

Valerie sat up with a start as she awoke. Something was different, but it was too dark to offer any clues as to what that might be. Around her the room was pitch black, and all was silent. Other than intuition she had little to go on. Staring hard into the darkness revealed nothing but more blackness. Shimmering white light encroached on her peripheral vision, intruding at the edges of her consciousness like featherlike clouds blown on a winter's night.

When what had been shimmering light turned into throbbing pulsations of hot white energy, she cried out in fear and pain. So intense were they that she was forced to cover her eyes with her hands. Even so, she felt as if she was staring directly into the midday sun. Blinded by the intense light and explosions of color, her ears rang, and her mind swirled. Startled and confused by the pain and chaos, she fought to maintain her senses in what had become a trial of sensory stamina.

As suddenly as the phenomena began, it dissipated; allowing her brain and senses to reboot. Upon opening her eyes, she found herself no longer lying in bed as she last remembered, but standing. But staying upright proved to be a Herculean task. Wobbling knees refused to cooperate while her feet seemed glued to the floor. More than that, her entire body felt as if gravity had suddenly doubled. *Has it?* she wondered. Her addled mind and impaired senses found no reliable explanation aside from gravity's cruel betrayal.

Struggling against the turmoil in her body, she fought to focus her eyes. Finally, she was able to make out the indistinct silhouette of an enormous figure standing directly before her. She recognized the form as humanoid; however, she was unable to ascertain whether what she was looking at was a sculpture, a being, or something else. The possibility of something else had her worried.

“Corell? What happened? Where am I?” she managed to mumble weakly, her frayed voice sounding so desperate she hated the sound of it.

“Corell Paris cannot hear you, Valerie Dunne,” the unfamiliar though kindly voice assured her. “You have no reason to fear. You are not in any danger.”

Although the voice she heard was not what she expected, it was soothing enough to ease her fears. With vision still too blurry to make out details, it seemed to her the bronze figure remained stationary. Since the voice came from the general direction of the silhouette, she anticipated movement, but none came. However, logic told her whatever or whoever was directly in front of her must have spoken. She just could not be certain.

“What happened? Where is Corell?”

“Corell is right where you left him— of course.”

“Of course,” she agreed, now feeling foolish for asking. No doubt Corell was exactly where she where she left him. Where else would he be? Maybe if she could see clearly, she wouldn’t have to ask such dumb questions.

"I'm sorry, I can't see you. My eyes..." Valerie said impatiently.

"Do not worry. Your vision will clear momentarily," the voice reassured once more. "Please seat yourself while your vision recovers. Right behind you," the voice added.

A quick glance over her shoulder revealed the shape of a bench, so Valerie backed up a step, guided herself by touch, then lowered herself carefully on the edge of the bench. Half-blinded and afraid of stumbling, she felt better being seated. Then drawing a deep breath of relief, she blurted, "Who are you?"

"My name is Osomario. I brought you here," proclaimed the pleasant voice, but she needed to know more.

"Wh-Where is... *here*?" she asked tentatively.

"The answer to that question might be difficult for you to understand. However, the precise answer is not so much where is here, as much as it is *when is here*."

"Well," exclaimed Valerie, "one thing is certain: '*when is here*' sure is hot—I am sweating like a pig!" No one had to remind her she was no longer in her air-conditioned room. Although dry, the heat was oppressive, as if she had stepped into a furnace.

"Mr. Osomario, I am confused. A moment ago, I was in bed, in Oregon, at Corell Paris' estate. Then I awoke and found myself here, half-blind, and in this—pressure cooker. I feel like I have been hi-jacked. If you brought me here, I need to know why."

"I saw that it was your time."

Valerie frowned. Another cryptic answer delivered matter-of-factly, which wasn't what she needed. She needed to know what was going on and why she was there. She was looking for facts and wanted them now. Certainly, that bronze thing's voice was reassuring, but it also carried an undeniable note of authority with it, and that worried her. Instinctively she perceived she was speaking to someone that commanded her destiny. She didn't feel an immediate threat, but she remained guarded.

"Time for what?" she swallowed.

Instead of fear, Valerie felt a compelling sense of serenity from this strange brown man and his scorchingly-hot place. Licking her lips did nothing; they felt dry as paper. But the air, she assumed, was desert air, and carried with it wonderful fragrances, as of a garden. But if it was a garden, it was different than any she knew of because the scents were all wrong. While her focus cleared further, the colors became more vivid, revealing around her every hue of the sunrise and sunset. Now her sight was returning quickly, just as her strange host had promised.

"The time has come for you to know the truth about yourself." Then Osomario added, "I will teach you."

Valerie furrowed her brows and squinted. With her vision restored, Valerie came to realize that everything about this Osomario was indeed bronze in color. And he was exceptionally tall, perhaps seven feet or more in height, and startlingly lean. She was

taken aback as she noticed his broad shoulders supported, not two, but four, long muscular arms of equal length. Each of those four arms ended in broad powerful-looking hands with three fingers and a thumb. The lean muscle definition of this creature was accentuated by hairless skin, making the creature's presence imposing.

But the feature that set him apart from anything or anyone she had ever seen or imagined, was his high forehead punctuated by a pair of large, deep-set eyes. And those eyes shone of darkness—incomprehensible, obscure as obsidian, reflective as mirrors. Although unknowable and more than a little bit unnerving, those glistening orbs seemed to see everything—and yet nothing. So utterly black and featureless were they that it was impossible to tell if they moved or if they looked at, through, or past her. Even as the creature turned his head, gestured, or spoke, those eyes did nothing other than mirror their surroundings. Seeing her own flawless image reflected in them gave Valerie goosebumps.

Nevertheless, Osomario's presence radiated serene intelligence. The creature's chiseled body and overall appearance confirmed her first impression: this Osomario seemed to be more of an animated bronze sculpture than a living breathing being. *What am I dealing with? A god? Perhaps.* The thought rattled her.

“So—I am here to learn the truth? About myself?”

*How odd,* Valerie observed. *The creature's clothing matches his skin color perfectly.* Considering the heat, the loose-fitting shapeless robes he wore made sense, but the

robes, even his sandals, were all the color of bronze. She reasoned this character had embraced his color like no one ever had. Although she knew better, for an instant she imagined the man to be a man of metal, entirely bronze from head to foot. A walking, talking, four-armed metallic scarecrow.

“Yes. You are here to learn the truth about yourself, the rings, and how to use them. I am Osomario, master of the five Hesaurun rings. I will teach you.”

Valerie’s heart skipped a beat as she recalled the name *Osomario* from conversations with Corell Paris. This strange creature made Corell’s ring, and it was he who had gifted them to humankind. According to Corell, she was face-to-face with the master of the five rings— and the source of their power.

Valerie thought of pinching herself to be sure she wasn’t dreaming. For whatever reason, this Osomario had chosen this time to bring her to him, which made her feel important. The warm glow of feeling needed, of being truly appreciated, coursed through her veins. Moreover, it was Osomario whom she had seen so many times working in the shadows of her dreams. He had always been there to help her, and now he had called her home to him. She was staggered as the full import of it hit home all at once.

“Osomario,” Valerie faltered, “I just realized I know you.”

“Yes, you do. We know each other quite well, do we not?” he said, with a trace of mischief in his voice. A wide smile had formed there, producing deep creases in his

sunken cheeks. It seemed he enjoyed the admission as if it were confidential between them. At that moment, the tension Valerie felt evaporated.

Gaining confidence, she confessed, "Almost every night for the past fourteen years." But as she realized what she had just said, she laughed, embarrassed at the unintended double entendre.

"Quite true," her host responded, avoiding her verbal misstep. "We have a lot to talk about, do we not? But before that, allow me to show you my home," he gestured with a pair of open left hands.

With her vision finally regained, Valerie looked beyond Osomario for the first time and made a discovery that took her breath away. The splendor that was Osomario's home was almost indescribable. As she took in her surroundings, she was instantly reminded that she was no longer home—heaven perhaps, but definitely not home.

As she saw it, nothing compared to this place. Not a fantasy or a fairytale. She was reminded of OZ, or perhaps Asgard. The hanging gardens of Babylon came to mind, but she found no other comparative metaphor.

What Valerie saw seemed not to be a home at all, but more of a domed indoor open-air botanical sanctuary. The place was a galleria of pillars, arches, ornate moldings, interspersed with sculptures, fountains and more foliage than her eyes could assimilate. Within the immense airy space, light, colors, and textures converged,

producing a scene anyone could savor. Anyone referring to this palace merely as *home* would be guilty of gross understatement.

The entire structure appeared to be hewn of stone. A series of intricately engraved arched braces rose until they merged, producing an eloquent dome. Valerie didn't know much about rocks or building materials but guessed it was marble, the color of polished sandstone, with meandering veins of green, blue, and black.

Osomario led the way. As Valerie followed him past what she assumed was the main entrance to this sanctuary, she had her first glimpse of the landscape outside the dome. One glance told her she wasn't on Earth, or likely anywhere near it. In the distance, a pair of orange suns hung in the cloudless gray sky as indisputable proof of that.

Beyond the arches the terrain was disturbingly jagged and torn with massive rocks thrown about. A valley visible in the distance helped her place the house on a hill or a ridge. Deep gouges marked the valley floor but without any indication of water, plant life, or evidence of habitation. Although she couldn't imagine how anyone would want to live in such a lifeless inferno, she resisted judging Osomario adversely for choosing this place as his home.

Valerie was led past an Andalusian patio adjacent to an aquatic garden. As they passed, something struck her hard from behind, on her hip. Valerie shrieked and spun around in time to see the head of a large red flower retreating with her power-bar in its



maw, munching voraciously on it, wrapper and all. It swallowed the bar whole then loosed a resonant call that sounded to her as if a goat had swallowed a car horn. She watched bemused as the vine-like thing slunk back into its watery plot with a splash.

“What the—” Valerie exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at the offender, that by the time Osomario had caught up with her appeared to be as innocent as any house plant. Just then, a bubble escaped the surface of the water, sounding suspiciously like a burp.

“You have to watch that one,” Osomario warned with a smile. “The Telygren is always looking for something to eat.”

“Tel-ey-gren,” Valerie repeated. “I’ll remember that for sure.”.

Although the atmosphere was sweet with a verdant scent, it had an otherworldly tang that was both tasted and felt on Valerie’s skin. The feel and smell of the place was much like being in a hot kitchen. Everywhere she looked, there were gardens, rockeries, water plots, with too many varieties to count. Each plant was unique, so different in appearance, she guessed correctly that they were from disparate worlds. None of it was familiar to her.

Osomario led her past a stone staircase that spiraled to the highest levels before being swallowed by incoming light streaming in through the arched openings. Sunlight played on the steps and balustrades in a mosaic of glowing illumination and shadow.

Osomario waited patiently for her while she stood, staring wordlessly at the scene.

“The staircase leads to an observatory,” he informed her, finally drawing her attention away from the scene.

“It’s beautiful, your home is amazing, and I love all these plants!” Valerie gushed as she dutifully fell in behind the lanky four-armed tour guide.

Beyond the staircase, Osomario led her past a veranda decorated with more plant specimens, teeming with strange and exotic vegetation. Above it, a terrace overflowing with cascading tendrils, flowering vines, and unusual broad leaf succulents hung nearly to the floor. A fountain featuring a graceful four-armed figure cradling an earthen vessel, poured water into a pool filled with floating vegetation, flowing down a trace.

The alien motioned toward a bench across from the fountain where he seated himself. The tour through Osomario’s gardens calmed Valerie’s frayed nerves. Comfortable now in this strange place, she felt content focusing on the serene fountain for a moment. The mysterious creature rested next to her in silence, with sixteen long fingers folded on his lap. However, the curious scene quickly pulled her back to reality, and the unease she felt at being involuntarily removed from the safety of her bed without notice or consent. Tension built as she thought about that. As she was about to ask why she was brought to this place, those thoughts were interrupted.

“Patience. Please. Valerie,” the creature told her in clipped words, exasperation evident in his voice. “I am very aware of your feelings. You want to know why I brought you here.”

That this alien knew precisely her thoughts and feelings took her by surprise. But then it began to make sense. After all, Osomario had been in her head since she was a child, which meant he knew her intimately through her dreams. And what of the first go around; the original Valerie Dunne? How well had he known her in that iteration of herself? She couldn’t say for sure, but guessed they must have had an intimate bond. Didn’t that make a difference? She thought it did. Humbled by this realization, she made a mental note to avoid playing poker with him.

“I am,” she admitted. “I am eager to know why you brought me here,” she said anxiously, seeing no reason to hide her feelings at this point. “Tell me.” What she actually wanted to say was, *Will you just spit it out?*

“Alright,” he allowed. “Remember, I said, ‘It is your time to learn the truth about yourself’? That is why you are here. I fear there may not be enough time for you to learn by trial and error. I must teach you.”

*Teach me? Teach me what?* Valerie wondered. Yet without saying the words aloud, Osomario answered.

“I expect trouble soon. When the Dominion, The Boeki, claim planets, they take everything. The population is enslaved, and everything of value is stripped away until

there is nothing left to give. Everything is appropriated, including minerals, water, plant, and animal life. Nothing of value is left behind.

“When the Boecki falls upon a resource, they appropriate everything, take everything, and leave nothing. It is what they do; it is what they have always done, wherever they have gone. It is their way. Currently, they are in the Proxima system. Once the Boecki are done with Proxima, Sol will be next. That is why I brought you here. You can stop them. I will teach you how.”

The creature raised a pair of bronze hands, sweeping them across the room. “This sanctuary....” he said, then paused reflectively before continuing. “These life forms are all the last of their kind, from worlds long dead, harvested by the Boeki.” Then an emotional admission— “I do not want to see the remnants of Earth preserved here.”

Valerie’s heart sank. She wasn’t sure which part of what she had just heard hit her the hardest. Was it the fact that aliens were headed to Earth to destroy it? That she had just learned the beautiful indoor gardens she had just toured were all that was left of untold worlds consumed by this ‘Boecki Dominion’? Or that she was expected to do something about it? It was all so awful she lashed out defensively.

“Osomario!” she cried, turning to face him, her face hardened. “I don’t understand why you need me; you said you are the master of the five rings! Why don’t you do it yourself? Why on Earth....”

Realizing her poor choice of words, she stopped to find other words for what she was trying to say. After a cleansing breath, she rephrased. "What do you need *me* for?" she said, exasperated. Then added, "I'm just a girl, why does everyone want to hang this on me?"

A silent moment passed between them as they allowed the emotion of the moment to recede.

"They know my companions and me," Osomario admitted. "We cannot interfere with them directly. If we are going to sabotage their efforts, we must do so indirectly."

"I'm sorry, I still don't understand. What makes you think I could ever do anything stop to them?"

"You are more powerful than you realize. And you are not Boeck!" Osomario spat those words as if distasteful. "The Directive does not expect effective resistance."

Suddenly, the untold truth hit her like a hammer blow to the chest. What he had not said was stunning, so shocking she wanted to erase the realization from her mind. But this truth was not something from which she was unable to hide, or forget. Willing herself to breathe, she pushed aside the horror in an attempt to remain objective.

"Osomario..." she erupted, seething, glaring at the creature, *you — you are Boekian. Aren't you!*"

