

-VULCAN AUTOMATA: AWAKE-

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Sleep

Again, I find myself in this strange darkness...a feeling of coldness engulfing me. What is this place? I don't seem to remember, but I feel like I've strangely been here before. This feeling of deja-vu hits me...and with it..dread. My foot moves forward, almost involuntarily, as if I'm simply meant to follow, a bizarre instinct. Looking around yields nothing to see. It's dark...everywhere, and everything, is dark. And then suddenly, a light. How far? I can't tell, but it seems to be getting brighter. No, not brighter...closer...and bigger? I don't even notice how close until I take another step which puts me just a few more away from it. I can't help but stare...it's light is inviting, but why am I afraid of it? Why do I know whats behind it...yet I can not recall. Hesitantly I outstretch my hand, slowly inching my way to this gateway into that which I must know. Regardless of fear or doubt, I had to know...

"Hey!"

The sound startles me, causing me to pull back with a slight jump as it echoes throughout the void, and again, I don't know why...why I'm afraid. I know that voice, I swear I do. Does it...want to show me? Is it my friend?

"Hey!" It shouts out again at me, the echo booming through the blackness. "What are you waiting for?"

My heart for some reason begins to pound, but it's such a strange

sensation, as if something is missing...something's not right about all of this. I know what it should feel like, and its lacking something, but my attention is stolen as I notice it reaching out through the light. A hand...it doesn't seem normal. No, hands don't shine like that. What is it...some sort of metal?

"Well? Are ya coming?" It motions its hand, inviting me over, and again, I feel instinct take over me. My foot moves forward, hand outstretches, and nervously, I take its hand...its cold, artificial hand, and it grasps, gently pulling me closer. The fear hits me like a tidal wave, but I can't stop it. As the light starts replacing the dark, bringing me into a strong embrace, I close my eyes, and even then, am blinded...

"Well then? Isn't it great!" The voice no longer echos...no...it sounds strangely natural now. I can hear it clearly, and I can hear more. It sounds like other people, and wind, and birds. Where am I? For some reason I feel like I should know.

"Come on silly! Just look at it." He sounds cheery, and I can't help but open my eyes. It's...beautiful. My eyes take it all in, this familiar yet foreign place. It's pristine, made to look like the pinnacle of modern design. A large complex walled by polished alloys that stretches as far to the sky as it does across the land. Surrounding it is this lush park full of vibrant plantation, but none of it seems real. It all carries an unnatural sheen, as if this was all some harmonic blend of artificial and organic life, and the point is driven across further when I see him next to me.

Holding my hand was what appeared to be a machine, but he was clearly also a person. A generously tall and toned construct of this flexible and smooth material that seemed to be the equivalent of flesh. It was fine, yet had some sharp angles to it. It was not meant to deceive, but

meant to be a balance. The machines form was very familiar. He had a form just like any fit and healthy fox you would see roaming the streets, but other than that, there was a generic design to it, as if it was meant to be a placeholder. No distinct traits, just another fox. And he wasn't the only one. Throughout the park were others like him of different species going about their business.

"What is this place really?" My words come out softly, but why am I even asking? Shouldn't I know? He chuckles.

"Can't you see? This is everything you ever wanted...this is home!" I feel as if my heart stops. Those last words should always be followed by a sense of warmth and comfort, but I feel...terror. I know now...it all comes back to me. Whats to come next. It's all...

"Now wake up, Kyler," The words sound different. The tone is light...yet harsh. Why is he doing this..."Wake up."

"I don't want to..." I tremble as I take a step back from him. He takes a stance in front of me. The smile is gone. It's all wrong. He looks at me menacingly. "Why?"

Everything suddenly goes silent. I feel as if the vibrancy of the world around me is slowly starting to fade. He steps up to me, and gently places one of his cold hands across my chest. The sensation makes me freeze, paralyzed from his touch, and I look him in the eyes. Those large glowing lenses for eyes, filling my soul with a terror, as they're engulfed in a wicked shining black. I can't stop it. I'm small. I'm weak. I faintly mutter. "Why?" I'm frozen. He grins.

"Because it's all just a dream."

A great force pushes against my chest. He sends me back with an inhuman strength, the light from the scene disappears. Its beauty, its colour, all gone, and I fall...I fall into the darkness. I see him standing at the light, looking down at me. I can't scream. I can't stop. I just fall...

“STOP!”

The scream blasts through the small apartment space as he jumps up from his restless slumber. A faint glimmer of sweat on his face. Eyes wide open, and heart racing, each fast, deep breath fuelling the panic, until it starts to subside. He places one of his dark hands over his own chest. His heart begins to slow, but the pressure is still very apparent. It was the third time this week, three sleepless nights now, and no way to stop it. But what did it matter...he was back to reality now. Kyler slumps back into the mattress, staring up at the ceiling, not even wanting to check the time. It couldn't have been later than 4AM he figured. The streak of moonlight piercing through his curtains was all the indication that he needed to sleep..or at least try again. At the very least, he never had the same dreams, or nightmares, twice in one night...and he hoped he never would. He curls himself tightly around his sheets and his favourite plush toy, a soft whimper escaping him, a single tear sheds rolling down his cheek before he closes his eyes. It's warmth is strangely reassuring, and slowly but surely, he makes another attempt to sleep.

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Just Another Day

His eyes dart open, but quickly fall back halfway. The soothing sound of his blaring alarm coming from his phone. It was a rather soft pleasant melody. How ironic that it was his alarm and not some lullaby. So long as it's loud, it works. He brings one of his small clawed fingers to the screen and swipes the alarm off before rolling around lazily. *I could just sleep in a bit more.* Kyler's eyes returned to the ceiling once more. The sun was shining brightly through the curtains. At least it looked like a nice day. There was a gentle warm light blanketing his whole room, making the mess all the more apparent. Various bits of dismantled and dissected electronics and some tools littered one section of the floor, while his desk with his rather extravagant computer setup and a plethora of random mess stood at the other, and between them, was an oddly barren and clean patch of floor to conveniently walk through. A sort of organized chaos. It was just the way he was accustomed to living. They say you can tell how creative someone is by how messy their room was, and he would always strive to have a balance between it and necessary responsibility. Right now though, he just didn't want to do anything, and his mind was already wandering on the events of the night.

His hand clenched at the fur on his chest. It was a good feeling. It felt soft, and warm, and it felt real. How foolish must it be to not be able to separate a dream from reality...yet he had a hard time discerning. It was an uncomfortable rush every time he drifted into deep sleep. His mind would play tricks on him, as if it was desperate to create its own reality.

But every morning, when he awoke, it was the same. A wave of sensation that seemed absent before. Ones he knew to be real. Looking around he would see the same little apartment. It was all this that told him it was over, and that it was just another day ahead of him.

One foot followed by the other finds its way out from under the sheets and towards the floor. Flexing the digits on each hand and foot, he interlocks them and gives them a crack, followed by a little twist of his neck, before ultimately he finds himself getting up and out of bed. He lazily steps across the clear patch of floor, his hand slaps the space-bar on his keyboard, waking his computer from its own slumber. A foot brushes up against some of the mess to the side toppling it lightly. A hand flicks the switch of the bathroom light as Kyler finds himself standing in the mirror, looking over himself with his unique eyes; left iris green, right iris blue. An attractive heterochromatic harmony, or so he thought at least. There were many species in this wonderful diverse world, but he had a sense of pride in what he was, regardless of what most people might think. His small, leathery black hand rubbed against the fluff on the side of his face, a smooth mix of creamy white and orange with black in the back, straightening it out over his rather large rounded ears. He rubbed one hand over his short hairless muzzle, a soft pale flesh, as he was still caught in the process of waking up properly. He wiggled his toe fingers stretching them out before grabbing his toothbrush in one hand and scrubbing away in his maw. His tail wrapped around a towel on the rack behind him as he brought it over. Spitting out and rinsing, he looks up at himself. Amidst all his troubles, at the very least he could say he was happy with who he was. He was a proud, kind hearted monkey, white headed capuchin, just reaching 24 years. Age meant little to him though, as inside the mature young adult was still a child enjoying the little things in life. That could have been related to what he was though. As one of the

smaller species he only stood around 4 feet tall, but he liked it. It made him nimble, and cute. It was great to be small and have essentially four hands plus a dexterous tail. Tinkering was all the easier. Most of his body was covered in black fur, but he had a sort of jacket strip of orange around his cream chest and belly that also went down his back.

Eventually he was done waking up as much as he could and retreated to his desk, turning his chair before slumping down into it, one hand grabbed the mouse and clicked, the other his glasses, sliding them over his muzzle. He entered his password and swiftly opened his web browser to start his typical day.

Step 1, messenger. He had to know what his friends were doing, because he sure didn't have any plans. Step 2, streams. Nothing like watching your favourite internet jokester play video games. Lastly, was the most important step. Reddit. At this point Kyler was convinced Reddit was eternal. In fact, it was celebrating its 100th birthday this month. It was a huge occasion, and an incredible one. Sure it had its flaws through history, but it was still the ultimate gathering of all things great and awful on the internet. But something caught his attention particularly fast upon opening it. He had forgotten about another anniversary this month. First contact.

How convenient it was, that a mere week before the hub of the internet needed something to freak out about, the world would be changed forever. "We should be celebrating more than Reddit this month." was the title of the topic. It was the number one discussed after just starting last night. Surely it was loaded with some positive insight as well as horrible opinions. He gave it a click, swiftly moving to one of his other monitor sections on his quite large multi-display, to start playing his favourite streamers recording from earlier. When he turned his head back to the

thread, he glanced at the first few words. "When will we as a collective appreciate Vulcan Automata...". He didn't even need to go further before losing himself in thought.

Vulcan Automata...our first contact, and the last we would ever need. All I know from them is from curious research into their coming and the bits I've seen myself from recent years, but to not try and understand how our lives came to the way it is now would be outright ignorant.

Everyone knew it would happen eventually, or at least those that weren't lost in the past knew. After our first reach for the stars beyond our own, the evidence was piling up of the possibility of life amongst the galaxy. But we didn't find it, they found us. We got the first communication in the late 2040's and the public went wild. Outrage, enthusiasm, terror. Mixed emotions across nations. We were entering an era of questions and uncertainty about the truth of the cosmos and these other beings. But it was a few months later after the governments started sharing what they knew, where that burst of emotion turned to silence. They want to do what? That was the first impression, a mix of shock and disbelief. But where to start? They weren't just more advanced than us...they were miles out of our league. If we had anything less than being able to travel to a different star system it would be outright embarrassing, and perhaps its the only reason why they bothered saying hi. And force? What do you do to something in orbit when all you have is meant for travel. They must have known the subtle projection would be intimidating and force us into diplomacy. We wouldn't have stood a chance, and thankfully, it was never brought into question.

We weren't the first for them to visit. They had visited plenty before. They were even watching us over the past decades, apparently just

waiting for the right moment to interact. They learned our language, our society, our various cultures. It was insane. But that wasn't the shock. Not even close. It was their proposition that was outright absurd, or at least, we thought it was at first. Surely it was too good to be true? They sure came in peace alright, and they wanted to help us help them. Something about the possible resources available on our planets in the system that they would like to invest in, and of course, they seemed interested in us. Investing in our people seemed so strange and at first intimidating. But then, the offers just poured in.

To help ease our people, they straight out offered to reshape our society, with power. Technology that can power our cities at a fraction of the effort. Power that was clean and cheap, and in many sizes. Fossil fuels became a primitive concept, and the oil companies were panicking. Our crippled atmosphere could have a chance to breath again as, over the course of a couple years, the entire world turned to clean energy. They didn't even ask for anything in return except an opportunity and cooperation. They were in a way saving us, our world, from the damage we had done, and opening a brighter future to us all, regardless of nation, origin, or any of our troubled past. It didn't take long after that for leaders all around to start agreeing that yes, maybe this is the future of Earth. They showed us much more, explained to us what they were hoping to achieve, and offered us great opportunities. They would slowly help us understand greater technologies. They would guide us as we more quickly advanced our society. The catch? They wanted a piece of the goods. They wanted to act as the intergalactic hub of business for Earth, having a pretty cut of its, and any other planets resources in our solar system and beyond. Earth and its people would get everything it needs, and Vulcan Automata would get what it wants. It took some talks and diplomatic effort to get the UN to agree to their propositions. Trying to

resist it was impossible. It doesn't help that their arrival made our society look like a pity. They took us out of all our greatest global crisis' with no effort whatsoever. What came next though, was the details.

They had employees alright. But those employees weren't flesh and bone. What we had seen so far wasn't the full story. They looked normal enough, but then we saw these other beings, they were metal and material. No, they were not androids, nor were they some AI construct. They were people. People that were once living. They had once lived, breathed, ate, and everything you'd expect from sentient life. And somehow, there they were, running on nothing but a battery now, looking more metal than flesh. Surely, it must be for the better right? People were afraid again, how was this sort of thing even possible? But after everything they did to help us, the ones in charge were the ones to decide that they had to proceed. Vulcan Automata knew how to persuade, and we were already past the point of no return.

Slowly, certain countries looking to get an edge like Canada built a closer relationship to the company. They reaped many economical benefits and once others took notice it was just a domino effect. Canadian relations put pressure on the US, which was V.A's main interest in North America. It took many years from the first agreement, but eventually, after being stuck doing orbital operations, they started building their planet side headquarters after their intentions were clearly made out to be genuine, despite the oddities surrounding their workforce. Washington D.C become the first city in the world to house Vulcan Automata. It was fitting really, having our galactic newcomers situated so close to a place of leadership was a good gesture of trust to them and the citizens. Not everyone saw it that way, but slowly the positive outlooks were outweighing the negative. Europe soon followed, housing a

headquarters in Germany. Japan was next. They must have made the government an offer they couldn't refuse. It was all coming together for them. Soon, they were the talk of the world, and the centre of fascination, and skepticism. Some people would never give up the concept of them being used. It got all the worse for skeptics when the final offer came through.

They were hiring, and they wanted to hire us. How couldn't they? Now that they were booming, they needed workers. Laborers, researchers, techs and engineers, public relations. They needed it all and apparently they wanted it local. Everything went from 0 to 100 real quick, and they knew they would have people come in. We're a society full of those looking for an escape for one reason or another, or have no other choice if they want to live a full life, and apparently their contracts were scary, but fair. Surrender your organic body for the rest of your days, work for them for a good chunk of time, but eventually that new life would be forever and free. No debts, no worries, no dying...whats 40 years or so of work matter when the next eternity is all yours? Was it worth it? What did it really mean to be alive anymore. The line was disappearing...Flesh, metal, it matters not when the mind is the same, they told us. The world was changing so quickly. One generation was worrying about nuclear war, and the next was wondering what its like to become a robot. That was their offer...an offer...I had considered before. And now with a small recruitment branch that opened recently in Toronto...it was like something was trying to pull me in...and then I thought back to the previous night again.

Kyler slumped back a bit, drooping down in his chair as his mind got lost in thought. So much racing in there that was stealing his attention

from anything else. *Ding!* The sound of his messenger going off. He got up from his poor posture and looked at the message. A smile spread across his face. It was his best friend, Jay.

"hey man not doing much today." the message read, *"wanna chill in a bit?"*. He quickly brought his hands to his keyboard.

"Ay! hell ya ill stop by in like 30 we can meet at the lounge." Before he even had a response Kyler jumped from his chair and threw off his pajamas, rushing to the bathroom to give his face a quick wash to help wake up a bit more. He saw a confirmation from his friend pop up. After that a quick slip into some loose shorts, one of his favourite Monster Hunter tee-shirts, his favourite game ever, and a light dab of cologne on his neck, and he was rushing out the door...until he realized he forgot his phone and keys. *Cause I'm smart*. Kyler snagged both and shoved them into his pockets before making his exit. He probably could have turned his computer off though.

The streets of Toronto were as one would expect them to be on a summer weekday afternoon. There was hustle and bustle all over every street corner. The city was always praised as the melding pot of cultures in the past, and it only became more so over the decades. Toronto was undoubtedly one of the hubs of North America. Ever since the completion of the international hyperloop, Ontario really started to see the benefits of having a direct line to the states. With a link between Toronto and New York, and the loops beyond that, North America was feeling smaller and smaller. These thoughts occurred to Kyler every time he walked underneath the looptube near Union Station. He was truly fascinated by it. Such old tech that changed the way we thought of transportation, still relevant to this day and just improving. He did always think of maybe

working in that industry. *But it must be pretty funny to V.A. Surely where they're from they must have flying cars or something.* His thoughts settled as he set his sights on his destination, a game lounge not far from where he was. It was a convenient location, and his go to spot to relax and let his worries go. He crossed the busy street, the humming of electric vehicles almost drowned out by the conversations of the people. Species from all over the world littered the streets. It was always nice to see, especially knowing what it was like generations before his. He took the final steps to the front of the brightly lit exterior of the lounge.

The outside was decorated with fancy neon designs in the shape of the most recent popular game characters. Above his head was a large sign bearing the name of the business. "E-TANK BAR AND GAMES" It was his favourite place in Toronto. Kyler took his first step into the lounge, the door hitting the cute bell which triggered the fanfare from Metroid. He loved that sound. The environment was always refreshing no matter how many times he had come. Walls decorated from end to end with various game and internet references. There was a section in the back with some arcade cabinets. The games were from the modern era but it was a nice aesthetic. Each booth had decent seating and a sealed computer behind the wall with some controllers connected to the booth wall. You could watch videos, movies, or pick from their huge library of installed games. And of course, there was the bar. A gloriously retro sci-fi mix design with a huge selection of drinks all themed around various references. Kyler was feeling a bit refreshed just from walking in.

"Hey man!" he heard the welcoming voice of his friend. Jay sat in a booth directly across the bar. It's where they usually sat. He made his way over waving to him. Jay was a rather good looking husky. When he stood he came to around 5'9" with a well toned physique. His dense fur

was mostly a clean white with accents of a blueish-toned grey. He had dyed some of his fur a deeper blue around the markings to compliment it. His eyes also went well with it with a nice amber tone. Dressing light today all he had on was some shorts and a tee just like Kyler. They kept it simple for the most part. They gave each other a light hug and pat on the back before taking their seats opposite each other.

“Hows it going dude?” Jay took a swig from some water that had already been brought to the table.

“Oh you know, it's good enough...” Kyler exhaled a slight sigh after his reply. “I'm still getting by so hey not bad right?” He chuckled, and Jay joined in, though admittedly he was more concerned.

“Come on man, you know you can't say that and expect me to just play that game. Whats going on, money's not tight again is it?” Jay seemed to get more comfortable. Kyler knew what it was. It was his 'We're going to have a talk' stance.

“No no, it's not really that, it's-” A booming voice interrupted Kyler before he could finish.

“Hey, hey! It's K and J!” The business owner made his entrance. Brody was an all around swell guy with a great passion. He put his heart and soul into this place and it really payed off. They all got to know each other as great friends after Kyler and Jay had become regulars over the months. The big bellied raccoon joyfully made his way to the booth.

“Hey Brody!” They two said in unison, waving a hand at him.

“Whats the dealio today fellas, some drinks and chills?” His body movements were greatly pronounced, speaking with his hands as much

as his words. It helped that his rounded form gave him an all around jolly appearance.

“Yeah I'll have some coke man, probably to early for real drinks eh?” Jay winked, and Kyler giggled at the concept. He wasn't a stranger to indulging in a cocktail in the afternoon though.

“Iced tea bud!” said Kyler.

“Right away boys!” Brody wobbled his way behind the bar to fill up some glasses.

“So you were saying?” It was in an instant that Jays tone went from jovial to serious as Kyler looked back to him. He knew Jay was concerned, he always had been, trying to look out for his closest friend. Jay knew what he wanted to do with his life and he was pretty well off so far. Kyler even envied it sometimes. He let out a deep sigh.

“I don't want to spend the rest of my life barely getting by Jay...” Kyler's posture loosened as he slumped a bit getting comfortable, but visibly saddened. “I had so many...ideas as to what I really wanted, and I thought it would leave me in a good spot, but instead...” he shook his head looking off to the side, “it's just left me in the middle of nowhere. I'm caught with nothing but thoughts and no idea where to really go. I can't keep working shitty jobs to occasionally get myself a new toy. The misery isn't worth it.” Jay frowned at what he was hearing. “Sometimes I wonder if anything I've done so far was even for a good reason...did I waste my time and money for nothing?” Kyler rested his chin on his hand. It was like a recording on repeat. The thoughts he'd been having, the dreams he'd been experiencing, on loop within his delicate mind. Jay had some idea of what was in there.

"You're thinking about it again...aren't you?" He looked firmly at Kyler even as his attention was lost elsewhere, but he knew his friend heard him. Just from the slight shift in his eyes and his body, he knew.

"Yeah..." Kyler softly replied, "I am." He couldn't deny it. The dream, the discussion thread, it left his brain in a mess of self turmoil over this...opportunity. Jay took a deep breath before exhaling, as if preparing what to say next mentally. Brody quietly made his way to the booth and gave them their drinks, and simply nod and waved before walking away. He knew when people were in the middle of alone time.

"Look Kyler...we need to just tackle this topic for a moment..." Kyler turned his attention back to his friend. "I've known you for a long time man, and ever since we were little that crazy brain of yours was the definition of a brainstorm." The monkey couldn't help but let out a faint grin at that, but it receded again. "You grew up fantasizing about just what Vulcan Automata was with your concepts and shit, but the moment the truth, and the reality of it got to us, its like all that wonder turned to fear."

"Can you blame me?" Kyler interjected. "We were young man...fantasizing is all about the lack of consequences. We're adults now and we have to face those consequences for our actions. I can't just keep dreaming that I can live forever at no cost." He took a sip from the straw of his iced tea. It certainly was a refreshing feeling amongst the gloom within. "Why does it sound like you're trying to convince me to become a freakin robot?"

"I'm not trying to convince you to just go off and *become* a robot. I just...I want you to do *something*." There was a sort of shaky tone in the last words. It was as if Jay really cared about him so much, and Jay knew Kyler was in distress recently. "I'm worried about you man...you're not the

same as of late. I know those commissions are helping but you said it yourself, you can't keep living like this." Kyler visibly winced as the harsh truth of all these words were piercing him. "You're a creative person Kyler, more creative than anyone I know, and you're willing to do what it takes, but the world is still a harsh place to make a living. I don't even disagree with you dropping out of your last year, you had to make a choice. Did you really want to struggle with money for the next who knows how many years? Possibly never even seeing work that wasn't some crapfest? Your ideas and your talents, they just...they don't get jobs without the money already being there, and it's not fair that you have to suffer because what you do just isn't what people want. Not everyone is cut out for high paying labour or being some crazy scientist. But *they*..." the monkeys eyes were now fixated on those of his friends, "*they* can surely put you to work, give you everything you need, and when the time comes, you can make your ideas real, not just for the next generation, but the one after, and the one *after*! Yeah, I thought you were a little silly when big boy Kyler was still dreaming of making video games for hundreds of years to come, but shit dude! It's real now!" The hands of Kyler engulfed the front of his face, burying it within. He huffed and clenched his fist a little. Was his life really in such a point where he had to go this route? "Just look at what people have to say, not the stupid bullshitters, the ones with experience and evidence, the ones that are the living, well, 'living' examples of what it's like. I mean...I don't want to just lose you for who knows how long but...you deserve to be happy, and I can tell that right now you need more than friends. You need to live your life the way you wanted to."

Jay took a swig of Coke. Despite everything he said he knew it was hard. He knew the way Kyler thought, and despite his past fantasies, when it came to actually *doing*, he was a whole different person. The concept of doing something so life changing was horrifying to him. Of

course there was evidence of the process and the success it brings, but its still all so unbelievable to him. Could he actually live forever? Would he actually be free? What cost did this all really have? He looked down at his slightly fuzzy hand. It looked fairly soft with the strands of fur across the top, and a rough textured padding across his palm and fingers. It was all organic, and what he knew to be himself. How easily could one actually turn to metals and rubbers, not just physically, but psychologically. Was he really fit for that process? He couldn't even go to a hospital without drowning in nervous anxiety. And the biggest question was...would he still even be him? His mind was his pride, the reason he could ever feel good about himself. He uses it to make great things, and do good to others. He was horrified at the concept of becoming not *something* else, but *someone* else. There was a loud thud across the table that distracted him. Jay had slapped down a handful of coins.

“We came here to relax and have a good time dude, so how about we get our game on huh? In fact...” Jay leaned closer as if ready to share a deep secret, “Somebody told me that this place has the new Monster Hunter: Legends Immersion kit in the baaaack...” Kylers eyes widened and this look of amazement quickly started overtaking him. “Which one do you wanna do first huh?”

“As if that's a real question.” He smirked as they got up with their drinks. Jay gave Brody some sort of signal. Of course it was all planned out.

-II-

Insomnia