordered, staring at the android’s writhing body. The decibel output of her emissions approached an impossible level for her vocalizers. He worked to establish control of the structural grid that kept the room’s architecture intact, calculating a new texture that would reduce the amplification of the little droid’s inconceivable vocalizations. As he finalized the designs for the room’s new geometry, his female cohorts joined him, one on each side. The black-skinned, animal-like women covered their bestial ears while turning to watch the horrific display. “Prepare for adjustment.”

Panels and mechanisms within the room activated at once, shifting the plating, joints, and outlets of the interior to form the new one that he had imagined. Even the translucent alloy of the room’s rear took on a textured shape as he altered the currents within it to create small, smooth valleys and peaks. With the new geometry of the walls, the android’s severe vocals ceased to echo throughout the room. In response, the droid’s body fell limp into the chair.

“Is it over?” the rough-voiced chimera on his left, Casera, asked.

“Doubtful,” he said, stepping forward. Scanning the android’s small, naked body and rig, he was both amused and appalled that the pictures she had fervently worked on persisted in their half-finished state. “Green-haired, can you hear me?”

No response.

“Maximillian, I doubt she’s alive after all that. Look at her,” Liora said quietly as she watched from other his side. She was correct. As far as the structural damage was concerned, GH-199076492’s body was beyond repair. Just looking at her limbs, the various controls had malfunctioned and splayed her in an impossible position for her imitation human form. Her vacant eyes were full of broken glass, their glow diminished and nearly indistinguishable from the room’s ambience.

The smell of ozone and burnt synthetic skin hung in the air, a result of damage within the android's body.

"Be that as it may, her internal processing unit may still be active," he said, even though she was by all probabilistic reasoning gone. Either way, he possessed different interests. He wanted to know what had infected her. He had at least one obvious set of suspects considering their observation target, but he needed certainty.

"Have I ever told you that you're a bad liar?" Casera asked.

"No. I will take the notion and refine that skillset for organics such as you," Maximillian replied.

"Watch out!" Liora screamed. He spied the slight raising of GH-199076492's fingers as they curled in reverse. Behind him, he heard Liora draw her guns.

"Halt, Liora," he commanded, his eyes fixed on the small droid.

Faster than they rotated backward, the idle fingers curled into a fist, the pale silver skin tearing along the joints. Liquefied repair machines and neural fluids leaked and fell, forming small yellow puddles on the ground. Jerking upright, the droid sat, its head tilted to the right due to Liora's harsh handling of its encasement. With slow, clockwork-like motion, GH-199076492's torso turned to face him, her motors and controls popping and grinding.

"GH-199076492, can you hear me?" Maximillian inquired.

"Iiiii . . . iiii . . . iiiiii . . . . . iii . . . . . i . . ." The android's voice jittered as her mouth dropped open. Beneath her torn skin and coagulating ochre gel, small cables and wires slithered, moving up her right side. They dug their way out from underneath her pale skin and pressed against her neck, propping it in place. They sewed through the tissue and into her jawline, creating muscle-like support for her mouth. For a moment, her ragged lips drew closed, her vacant eyes staring into space. Then she spoke in a voice unlike any Maximillian had ever had the pleasure of sensing audibly. "I . . . AM . . . HERE . . . VERUDT!"

The intonations and sounds reminded him of the speaking programs and applications of old. Mangled grammar and disjointed words mixed with an electronic buzz. But the words themselves

seemed to carry a weight that oppressed the very fabric of reality in the room.

“Who are you?” Maximillian asked, his straight posture and demeanor unchanged. “Are you the entity that infected GH-199076492?” In the back of his mind, he started cutting off systems throughout the room and the whole of Ientec Prime, isolating the intruder. He would be prepared just in case things turned violent. [Engage gate drive, one percent.]

“YOUR . . . INTER-FERENCE WILL NOT BE TOLE-rated any lo-NGER, FALSE MAN.” The voice was trying to manifest a consistent tone. “Ha-VE YOU LEAR-ned NOTHING FROM your prev-IOUS travails?”

[So, it’s one of them then.] Maximillian contemplated the probability of the entity heralding from the outer realms of self-proclaimed order or chaos. He thought the latter was far more likely.

“So, you are the saboteur of our signal? I take it you’re an entity of Nogias? An agent of chaos?” Maximillian prodded the entity without hesitation as his systems made ready to engage the gate drive.

“AN A-gent of CHAOS?” the entity said as it struggled to lift the android’s body from the table, with little success. More wires and machinery twisted and turned underneath GH-199076492’s skin as it attempted to fashion a makeshift musculature. “I’m SAEL, YOU HORR-id, FALSE-man. I AM OVERLORD of tha-T WHICH CONF-ounds YOU! YOUR TECH-no-LOGY is MY PLAYTHING. I’m be-YOND YOUR COMPREHENSION. AND FOR MEDDLING in THE aff-AIRS of G-ods, YOU SHALL PAY DEARLY!”

“Over my dead body he will!” Casera exclaimed, drawing her signature rail rifle.

“Just give us the word, Max,” Liora said with a growl, readying her pistols.

“Stand down,” Maximillian ordered, scanning the possessed android with near-perfect acuity. The energy signatures throughout her body were oscillating without any discernible pattern. The incident

provided him the opportunity to study a being from one of the most unique realms of this universe. He could analyze one of the few that could alter not just its own timeline but also the causality of its environment. “As for you, you will either tell me everything you know about Omega-3043, or you will free GH-199076492.”

“Oo-H DO YOU CA-re for THIS LI-ttle frame, pre-TENDER?” the otherworldly voice asked as its shell lurched off the rig chair, the android’s body falling into a crouched position. With grinding servos and a snap, the droid sprang upright, curving its torso toward Maximillian. The machine began to cackle with a crackling, hissing clamor. Keeping its cracked yellow eyes focused on him, the possessor opened GH-199076492’s hand and grabbed her exposed left breast. Forming a maniacal clown-like smile, the entity ripped the mammary implant from the droid’s body, spilling globs of flesh and jelly while throwing the synthetic hunk to the floor. “TE-ll me . . . does it cause y-OU PAIN TO s-EE your PRE-cious PUPPET HA-rmed?”

“I grow tired of your crude displays,” Maximillian said with his same cool demeanor. “Answer my demands, chaos lord, or I shall force you to do so.”

“FO-rce ME?” the creature roared. The color of the poor android’s eyes began to darken, the yellow of her irises transforming to smoking embers. Taking a step forward, head slumping, the monstrosity limped as sinewy cables and strands wove through flesh to support the broken body. As a coil of metal and carbon snaked up the green-haired’s broken back, the dark lord whispered in the droid’s soft, almost child-like voice. “You haughty piece of metal and sand. You want to force me?” With a sickening crack, the cable snapped the green-haired’s head upright, its eyes leaking a dark red liquid, appearing almost ghost-like. With a deafening scream, it beckoned. “Be FORCED TO PERISH F-ALSE MAN!”

Throughout the room, the grinding and hissing of motors and electricity could be heard as the entity began to take control of nearby devices. The room’s panels shifted and jolted, each one jerking and springing for Maximillian and his bodyguards. The back wall twisted

upon itself, the near-liquid glass-alloy forming large spiked prongs that flew like spears toward his contingent.

“Kill it, Liora!” Casera yelled as she unloaded a molten slug from her rail rifle. The igneous metal embedded itself in the android girl’s body, tearing away a large chunk of mass from its mid-section and scattering flesh and wiring across the room. Liora opened fire with her pistols. Acidic rounds pierced the creature’s frame, exploding with sizzling slime that dissolved its skin while eating away at its carbon-metal supports. Despite their assault, the creature’s attack continued unabated.

“Enough,” Maximillian said. [Direct link with gate drive established. Activating gate receiver.]

A microsecond later, Maximillian raised his right hand, diverting what power of the gate drive he had commandeered to a small ring-like device on his middle finger. Focusing all processes on the task, he imagined the form of a polygonal mesh around himself, his protectors, and the rest of the space station. Finalizing the design, he flushed the information to the ring-like device, establishing parameters for the curvature of space-time within the field. Milliseconds before any of the rampant debris arrived, he activated the small gate receiver.

All around them the world warped, bending and twisting as space and time condensed, forming a bubble around Maximillian and the rest of Ientec Prime. The flying debris and liquid glass were obliterated as they smashed into the bubble’s surface. The monster roared as it pounded the android’s fists against the dimensional barrier, layers of the skeletal frame scattering into sub-atomic particles as it collided with the field.

“Fucking hell,” Casera exclaimed as she watched the impressive display.

[Now, to simplify things,] Maximillian thought as he began re-purposing the defensive shell. His mind raced as he established new parameters and formed a small containment sphere out of the unfolding of the space. Faster than either of his companions could blink, he modified the physics of the new enclosure to allow for the flow

of specific auditory frequencies to create a strong displacement of charge within the new space. With a single hint of vengeance, he activated the receiver once more.

Faster than the spatial envelope had formed, it unfurled itself around the space station and the small group, rolling into a small sphere as it collapsed and enclosed the possessed android. Immediately, the controls and tech within the room halted all sporadic operation.

“What . . . WH-at HAVE YOU DONE?” the monstrous being roared from within its dimensional prison, the sound echoing behind the imagery of the creature’s speech. It writhed and slammed the droid’s body into the force field but could not break free of it. “RELEASE ME!”

“I think not,” Maximillian said, surveying the damage to the room. [Engage blast shields in Research Lab HL-TS-10833.] His request was answered as the room shook, the exterior blast coverings encasing the weakened glass-alloy along the back wall. “Now, I believe you were going to tell me about—”

“YOU KNOW NOT WHAT GA-mes you PLAY, VERUDT!” the dark lord exclaimed, its cybernetic voice mixing with that of the android. “AMRUK DUR, MARRLURSAI IMET TAU VES-na RO-uarl INDRAS-al SAEL VIRAGE!”

“The Virage?” Maximillian probed as he attempted to process the archaic words. “I’m sorry, but the nuances of vocalized Inun speech are lost on me. As for the rest, your words of power are useless from where you’re being held, servant.” With the utterance of the last word, the enclosure rippled. Several lightning bolts ripped from one end of the sphere to the other, electrocuting the small droid shell and causing the beast to roar in anguish.

“FONES IM-ard Ul-numati, fake MAN!” the possessor said as it thrashed within its prison.

[This is all we’re going to get out of this session,] Maximillian surmised, a small grin cracking across his face. “Very well,” he said, a hint of sadism in his otherwise flat voice. “I shall send you back to whence you came, servant.” Lightning flashed once more as he uttered

the last word, tearing and scorching the remains of the green-haired's body. [Reduce power, and collapse rift.]

On his final order, the receiver formed a geometry equal to a singular point, shrinking the encasing dimensional sphere. Screaming in anguish, the dark lord's host crumpled as it imploded under the pressure of the collapsing space. In a flash, the prison twisted as the interior matter began to fuse. Within seconds a sun-like burst of light exploded within the small universe, its emissions filtered through the harsh polarization of the dimensional shell. With a final eruption, the sphere collapsed to a head-sized ball before dissipating, leaving nothing but a large sphere of heavy metal in its death throes.

"Fuck me sideways," Casera said, stepping forward from her perch to Maximillian's left. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Like what, exactly?" Maximillian asked as he began his assessment of the room and Ientec Prime. All over the station, alarms triggered due to low power levels, followed by rampant communication outages and signals to send operatives to the lower station. "Liora, could you get the door while you're standing there gawking? We will have company shortly."

"Whatever, boss," Liora said with an empty voice.

"That . . . thing. What was it?" Casera asked as she approached the metal sphere.

"Stay away from it for now," he ordered. "We need to quarantine it and scan for any irregularities. It's hard to tell with these arcane beings if there's any residual trace. Especially those from the outer realms."

"I wish I knew what you were going on about," Casera said with a pout, stepping back to his side. "This is over my head."

"It's of no importance for now," he said, turning to face the door. "Besides, at least we gained some insight."

"Like what?" Casera asked as she eyed the droids making their way in.

"We know one of Omega-3043's identifiers."

"Ahhh, the Virage," Casera said, grinning with her sharp, catlike teeth.

“Very perceptive. We also have some frames of Omega-3043’s movements,” he said, shifting his eyes to the still-intact holographic display. Casera turned her head and watched as the scenery. The angle of view for the dark figure, now known as the Virage, changed with every frame. The last frame in the progression seemed to be the anomalous figure entering some dark arboreal region, given the coloration and tree-like patterns in the image. “Likewise, we know it’s broadcasting now.”

“That’s something,” Liora purred sarcastically as she ripped open the access panel for the emergency door controls. “And what about all that other garbage it was shouting?”

“The worm, in ancient Inun speak,” he said, narrowing his eyes as he began a subset of personal queries. “Somehow, this Virage is tied to it.”

“Well, I hope all of this was worth it,” Casera said as she disassembled her rail rifle, preparing to stow it once more. “The board is going to be really displeased once they investigate.”

“Nothing can be obtained without first giving up something in return,” Maximillian replied as Liora pressed the door’s release button. He wore a satisfied grin as the gateway opened just in time for a small contingent of white-haired soldier androids to reach the threshold. “And look, right on time.”

“President Maximillian Verudt,” the female android at the front of the contingent said, “you have been summoned for an emergency board meeting.” She came to a stop, the male and female androids behind her pausing in time, their grey eyes scanning the room for potential threats. “They have asked that you come immediately and report on the cause of the power and the breach in HL-TS-10833.”

“And so I shall,” Maximillian said, grinning pleasantly. “As for you and your crew, please have this section of the station quarantined. Confiscate all android remains and materials, and have them destroyed. Use organic agents because there is a medium probability of synthetic contamination.”

“What about the metal sphere, Max?” Liora said, gesturing her clawed hand toward GH-199076492’s condensed remains.

“Have it taken to OM-TS-8784 for further analysis,” he instructed, his subtle grin disappearing.

“Sir, we were told to escort you to the boardroom,” the commander said.

“That will not be necessary. I shall report immediately, as requested,” he replied while issuing an override command mentally. [You will perform the actions I have delegated to you. Do I make myself clear?]

“Yes, sir,” the android replied, gritting her teeth, the imperative of his order overcoming her. “We will do as you command.”

“Good,” he said, bowing his head. He took several steps forward before turning to face his bodyguards. They stood at attention, their fierce green eyes locked on his, anticipating the order. “Casera and Liora, please report to the nearest medical bay for examination and decontamination.” He smiled. “Just in case.”

“Yes, sir!” the women replied, their wild blond manes bouncing as they saluted him.

“Also, tell your sister to report to the boardroom when she gets in,” Maximillian said as he paused to cross-reference the databases for incoming flights.

“Roseva, sir?” Liora asked.

“Yes. I have a feeling that her report, along with our findings here, will be necessary to divert any unpleasantness during the hearing.”

“Yes, sir,” Casera said.

“Very good. Her ETA is thirty minutes. Now all of you, to your tasks,” Maximillian commanded as he stepped through the lab’s threshold.

Strolling down the hall, he cleared his mind of all extraneous processes. He knew his brothers and sisters would be beyond displeased with the impact of his most recent research and squandering of Foundation resources. Hence he needed to have all processes focused on constructing optimal arguments. Stepping into one of the central transport shuttles, amidst all the calculations and planning, he

found the time to ruminate on one unpleasant thread that he had left hanging.

[I'm sorry you cannot report this yourself, GH-199076492,] he thought with a faint, undetectable grimace. He released the emotional thread that had driven his small act of vengeance against the intruder. [I'm sorry you had to be sacrificed.]

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## UNKNOWN

**H**is mind was a blur, and his senses stunned. He was overwhelmed, repulsed by the memories that were bubbling up from deep within his subconscious. He knew he was no longer there amongst the ghoulish and lifeless, but he could not let go of those tormenting, tragic moments. He could still feel the heat of the flames and smell the odors of death. He was trapped within himself, and inside was a hell he wished never to have known, one he wanted to escape. He tried to focus, to break free of the temptation to relive the agony yet again. He struggled to open his eyes, but when he did, the flashback was inseparable from reality.

He sensed sunlight pouring in upon him, its gentle warmth dancing like fiery coals across his skin. The pain made him want to retreat into his dreadful sleep. Fighting through with dry, narrowed eyes, he could make out the room's general features. Wavering washes of color created unearthly auras among the sterile linens and the walls' earthy tones. The smells of the forest came to him, entwined with others: flowers, herbs, leaves, bark. But the strongest was that of decay, its pungent aroma assessed and embittered by his tumultuous brain.

Focusing on his other senses, he heard the murmuring of others

somewhere nearby, too weak to pick up the nuances of their words. He heard laughter and faint sounds of the small things, the calm breaths and silent whispers of those somewhere close but unreachable. They were like double-edged blades, luring him back to a peaceful time that could not have been that long ago but was followed by dread and despair. They drew him on as he tried to obtain a firm grip on reality.

Then he felt it. Something warm but gentler than the harsh sun gripped him by the hand. Soft skin stroked him, playing across his fingertips. Something about the sensation was calm and familiar.

Before he could clear his thoughts, his senses let go again. His heart started to race, pounding throughout his body until it was audible. For a second his mind drifted, as if trying to halt the onset of whatever was to come. His heart felt as if it were about to burst, and somewhere in the back of his mind was a strange, frightening sense of release.

With all his conscious effort, he struggled to keep a grip on the present. He tried to force his heart rate down but could not stop it from climbing. His arms and hands twisted and contorted of their own accord. With what little strength remained, he held the writhing limbs to his sides. While his body was trying to die, something was forcing it to stay alive.

Through it all the warmth on his hand stayed, becoming a firm grasp as a frantic voice called from beside him. Other voices replied. He felt the thuds of several feet upon the ground, growing closer. As they drew near, his body stopped convulsing and began to shake. A bitter chill and waves of pain rippled through him, reaching out from his chest and through his extremities. He heard several people circling around him, some shouting as others cursed under their breath.

With a firm grip, the one next to him drew close beside his contorted face. The person's voice was soft but stern, gentle but commanding. He tried to lie still and understand the figure's words. He turned his head to focus on the person next to him, but something warm pressed against his forehead, caressing and immobilizing him. He felt the figure come closer, his or her warm breath upon his neck.

“Ge rolm ne vahr,” the person whispered in a soft, soothing voice.

The words were ancient, calling to a time long ago that he could not quite place. With those simple words, a calming sensation rippled across his body as they echoed through his embattled mind. With all notion of desperation fleeting, he lost his grip on the moment and allowed himself to fall back into the abyss of his dreams.

“Ge rolm ne vahr . . .”

“GE ROLM NE VAHR . . .”

Something was holding his hands somewhere in front of and above him. It was as if they were dancing, and he was being led. The light and colors were intense, making it hard for him to concentrate. His legs wobbled, further disorienting him.

“Ge rolm ne vahr!” a voice called out, drawing his attention to the speaker, his eyes transfixed by the gaze of another. He lost himself in the other’s eyes, pools of bright lavender staring back at him. Surrounded by what seemed to be a halo of gold, the figure beckoned him. He concentrated, forcing his legs to stop their violent shaking.

“Ge rolm ne vahr,” the voice said, deep, feminine, and filled with childlike zeal. At its call, he took a step forward, followed by another and another. “Naisure Deldaron!” the voice exclaimed. Full of excitement, the other’s hands shivered, unbalancing him. He clenched his tiny bones around the other’s larger fingers. With renewed focus, they held his even tighter. Suddenly, he realized the ratio of the other’s hands to his, forcing his mind to break away from the scene.

[What is this?] he asked, his words echoing within pools of thought. Detached from his form, he tried to bring the scene into focus. He stared, attempting to clarify the face of the person who held his small hands. He moved closer, his legs still wobbling but consistent, approaching the source of the wondrous voice.

All around him, the echo of other voices filled the space between his thoughts and the stage. “Serra ne nark,” a robust, comforting voice said, followed by a joyous outburst.

“She’s always been a wonder,” another voice answered. Somewhere

deep down, he knew them. But try as he might, he could not recall to whom they belonged. Cheers and praise were followed by his happy burbling.

In front of him, the other's voice giggled with radiant glee. His body tried to carry him another step farther but caved under its own weight. His vision fell as his legs gave way. With a gentle grace, warm, bronze arms surrounded him, pulling him close. As they drew him up, he slipped away again, the echoes and what little color in the room warping as reality and time bent.

"Ge rolm ne vahr," the voice whispered.

"Ge rolm ne vahr!" the voice called again as he stood in the middle of a dusty town square. A girl held his hand, pulling him forward. "Hurry up, or we'll never make it!"

"OK, OK," he heard himself say in the voice of a small boy.

He looked up at the girl, her golden hair bobbing as she dragged him forward. Her vivacious lavender eyes were transfixed and purposeful as they traveled through the busy streets. He couldn't help but feel bashful as he glanced over her fine features. She had always been older, but the supple curves that had become present on her body only served to reinforce how many years lay between them. The top of his head just reached her chest, her long legs and more mature body pulling with twice the force that he could muster.

Her tugging walk turned into a dragging sprint as he tried to match her pace. They dodged between people, running in and out of small crowds and sprinting toward the edge of town. As they found more spacious places, the girl picked up speed, running faster. He was tired and unable to keep up. He tried his best, but the most he could do was a few skips and jumps, taking every opportunity not to fall.

"I can't . . . keep up," he said, panting. He almost stumbled when she came to an abrupt stop, forcing him to lean against her to brace himself.

"Well, we're almost there," she said, looking down at him. "We can take it a little easier now if you want." She smiled at him with her bright lavender eyes. He leaned against her, his hand still in hers, trying to

catch his breath. He felt tired, but he didn't want her to know that. He grinned up at her, still feeling the redness in his face.

"We can keep going," he said with swelling pride. "I can run all the way! I could even do it by myself!" The girl laughed. She looked down, folding her arms over him, a soft, almost motherly smile on her face. She had gentle eyes, but they seemed to stare through him.

"Well, alright then," she said coyly. "If you're so eager to impress."

"I . . . I never said," he stuttered, his face becoming redder with embarrassment and boyish pride.

"You better keep up then," she said, unfolding her arms. She held his hand until she turned. Letting go, she sprang off. He stood there as she sprinted away. Before he realized it, she was several paces ahead.

"Ge rolm ne vahr!" she shouted back to him. Drawn by her words, his legs began pumping. He sprinted after her, trying to catch up. As he ran, his stomach churned from exertion. All around him, the colors of the grass and trees began to swirl. In a moment of extreme vertigo, the procession lurched forward. All at once he found himself at the edge of a large pond, surrounded by trees and mossy stones. He panted, feeling dizzy from running so hard.

"Hey, you!" the girl shouted from behind him. He was about to turn when she reached her hands around his face, covering his eyes.

"Hey!" he shouted, surprised and dazed.

"I was wondering when you'd finally get here," she said, giggling behind him. She closed the gap between them, pulling him close. He was about to struggle when he felt how warm her body was. With his head against her chest, he felt her breathing. Overcome with shyness, he stood perfectly still.

"So, you got to see it already, huh?" she said, keeping his eyes covered. "This is where I used to take my sister to swim before . . ."

"Before she died?" he asked, knowing the answer before he had even formed the question.

[Before she died,] his internal voice replied, echoing his young self and sending a faint ripple through the dream.

"Yeah," she said, her voice trembling. She dropped her hands and

pulled him closer, wrapping her arms around him. "That's OK though, because now I have you!"

Her gaze fell onto him, and he raised his eyes to look at her. Her lavender eyes were full of a gentle fondness. She smiled warmly, looking at him with joy and overt affection. There was something both of awe and more in the way she stared into him.

"So, you ready?" she asked, giving him a once-over. "Doesn't look like you're ready to swim to me."

"I've never swum," he replied.

"Well, there's only one way to do it," she said, stepping from behind him and approaching the water's edge. His eyes widened as she walked in front of him, her body bare. Somewhere inside he remembered her from before, but that had been some time ago. He had never seen her like this. Never seen her so . . . changed, as the grown-ups might say. His face flushed.

"Y-you're . . ." he said, stuttering as he tried to form the words. He was too busy staring, his eyes fixated on her every feature.

"You silly boy," she said, laughing. "You're never going to make it if you stand there with your eyes wide and mouth gaping. Hurry up and get undressed!"

"B . . . but . . ."

"Alright, I'm going in without you," she said, stepping up to the water's edge. Without hesitation, she slid into the water. He stood there, still in awe, her image etched into his mind.

[Why am I seeing this?] he wondered as he wrenched free of the vision. The girl giggled as she swam, looking toward the shore and taunting him as she trod water. It was tempting to let himself slip back into the act.

"Alright, I'm coming!" he said. He struggled out of his clothes, falling over twice as he tried to take them off. Each time prompted a burst of laughter from the girl in the water.

"You better hurry," she teased him. "I'll be done, and you'll have just gotten started!"

He felt a kind, genial peace about everything he was seeing. He

wanted to rejoin himself with the boy, allow himself to be one with the simple pleasures of a warm summer's day.

He rushed to the water, slipping on a wet patch of grass. He tumbled to the ground, rolled down the small slope, launched off the mossy ledge, and plummeted into the pond. The girl uttered a shocked cry as his little wave splashed her. She called him to her, but he was starting to sink. He felt his consciousness giving way as the girl fetched him, his vision blurring as reality began to crumble. He watched with terrified detachment as the girl pulled him above water.

“Ge rolm ne vahr,” the girl said as she drew him close to her, but all around him the scene was darkening, and from somewhere below, he heard shrieks echoing from the abyss.

[No. Not this again. Not again. I'll stay. I'll come to you. Just let me stay!] His cries reverberated within the closing darkness as he called to the boy and girl within. With frantic abandon, he tried to hang on but was lost in a whirlwind of uncontrollable thoughts as he fell from the dream. He heard the girl's laughter mixing with his boyish giggles. The voices blended in a disturbing unison with the screams of the abyss, darkening as he continued his descent.

[Please, no! Please . . .] Despite his pleading, he landed on the ground. His eyes were shuttered, his descent complete. He felt the brisk air of an arid summer morning upon his skin. Behind him, he heard the drowsy murmurs of someone dear, dread penetrating every part of his being.

Opening his eyes, he found himself standing once more at the precipice of his never-ending hell.

“He’s still shaking!” Elis cried as a slender, agile woman rushed to her side holding a small phial.

“Try to give him this, ne vindal,” the woman said, handing her the bottle. “Force it down if you must. The rest of you, make sure he doesn’t slip off the table.” As the others around her tried to hold down the shaking man, she drew close to him. She caressed his fingers and brought her mouth to his ear. He jerked. She placed her other hand, bottle and all, against his forehead.

“Ge rolm ne vahr,” she whispered familiar words that she had not spoken in ages. She tightened her grip on his hand, begging him to come to her. As she spoke the phrase, his tremors became less violent. Seizing the opportunity, she popped the bottle open with her thumb and brought it to his lips. She prayed as she watched him tremble beneath her.

At first he rejected it, his weathered face puckering in an expression of fear and pain. Yet like a knowing child, his dry lips parted. He took the potion from her, drinking its greenish contents with slow, steady gulps. She waited, her desperate eyes watching as his body trembled, his chest rising and falling between every gulp. She handed the

empty bottle to one of the struggling bystanders and then returned her shaking hand to his forehead. For several moments the room was filled with bated breaths and anticipation as everyone watched the man struggle.

She brought her hand down to his face and held him there, keeping a firm grip on him. She calmed her breathing as she brought his trembling hand to her chest. Thinking soothing thoughts, she caressed his hand. Finally, the man's breath settled, and his tremors subsided.

All around her, the others let out deep sighs of relief. Without any need for further alarm, they pulled away from the man. She looked up and watch the dark, slender woman as she motioned the others out of the room, keeping them hushed as they all filed out. As the last of the aides left, Elis took a deep breath. Leaning back, she exhaled, exhausted by the short encounter.

"I don't know what I would have done if you weren't here," she said, raising her eyes to the other woman. "Your expertise and concoctions always seem to ease him.

Closing the door, the other woman strutted across the room with a cavalier air of mystique. The few rays of light that penetrated the room glistened across her dark skin. Like a red-breasted bird, her dark, crimson corsetry and plume-like garters exaggerated every detail of her robust frame. Fluttering as she moved, a matching shawl dangled around her shoulders while her skirt, with a slit up the front and back, whipped around her legs. Her ensemble left little to the imagination, exactly as she preferred. Her straight black hair hung just above her shoulders, her red-brown eyes flickering.

There was something primal about the way the woman presented herself. Yet every action she performed betrayed a predatory mindset that was distinctly human. Every time Elis saw her like this, strutting and on display, she couldn't help but reconcile those facts by taking in the sight of her proud talvuo lineage. It protruded like the long, floppy ears of a large canine, which adorned the dark woman's head. Thin folds of extra skin dangled, covering the interior of the strange auditory organs. Lighter than her mane, short, ashen hair, more like the fur of a

feline, covered the exterior skin of the weird ears. Emphasizing the heights of the woman's predacious nature, thirty black metal rings and one iron ring adorned her right ear while a single gold ring hung on her left.

Placing her dark, slender hands upon Elis's shoulders, the woman leaned over her. She nuzzled her ears, her many metal rings jingling.

"Think nothing of it," the woman said in a cold, deep, feminine voice. "Anything for you, vinald Elis."

"Yes, vinald Neris," Elis replied, the words rolling off her tongue. At first it had been strange to call an outsider her sister, but ever since they began coupling, it had become more natural and intimate to do so. But the words still felt strange, given the array of circumstances. "I'm glad you were here."

"My heart, ne vinald. Anything for you, and doubly, anything for the Virage," Neris whispered.

Thoughts of the mysterious and infamous Virage sent shivers down Elis's spine. Even in the best of times, she did not want to hear the darker stories of the outside world. Stories of mad sorceresses and ghostly armies. Intrigues of bloodthirsty warlords and tyrannical despots. Tales of demons that frolicked on moonless nights, children being spirited away in the darkness, or monstrous orgies of the profane. All of them had reached her ears one way or another, but none of them were as terrible as those that spoke of the demon-clawed man they called the Virage.

Rapes and beheadings were kind mentions when referring to the dreaded figure. The slaughter and purging of whole towns and villages was yet another common topic. Unlike the political and mythical terrors whispered about the world, none compared to the scourge whose very presence was considered a desecration upon earth, body, and mind. Wherever he went, the land and its people would die. No magic or weapon could stay the encroaching end of all things that followed in his wake. No prayers could stay death's hand, and for those who felt the reaper's icy embrace, the final moments were horrific and torturous. The few who survived their encounters were driven mad

beyond all reasoning, so the stories went, spared death only to be sacrificed to chaos.

But there he was in front of her, evidence of the grotesque mystery and villainous stories. Lying on the table with a twisted and monstrous black left hand was none other than that self-same terror, clinging to life by a single thread, sprawled in a dreadful sleep. But the cruel mistresses of fate had an even stranger irony to deal out. Somewhere long ago and far from her current dwelling, Elis had known and cherished a man whose face the dozing monster wore. Coupled with the complications of the present, the incident left her feeling confused, conflicted, and terrified.

“You seem distressed, *ne vindal*,” Neris said, drawing away from her. “You look as if you could use some personal attention. Perhaps we should retire early tonight?”

“Perhaps,” Elis said, grinning bitterly. “Though I don’t know if my heart is in it.”

“Oh, but I don’t need your heart, my dear, just your presence,” Neris said, lowering her voice and wearing a sultry grin on her dark lips. With a hint of the erotic, the woman drew her slender hands forward, caressing Elis’s cheek. Looking up at Neris, Elis’s eyes locked on the dark-skinned *talvuo*’s hungry red orbs.

Elis’s heart raced for a moment, a flutter of interest stirring within. But before she even had time to think or react, swelling guilt and resentment bubbled up. All at once the thought made her feel disgusting and dirty. It wasn’t the other woman who brought on such feelings. After all, only two fortnights earlier, the pair had begun spending nights together, one round of debauchery following the next. But right now, so soon after recent events and with her oscillating moods, she was completely put off. Her whole being felt wrong. Confusion and all-too-familiar emotions overwhelmed her normal rhythms. Even though she would have normally leapt at such an offer, she was unable to pursue it.

“With all my heart, yes,” Elis said, leaving her vigil over the sleeping man, “but with all my being, no. I’m sorry, *ne vindal*, but I

think I'll be retiring to my own quarters for now. That is, if you don't mind watching over him."

"Not at all, my dear," Neris replied. "Sometimes, even I need to be alone. Though if you change your mind, my offer still stands."

Feeling ashamed, Elis shot her a dispassionate glance, getting only Neris's composed complexion in response. She hurried over to the door, trying to focus on her goal.

"And Elis?" Neris's said.

"Yes?" Elis replied, opening the door.

"If you need comfort without the other formalities, know that my offer extends there as well," Neris's words flowed with a hint of sincerity. The same sincerity Elis knew only in the confines of their own private world.

"I know, Neris. Thank you," Elis said, closing the door behind her.