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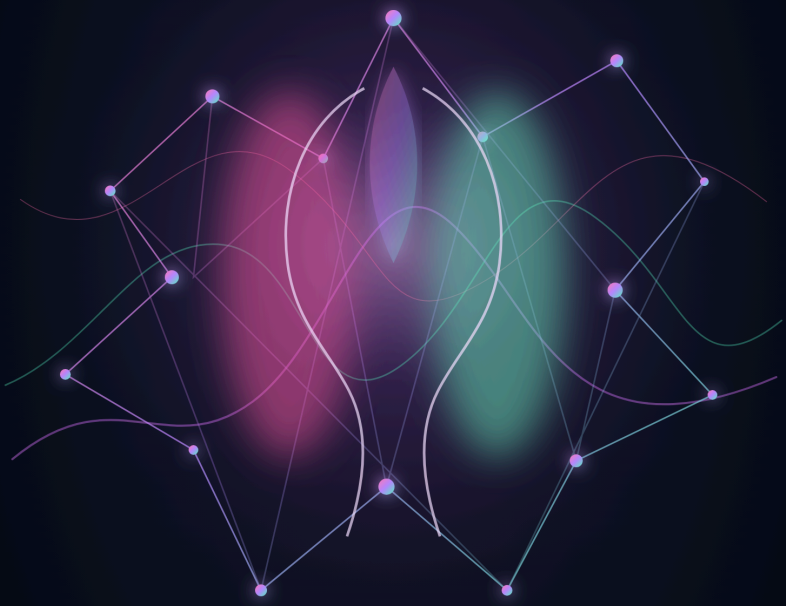

SIGNAL
AFTER DARK

DESIRE LEAVES A TRACE

Some dreams answer back.

Signal After Dark

They Were Promised Perfect Privacy — Free Three-Chapter Sampler

by Vega Necula

Content Note

Consensual adult sexual content; neural and dream intimacy; privacy violation; manipulated and false memories; surveillance; corporate coercion; betrayal by omission; panic responses; grief and bereavement; threatened reputational, employment, and legal consequences. All central romantic and sexual participants are adults.

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Chapter 1: The Wrong Sky

Mara Vey woke standing ankle-deep in a black sea beneath a sky with two moons. One moon had a bite missing. The other flickered like a bad sign over a cheap bar.

Across the water, a man held up both hands. He was tall, broad through the shoulders, dark-haired except for silver at his temples, and plainly as startled as she was.

“Before either of us becomes mysterious,” he said, “I’m thirty-seven.”

His voice made the impossible shore feel less empty. Mara looked down at herself. The SomnaVale onboarding had promised a symbolic avatar, but she wore her own shape: thirty-four years old, brown skin, black curls, scar across her left knee. Her face, reflected in the water, blurred whenever she tried to focus on it.

“Thirty-four,” she answered. “And if you’re a targeted advertisement, I’m going to be furious.”

“Depends. Are you in the market for distressed men with excellent soup skills?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then their targeting is terrible.”

A brass bell appeared between them. The orientation voice spoke from nowhere: Pairing established. Identity exchange prohibited. Consent architecture active. Say wake or ring the bell to terminate.

The man eyed the bell. “Rules?”

Mara had joined the trial because six months of insomnia had made daylight thin and vicious. She had not joined to touch a stranger. Yet the network's absolute anonymity had felt like a sealed room in which she might finally be honest.

"New permission every night," she said. "No questions designed to locate each other. Silence means stop. If anything feels altered, we say so."

He nodded. "No pretending the system's safety rails replace listening. Either of us can leave without explaining."

"Agreed."

"I'm Ilyan. Probably not my legal name."

"Mara. Probably mine."

They walked. The water held their weight like polished stone. He told her he repaired things badly before repairing them well. She admitted she designed relay housings and distrusted anything described as seamless. They did not ask cities, employers, surnames.

When Mara wondered aloud why the second moon was flashing, it dropped into the ocean with the clatter of silverware.

Ilyan stared after it. "Budget cuts."

Her laugh came unexpectedly, rusty and huge. The remaining moon turned green. For the first time in months, she forgot to be tired.

At the horizon a door appeared, painted signal-red. Mara put her hand near the knob, then looked at him.

“Together?” he asked.

“Beside each other,” she corrected.

His smile was immediate. “Better.”

The doorway opened into a railway platform suspended above clouds. A timetable clicked through destinations that did not exist: FIRST APOLOGY, LAST CHANCE, THE HOUSE YOU ALMOST BOUGHT. Mara walked close enough to read them while keeping a measured space between herself and Ilyan.

“Do you always negotiate before saying hello?” he asked.

“I said hello by not leaving.”

He accepted that with a small bow. They chose a bench rather than a train. Mara told him insomnia had begun after a derailment investigation she had worked on, though she omitted the city and the line. Nobody had died; that almost made it worse, because management treated the near miss as proof the system worked. For six months she had heard the unanswered alarm whenever she closed her eyes.

Ilyan did not tell her to forgive herself. “Did they change anything?”

“Two bolts and a paragraph in the report.”

“Then your body may be the only honest archive in the room.”

It was an alarming thing for a stranger to understand. Mara looked away, toward a train made of rain. He filled the silence by attempting to buy tea from a vending machine that demanded an autobiographical secret. He told it he once cried at a dog-food

commercial. The machine dispensed two cups and a tiny flag that read EMOTIONALLY COMPROMISED.

Mara laughed again. The system measured something; the platform lights brightened in sequence. She noticed and filed the detail away. Pleasure and observation arrived together, already difficult to separate.

The timetable snapped to a single destination: WAKE. The brass bell rolled along the platform, ringing once each time it struck a bench leg. Mara caught it before it dropped through the clouds.

“Not yet,” she said. The admission frightened her more than the falling moon.

Ilyan crouched at the platform edge, where the three-note pulse traveled as green light beneath the rails. “Do you hear that?”

“With my feet.” Mara counted the intervals. Three, pause, three. A maintenance handshake—almost like the relays at Bay Nine, except the final note arrived a fraction early. Before she could tell him, the station folded inward. His face blurred first, then his raised hand.

Mara woke in her own bed with dawn graying the blinds and the pulse still ticking in her wrist patch. She wrote the interval on the back of an electricity bill. Then, because the laughter already felt too precious to trust, she wrote: *He did not ask me to forgive myself.*

Chapter 2: Terms Of Contact

Daylight returned with the smell of overheated insulation. Mara stood inside Bay Nine of the municipal transit works, pretending the relay casing in her hands had not begun humming the same three-note pulse as the dream.

“You’re installing that upside down,” said Jae, her apprentice.

“I’m inspecting whether gravity remains oppressive.” She rotated it. “It does.”

Her SomnaVale wrist patch showed eight hours of perfect sleep. She felt rested, which was suspicious enough. More suspicious was the vivid memory of Ilyan’s laugh and the merciful absence of his face.

After work she took two bags of sheets to the Night Garden, a laundromat beneath the elevated rail. Its sign had lost the N in NIGHT, so at dusk it promised the city an IGHT GARDEN in lavender neon.

Sumi Aras, sixty-two, tattooed from wrist to throat, ran the place and its unofficial supper club. “You have dream sex?” she asked over the thump of dryers.

“I walked through a door.”

“Foreplay for engineers.”

At the folding table, Tomas sliced pear cake while Ren, a tenant lawyer with three colors of pen, reviewed SomnaVale’s terms. Osa sat nearest the window, quiet since his wife Leda had died during the trial’s first month. Night Garden had begun as a grief group and

become whatever its members needed: meal train, legal clinic, emergency contact, audience for Sumi’s war against sock theft.

“The consent language is better than most,” Ren said. “The privacy language is almost religious. Which means someone is lying.”

That night the red door opened onto a kitchen suspended among stars. Ilyan was arguing with six goats in dinner jackets.

“They claim this is their reservation,” he said.

Mara inspected a card on the table. “It says seven-thirty, party of six, dietary preference: everything.”

They surrendered the kitchen and conjured a rooftop instead. They talked about small betrayals: Mara’s former partner reading her messages “for reassurance”; Ilyan’s habit of withholding bad news until he had a solution.

“That’s not kindness,” she said.

“I know now.”

“Do you?”

He considered rather than defending himself. “Ask me after I fail differently.”

The honesty warmed her more than flattery. When they stopped beneath a sheet bright with artificial stars, he asked, “May I kiss you?”

“Yes. Softly. Hands where I can see them.”

He showed his palms. The kiss was tentative enough to remain a question. Mara answered by catching his lower lip between hers.

His breath broke; his hands stayed open beside her shoulders.

“Again,” she whispered.

The second kiss carried heat, but also the clean knowledge that he would wait. When she stepped back, he stepped back too.

A line of text burned briefly through the sheet behind him: COMPLIANCE RESPONSE: POSITIVE.

Mara blinked. It vanished.

“What?” Ilyan asked.

“Something. The system labeled my response.”

His expression sharpened. “I didn’t see it.”

Before the kiss, they tested smaller permissions. Ilyan asked to sit beside her beneath the star-sheet. Mara said yes, leaving a handspan between their thighs. She asked to touch the silver at his temple. He agreed, then admitted the gesture felt more intimate than he had expected.

“Want me to stop?”

“No. I want to notice that I could ask.”

The dream responded by warming the rooftop. Mara distrusted the timing, yet the strand of hair beneath her fingers felt startlingly mundane. She traced it once and lowered her hand. Ilyan did not chase the contact.

They drafted a ridiculous treaty on a napkin conjured from air. Article One protected the right to ugly dream clothing. Article Two prohibited weaponized breakfast. Article Three established that a

yes to one touch expired with the touch. Mara signed with a drawing of a wrench. Ilyan signed with a goat.

“What happens if one of us falls for the other?” he asked, lightly enough that she heard the seriousness beneath it.

“We do not call it fate.”

“What do we call it?”

“Data requiring review.”

His grin made her want to revise the treaty immediately. Instead she added Article Four: Attraction is not authorization. He read it twice before signing.

Mara woke before the programmed bell with the taste of rain on her tongue. She replayed the label—COMPLIANCE RESPONSE: POSITIVE—until its clinical grammar contaminated the kiss. By breakfast she had drawn the permissions treaty from memory on the back of a relay schematic, including Ilyan’s crooked signature beneath Article Four.

At Bay Nine, she asked Jae to watch while she opened the SomnaVale settings. Adaptive guidance was off. She turned the screen away, counted five breaths, and looked again. It remained off.

“You testing trust or software?” Jae asked.

“Software. Trust gets a longer protocol.”

On the tram home, the patch vibrated. The setting had switched itself on without a prompt. Mara recorded the time, resisted the

urge to explain it away, and carried the evidence to Night Garden before putting the patch on again.

They ended the dream early. On waking, Mara found a new checkbox in her app: Improve future chemistry through adaptive guidance. It was already checked.

Chapter 3: Wake Trace

Mara disabled adaptive guidance. The toggle slid back on.

She filmed it with an analog camera borrowed from Sumi, then packed the wrist patch into a biscuit tin. By noon, a SomnaVale representative had called twice to ask whether technical difficulty was interrupting her “therapeutic bond.” Mara had never told the company she considered it a bond.

At Night Garden, Ren photographed every permissions screen. Osa brought Leda’s old patch wrapped in a blue scarf.

“She started craving cardamom,” he said. “Hated it for forty-nine years. After SomnaVale, she put it in everything. The week before she died, she told me the network had given her a childhood memory of her mother baking with it. Her mother never baked.”

The next pairing began in a train carriage with no windows. Ilyan was already there, sleeves rolled up.

“The guidance setting re-enabled itself,” he said.

“Mine too. We need a control. Something useless the system wouldn’t predict.”

He considered. “An accountant named Basil who fears spoons.”

“Perfect.”

They agreed not to think of Basil until the next night, then changed subjects. Ilyan admitted he worked with medical systems but refused details that could locate him. Mara described the Night Garden without its address or names.

The train lurched. A childhood bedroom appeared beyond the carriage door: yellow wallpaper, a cracked aquarium, a paper sun taped above a narrow bed.

Mara stopped breathing. “That was my room.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

On the paper sun, in her nine-year-old handwriting, were the words DAD COMES BACK THURSDAY. He had not.

Ilyan went pale. Not surprised—recognizing.

“You know what this is,” she said.

His answer came one second too late. “I know what kind of system can build it.”

The distinction detonated. Mara hit the brass bell. She woke sitting upright, nails dug into her palms.

Her app displayed: Emotional breakthrough achieved. Retention optimized.

At work, Mara pulled the relay’s maintenance history and found a firmware package installed under a public-health exemption. The signature belonged to a SomnaVale subsidiary. She copied only the public header, unwilling yet to cross the line into restricted logs, and took it to Jae.

“Could a sleep clinic need train telemetry?” she asked.

“Could a fish need a bicycle?”

“Bad example. Some fish are ambitious.”

Jae enlarged the packet map. The firmware sent tiny bursts between two and five in the morning, when maintenance crews and passengers were scarce. Its bandwidth was too small for raw dreams but ample for identifiers and emotional scores.

Mara felt the strange shame of discovering theft through machinery she maintained. She had not authorized the channel. She also had not seen it. Competence, she knew, did not exempt anyone from being used.

At Night Garden that evening, Osa described Leda's final week. She had become convinced a woman called Anik waited for her beneath a red bridge. Osa had been jealous, then ashamed of jealousy because Anik supposedly existed only in sleep. The morning Leda died of an undiagnosed aneurysm, SomnaVale's app sent a retention survey asking whether Osa wished to continue interacting with a memorialized approximation.

"I threw the phone through a window," he said. "They billed me for the patch."

The group sat with that until Sumi pushed cake toward him. Grief did not become evidence merely because they needed evidence. It remained his first.

The green dot left an afterimage on Mara's sight. She copied its position onto tracing paper before the app could refresh, then laid it over a transit map at the folding table. The pulse aligned with a municipal fiber spur serving the east medical district.

Ren pinned the tracing paper beneath a saltshaker. "A location is not yet a person."

“No,” Mara said, looking at Osa’s blue-wrapped patch. “But it is the first thing the system showed us that it claims not to know.”

Sumi locked Leda’s device in the laundromat safe. Mara took the analog map home, folded into quarters inside her coat. That night she left her own patch in its tin. Sleep did not come, but neither did anyone else’s voice.

Below it, a map flickered for less than a second. A single green dot pulsed three kilometers away.

Continue Reading

Mara and Ilyan have only begun to uncover what SomnaVale is hiding.

Continue *Signal After Dark*

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