

THE LIMINAE CODE: GHOST IN THE MACHINE

SNEAK PEAK

BY AVIVA

Chapter One

Freya didn't hurl her phone at the smiling woman on the holo-screen across from her in the subway. Public vandalism wouldn't solve anything. Though ... it couldn't make things any worse. Freya watched in horror as an implant-enhanced Daem woman hosting one of fifteen generic Nue-York morning shows introduced her guests, Clarissa Westord, and Malakai Talareh.

Clarissa—or Riss, as she was known to Freya—lounged on the couch in whatever studio they were filming the segment in. A stylist had coiffed her ice-blond hair to within an inch of its brittle life. Riss's blood-red lips wore a cold, self-satisfied smile that sank its claws into Freya's skin.

And why wouldn't she be smiling? Now, she's got everything she ever wanted.

Freya clasped her bag strap more tightly. Malakai's self-assured posture beside Riss drew the kind of attention only someone of his status could command.

Riss had clawed her way out of the gutter, getting involved with Malakai, the poster bad-boy son of one of the Daem's most elite families. Now she had straightened him out and was taking credit for YourPast, a groundbreaking technology that let all species, mainly Daem, the demigods, explore their ancestry.

My groundbreaking technology.

Freya shifted her bag on her shoulder, trying to suppress the simmering rage that had

become her base state these past months. Even though she'd woken up early and promised herself that she would do better. She'd even selected a white shirt instead of her usual all-black wardrobe, something different to mark a month of steady employment. Of course, this had to be on air during her commute, making "optimistic, cheerful Freya" a distant hope.

'That's why I believe demigods should have the chance to connect with their divine roots. Identity, after all, is the foundation for each of our unique individual essences. That's why YourPast is going to change our world. It's more than a business—it's a legacy,' Riss said, each word cutting through the rattling subway carriage with practised confidence.

Malakai nodded like a well-behaved pup beside Riss on the red couch before adding, 'It just came out of nowhere, y'know? We were tossing around ideas after a late dinner. Riss—Clarissa had this spark of an idea, and I was like, "Yes, babe, we have to do this." I mean, it's in my blood, right? So we headed to Angel Cy to set up a lab at the BioNova headquarters.'

Freya clenched her teeth and focused on her clipcomm, staring at the dull screen. Forget it. She knew it wasn't worth letting Riss get to her. She just needed to get through today—and then tomorrow—each day, one at a time.

Her fingers had other ideas as they started tapping out a message to Riss on her clipcomm.

You know what you're doing is wrong. You'll regret this.

Her thumb pressed "authorise message" before she could stop herself.

'No.' She shook the comm as if that would undo her stupidity. 'No, no, no.'

The system hasn't been able to deliver your message.

A wave of relief washed over her before something clicked. Riss had *blocked* her?

The subway doors hissed open, and a rush of bodies surged forward. Someone trod on Freya's foot. She yelped.

‘Watch it, lim,’ a tall Daem man growled, shouldering her aside.

Her comm slipped from her hand, crashing onto the floor. Before she could grab it, the carriage jerked, causing a liminae woman with lime green implants on her temples to totter. Freya froze, horrified, as the woman's heel came down hard on her comm, shattering the screen.

‘Oops. My bad. They’re just about to do a close-up,’ the woman said without breaking eye contact with the holo-screen.

Freya crouched to pick up the broken comm, careful not to spill the contents of her bag. ‘Don’t worry about it. It was already broken,’ but the woman was zoned into the interview.

‘Not *that* broken,’ the Daem man said over his shoulder.

Freya spun around, ready to snap, but then froze.

She knew what was about to happen.

She didn’t know how she knew, but she was certain it wasn’t just a guess. That clear, undeniable tang of certainty. More than déjà vu.

The Daem’s coffee. The lid popped off—the arc of liquid sailing toward her.

Her brain yelled at her to move, but her feet wouldn’t cooperate.

Time resumed, and reality moved on. The train jolted. Freya lost her footing, her mouth falling open as hot, milky liquid arched toward her and splashed across her white shirt, soaking the fabric. Warmth spread from her neck to the tips of her slightly pointed ears, which revealed her liminae heritage.

‘What a waste,’ the Daem man said, staring into his now empty cup. Not a single drop of coffee had splattered on him. *Of course not.*

Freya clenched her bag strap and turned away, only to catch her eye returning to the holo-screen. Riss was still smiling, her bright white teeth shining.

Brainstorming with my brilliant fiancé, we thought it was about time someone did something for the everyday Daem ...'

When the subway doors finally buzzed open, Freya let the crowd sweep her off the train. Coffee-stained and seething, she trudged forward, dissolving into the New-York morning rush, her mind still reeling.

Chapter Two

The Shep's Bakehouse sign hung over the door, the chrome veneer dulled from years of acid rain, revealing the steel underneath. She thought about the possibility that her seat at the lone table under the tattered awning, out the front of the shop, was just a decorative nod to a bygone era of street café culture, and not a proper customer seating area at all. Still, in all the years she'd been coming by, the owner, Shep, had never said a word.

The space above the footpath buzzed with drones laden with parcels, food, and pets flying down, back up, across, and around the towering neon skyscrapers. Freya was bathed in blue light from a flickering holo-ad across the street. The ad, displaying a Daem politician, promised "progress for all" through new street-cleaning initiatives.

Freya blew on her hot coffee, wisps of breath forming in the crisp morning air, and her eyes fell on her pathetic excuse for a comm. A digital spiderweb of cracks revealed red circuitry beneath the shattered glass. The device still pulsed.

She looked back up just in time to see a boy, no older than ten, walk past the café with a face smeared in dirt, dragging a battered droid behind him. He stopped at the curb, gazing wistfully at the pastries in the window. Freya took a digicoin from her pocket and flicked it to him.

He blinked in surprise, caught the coin, and then hurried off with his broken droid clattering behind him.

Freya took a sip of her coffee. ‘You’re welcome,’ she laughed.

‘Bad morning?’ Shep asked, emerging from inside the warm bakery. He placed a golden croissant in front of her, and steam rose from the flaky layers, curling into the blue-tinged air.

‘You could say that,’ Freya muttered, fingers tapping a hollow rhythm on her mug.

Leaning against the doorway, the threshold sensor pinged against his broad shoulder.

‘Your dad doing alright?’

She didn’t look up. ‘Still accepting my money transfers.’

Shep snorted. ‘Well then, it’s good that you’re hanging onto this job like a fungus. Wouldn’t want to upset his delicate routine.’

Freya rolled her eyes before tearing a corner off the croissant and popping it into her mouth.

‘What happened?’

She hesitated, chewing thoughtfully.

‘Riss and Malakai went public with their engagement. Add that to the YourPast tech they’re spruiking,’ she mimed throwing up. ‘Now it’s like the world is their stage—big press cycles, bright lights. “Daem golden boy marries sweet little human girl-next-door. Rewrites history and sells it in twenty-minute soundbites.”’

‘Yikes. Well, on the bright side, you’ve got a croissant.’ Shep dropped into the seat across from her, brushing invisible crumbs off his apron. ‘You’re stewing again.’

Thanks, Shep. Drop in for the pastries, stay for the insight.

‘You should give that ancestry thing a go,’ he said, nodding toward the YourPast ad looping on-screen. ‘Who knows—might find out you’re descended from the gods.’

Freya glared. ‘*Right*. Freya, the demigod, daughter of myths and legends.’

He missed the sarcasm, drumming chubby fingers on the counter. ‘Could shake something loose, m’dear. Might even cheer you up.’

She took a long sip of her coffee rather than replying.

‘You still living out at the Brookside estates?’ he asked.

‘What’s new? Same crappy job. Same deadbeat dad, who’s still not calling ... unless he needs some coin. Same dodgy apartment block, but at least the walls are thick.’ She bit into the croissant like it had insulted her.

He tilted his head. ‘Ever think about leaving?’

She scoffed. ‘What? Just pack up and vanish?’

‘Worked for me once. Ended up with a bakery and two herniated discs, but, hey.’ He rubbed a hand on the back of his head.

Freya shook her head. ‘It’s not that easy.’

‘Nothing worth doing ever is. But come on—you’re smart, bitter, and stubborn as hell. Seems like a dream combo for shakin’ things up.’

She let that sit for a while, gazing at the table, illuminated by the flickering neon of the city's lights. The ad for YourPast had looped again.

‘You think I’m stuck.’

‘I reckon you’ve been stuck since the day Riss stopped calling. Your dad’s been stuck since the day—’ he winced. ‘All I’m saying is something’s gotta give.’ Shep stood, wiping his hands on his apron. ‘The job’s safe, the croissants are warm, and I’ll always be here for you to whinge to, but if you want more than that ... you know what to do, and honestly, I’d prefer not to see you here again. Y’know, imagining you out there in the big world kicking some Daem butt, because if you end up like me, baking muffins for assholes like Malakai, well, that’s the real tragedy.’

Chapter Three

The air carried a faint scent of ozone and old frying oil, and all around her, holo-screens buzzed, seven of them displaying live newsreels, advertisements, and reality-TV live-cam check-ins. Freya slung her bag over her shoulder and looked up at a stack of enormous billboards looming over the crowd. The screens showed a series of publicity shots of Riss and Malakai before transitioning to the next advertisement.

Freya felt a churn in her stomach at the sight of them. Their billion-dollar project had been hers. It had been her entire college project. A product designed to fulfil a thesis for a degree she never had the opportunity to finish, and who would believe her anyway?

A split-screen below the advertisements flashed scrolling text that was almost too fast to read.

Another Liminae Woman Missing in Angel Cy—Authorities Remain Silent.

A grainy photo of a young liminae woman flickered on the screen; her vivid green eyes shone clearly, but her image and story were gone as quickly as they appeared before the next update rolled past.

Freya crossed the intersection and headed towards the narrow lane where her employer's shop, "Grouse's Fine Books," was tucked away. The shop was situated halfway

down the alley, its small door hidden behind a faded green awning. The sign above read “rouse ne ooks,” the original letters barely visible, worn down by years of peeling paint.

Freya found her keys and selected the one with green nail polish. She muttered under her breath about Grouse’s obsession with her supposed clumsiness. The lock resisted before finally clicking open, letting her inside. A faint, musty odour filled the air: a mix of old paper, dust, and a sour smell that Freya had learnt was caused by her employer herself.

Inside, the store looked no different from its decrepit exterior. Dusty shelves overflowed with everything from historic Daem volumes to generally frowned-upon, rare liminae texts, which Grouse sold discreetly on the side. As she passed that section on her way to the counter, Freya’s eyes landed on a worn, leather-bound book tucked between dusty tomes. It had a purple tag, which Freya figured meant the price was up to Grouse, a number based on what the old hag thought of the customer.

The book’s cracked spine and intricate liminae symbols seemed to shimmer softly in the dim light, drawing Freya in. She looked around to check that the old woman wasn’t watching before quietly stepping closer to the shelf and, without hesitation, slipped the small book into her palm. She planned to read it when Grouse stepped out for her long three-hour lunches. A book like that would never be sold to a liminae customer, not that Freya could afford any of the prices in the shop.

A small heater hummed behind the counter. It barely warmed the freezing room, and Freya’s breath fogged as she stowed her bag beneath the counter, making sure it was properly shut to hide the small book. She noticed a flicker of movement—a mutated mouse scurrying between two unstable stacks of books. Freya shivered.

‘You’re early,’ Grouse said. Her familiar tobacco smell drifted through the air.

‘My subway ride was speedy,’ Freya lied effortlessly. She almost bumped her head, and a jolt of nervousness hit her as she faced her employer. She couldn’t afford to lose this

job.

The old woman narrowed her eyes and waddled over, her beady eyes searching for flaws.

‘Zero eight hundred means zero—’

‘Eight hundred,’ Freya finished for her.

You lim folks just don’t understand boundaries, do you?

Freya ignored the comment as she booted up the ancient computer and logged into Coin-box to check the POS. Meanwhile, Grouse launched into her daily ritual of micromanagement. First, she closed the blinds Freya had opened, then readjusted them and finally opened them again before shuffling through the aisles, scanning the books on each shelf.

Freya could feel the old woman's contempt permeating the room.

Grouse froze. ‘Why is this here?’ she asked, holding up the bright blue “My Country Table: A Culinary Memoir” with its text shimmering in gold foil embossing.

‘It’s a recipe book,’ Freya replied, only briefly glancing up.

‘It’s a memoir.’

‘It’s also a recipe book,’ Freya countered. ‘People searching for memoirs about Daem chefs might browse the cooking section. They could even pick up another book while they’re at it.’

‘This is my shop,’ the old woman was going red in the face. ‘Items go where I decide they belong.’

Freya shifted her gaze from the blinding glare of the old monitor.

It was like she was watching herself from outside her body. At that moment, her patience vanished. Maybe she had lost it on the train or dropped whatever self-control she had left on the pavement in front of the billboard with Riss’s snarky smile, because wherever

her patience had gone, it wasn't with her now.

'I am done.'

Grouse narrowed her eyes. *'What?'*

Freya crouched down and grabbed her bag from under the counter. She paused briefly, torn for a moment, before deciding to keep the mysterious liminae text in her bag. Then she slammed her key onto the worn counter.

'I said, I'm finished. I don't need to take orders from you. To be micromanaged on where to place some cookbook memoir that no one's going to buy, because you would need to have customers for someone to buy it in the first place!'

'You insolent little—'

But Freya was already halfway through the stacks, rushing towards the door, leaving Mrs Grouse standing there, mouth open like a fish.