

Synthetic Ideals, Volume 1 of The Inheritants

Chapter 1 - Snow Capped Summits

Ayd's surroundings blurred into an endless, formless expanse.

He tried reaching for a thought, a fragment of memory, but they danced away like smoke in the wind. The weight of Meridian pressed in, squeezing the edges of his consciousness. The silence was deafening, the darkness absolute. He was trapped, not by chains, but by an intangible force that robbed him of his existence.

"Welcome back, Ayd." Diembe's voice was a low rumble that brought Ayd's vision back into focus. The room around him was sterile, a mix between a pristine laboratory and a mausoleum. A place where time was suspended, yet lives ebbed away.

"You weren't a fan of our facility last time we were here. However, needs must, and this has to be done in person". Diembe was cold and detached.

Ayd tried to form a retort, but his thoughts were sluggish, filtering through Meridian's control.

Diembe's form solidified towering above him. "You've always had potential, but ambition can be treacherous."

"Diembe" Ayd's speech stuttering. "We've been through countless experiences together. You've seen my work, my dedication."

Diembe remained unfazed. "Untested loyalty is nothing more than duty. And duty, without certainty, is worthless to us."

In his hand, he held a sleek, silver neural interface connector. A bridge between reality and memories.

"Please Sir, you don't have to do this." Ayd weakly pleaded.

"Unfortunately for both of us, I do." Diembe replied.

Gently, almost mockingly, Diembe pressed the connector to a port at the base of Ayd's skull. There was a sharp hiss, a flash of blue light as his reality spiralled. Scenes flashed rapidly, merging into a chaotic blur of sensations and emotions.

Ayd's eyes flickered. The rhythmic rush and crash of waves slowly reached his ears. The sea breeze brushed against his skin, carrying with it a hint of salt and warmth. He shifted his body feeling the fine grains of sand gently cocoon around him.

"Meridian, increase the sensory feedback." Ayd murmured lazily.

"Of course, Ayd. Enhancing the sensory experience now." Meridian's clipped response echoing in Ayd's consciousness.

A contented sigh escaped Ayd's lips as he basked in the radiating glow of the sun. Its golden rays kissed his skin, casting a gentle relaxation that seeped into the depths of his being. He relished the delicate dance of light and shadow as the sun's caress painted a tapestry of tranquillity upon his closed eyelids. In this moment, Ayd was transported, his thoughts carried away by the ebb and flow of the waves. The worries and stresses of the outside world faded into insignificance.

And yet, even as Ayd revelled in the complete comfort, he was begrudgingly aware of the fleeting nature of this paradise. With a touch of his fingertips, he initiated the transition, beckoning the sleeping pod to reveal his quarters. The pod's roof silently glided open. The symphony of waves gradually receded, their echoes fading into the recesses of Ayd's mind.

The warmth that had embraced him dissipated as the boundaries of the virtual world receded. With the pod's canopy now fully retracted, Ayd sat upright and swung his legs out of the pod in one graceful move.

"What a great start", Ayd brightly greeted his assistant as he started a few neck and shoulder rolls.

"Good morning to you too Ayd. Your levels all look good. I will continue to boost your cortisol for the next thirty minutes." Meridian responded, its response deliberately soft in Ayd's awareness.

Ayd dropped down from his pod and his feet hit the floor. The cool sensation grounding him in reality as he took in the breaking dawn in the Compound.

The light in Ayd's room got brighter as the rays of the morning sunshine glitter off the reflective surface of the wardrobe built into the wall behind him. Meridian had already started reducing the window opacity all around his quarters.

The fresh lingering aroma lured Ayd from the bedroom to the kitchen as the brewed coffee dominated his sense of smell with a tantalising scent of roasted hazelnut and brown sugar. The housing system had anticipated his awakening and triggered the preparation of his morning drink.

As he approached the kitchen counter, he reached for the mug, feeling the warmth seep through his fingertips and into his palms. Ayd took a large swig of coffee. Knowing from habit that the temperature was going to be just right. The absence of caffeine didn't diminish the pleasure the coffee brought.

I am very willing to lie to myself that the energy boost comes from my coffee. Ayd told himself with a half smile.

"And they say that it is ignorance which is meant to be bliss", teased Meridian.

Ayd chuckled, "And I can always turn down your personality level", he retorted quickly.

He turned his attention to the large window that ran the whole way across the room that was now fully transparent. In the distance he could see the sun rising over the awe-inspiring mountains that loomed high above. Their peaks pierced the heavens, poking holes through the veil of clouds that surrounded their lofty heights.

At the base were layers of verdant green that made way for rugged grey stony crops, which were crowned with pure white snow-capped summits. They stood as the silent guardians of the Compound.

"A beautiful prison", Ayd muttered out loud to himself.

It was not unyielding rock that formed their colossal silhouettes, but rather the artistry of fusing technology with imagination.

The grandeur of the alpine scene was actually the curving inner wall of an enormous dome, enveloping the Compound in its protective embrace. The mountain range with the deep orange glow of the sun flickering across them was displayed upon its surface.

Ayd rolled his shoulders back, took a deep breath and somewhat begrudgingly activated the displays around the room. He deliberately chose not to use his Rada yet. In the mornings he wanted the tangible experience of seeing the news physically. It was an intentional break from the virtual dreamscapes that monopolised so much of his life.

The displays flickered to life like shimmering windows. Flowing across from one view to another, a ticker tape of data and rapid-fire bulletins of brief headlines, each piece of information a pixel in the grand picture.

Graphics unfurled like digital origami with a subtle gesture from Ayd as he drained the last of his coffee from the mug. Out of the folds came a series of charts and figures showing the key monetary values tracking in the CorpChain exchange. It pitted the OpusCivic credit performance against the main four Corp Currencies that were backed by the large companies that dominated Opus.

I'm glad I get paid in Sterling. Ayd mused as he looked at another dip in OpusCivic and added the latest bulletin from the Committee who governed Opus to his queued news feed.

Ayd's fingers danced in the air as he manipulated the holographic interfaces, funnelling through a vast array of options. He navigated next to the bulletins from the Guilds, promoting their latest innovations and solutions. They were craftsmen and engineers, the pioneers of their respective technologies.

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"Discover a new level of clarity and inner harmony with LuminGreat! Immerse yourself in a permanent tranquil oasis as you maintain the power of serene thought and peace."

"Enjoy the pure bliss of altruism with GoodWilled! Embrace your charity and feel rewarded as you radiate positivity, leaving a trail of smiles in your wake."

"Unleash your true potential with myTech's Apex! Experience the exhilaration of pushing your physical limits as you unlock mechanised strength, speed, and agility. Now only 100 OpusCivic per year."

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"Log that GoodWilled one for later", Ayd instructed Meridian. "It could be worth setting a meeting".

"Logged for later. I will populate a dossier", Meridian confirmed.

Next, Ayd turned his attention to his public news bulletin.

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"Attention citizens of Opus,

This is a public announcement from the Office of the Mayor on behalf of the Committee. We would like to inform you of a recent increase in incidents involving Bugs within our great city.

These incidents have involved acts of violence, and it is important for everyone to exercise caution and remain..."

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Ayd's focus became loose as the displays swirled with the curated feeds, his mind started to attune to the stories before him. He shook his head, pushing back against the creeping sensation of his neurotransmitter and the faint tug of Meridian blending into his peripheral.

"Not yet please, I spend enough time out of my body," Ayd said to Meridian, a hint of bargaining in his voice. "I want to hit the gym first, otherwise it'll just be even more painful next time."

Ayd swiftly changed into his workout gear before he could get distracted again. It was specially designed to enhance his performance. His outfit was integrated with a network of nano magnets, seamlessly woven into the fabric of his clothes. These magnetic elements were an integral part of his gym equipment as they interacted with the gym's magnetic pods to simulate objects, weights or resistance from the simulated experiences.

Ayd's footsteps echoed through the corridors as he made his way towards the exercise facilities. His mind was burdened with a weight that matched the heaviness of his steps. Walking through the Compound always brought home the duty of his heritage. It hung like a shroud around him, a constant reminder of the expectations that he could never escape.

As he moved through the familiar route from his quarters to the communal gym Ayd recognised the irony of treading the well worn path. His own path in life was predetermined by his birth to parents who, like Ayd, were also Staffers of the prestigious Sterling family.

Born not of natural means, but crafted. He was a product of a deliberate genetic programme. From the screening and editing to the creation and gestation. They had been selected for their exceptional traits and their loyalty in service. Their DNA combined to create a human of complete perfection. The blemishes of inheritable mental and physical diseases eradicated. A Fabriclon as they were known by the residents of Opus.

The cost of having an unblemished and privileged life of a Fabriclon Staffer is that the life is then spent working for the family that created them.

A blessing and a curse. Ayd reflected as he pushed open the heavy doors leading to the Compound's inner sanctum that housed the gym.

I live to serve, but what a life, he thought as he looked out across the multiple floors covered in biomech exercise machines and recovery pods.

Ayd approached his regular spot and selected the climbing simulation. The handholds and footrests seemingly floating in midair were controlled by a sophisticated system of magnets. The machine worked together with Meridian to analyse Ayd's virtual movements and in combination with his workout attire allowing him to grapple and climb as if he was really outdoors.

"Let's see if I can top my best altitude", he thought as he let his Meridian flow to connect to the machine and he was instantaneously in the midst of a rocky outcrop of a mountain range. He

pressed his body against the rock, feeling the cool surface against his skin. Ayd looked down and saw the Compound stretched out below him.

He shook out his arms and legs and started on his ascent up into a treacherous section of the mountain.

"Meridian, analyse the terrain and suggest the best path for me." Ayd instructed.

"Calculating optimal route. Adjusting handholds and footrests for maximum grip." Meridian intoned.

Ayd shifted his weight, his body coiling like a spring, as he sought out the next handhold. A small ledge now beckoned him, barely deep enough to support the tip of his climbing shoe. Carefully, he shifted his feet as he made the step. He had his eyes on a jutting outcrop that caught his attention a metre or so above his head. He saw if he could make the jump then there was a clear route out of this section of the mountain.

"It's a little precarious, but worth the risk", Ayd told himself. He launched himself upward, his body suspended in mid-air for a fleeting moment before his fingertips found purchase in a shallow groove. He hung there, suspended between earth and sky, his body taut with tension.

"Meridian, I need to find a foothold. Any suggestions?" Ayd grunted as his shoulders strained from the effort.

"I've detected a potential foothold slightly to your left. Reach for it carefully." Meridian helpfully offered.

Panic surged through Ayd as he desperately sought the foothold. His stomach lurched with a sickening drop as he felt his energy sapping. Pain seared through his limbs and his fingers cramped agonisingly.

Gravity claimed its victory, and Ayd was sent hurtling towards the ground. The rush of wind filled his ears as the ground rushed up to meet him. A jolt reverberated through his body as reality crashed in with a brutal force. Gasping for breath, Ayd's mind struggled to adjust to the sudden shift as he collided with the padded floor of the exercise pod.

"That was intense. I didn't expect it to be so challenging", Ayd panted as he fought to catch his breath.

"It's important to push yourself, Ayd. Failure is a part of growth." Meridian said encouragingly.

The vividness of the climbing experience had faded, but the aching in his body from the effort and the subsequent fall lingered. He lay there for a moment, the taste of defeat mingling with the sweat dripping from his brow.

“Sanctimonious bunch of transistors”, grumbled Ayd.

With a resolute sigh, Ayd reset the climbing simulation and prepared to face the mountain once more. The pain in his body served as a reminder that he was alive. Despite how he came into the world he still felt very much human.

Chapter 2 - Counting Credits

“Time to get to work”, Ayd instructed. Freshly showered and fed after his morning workout.

The ergonomic contours of Ayd's Rada start to envelope him to support his body as he lay back opting for partially reclined rather than fully horizontal.

It was one of the perks of working for the Sterling family, thought Ayd appreciatively as he had access to the latest technology manufactured by the family's company.

Running his hands over the breathable, hypoallergenic fabric that regulated his temperature and moisture.

The Rada was equipped with an array of display technologies. The main visual interface consisted of a high-resolution holographic screen that enveloped Ayd's field of vision, like a band of translucency wrapping his upper body. The pod also featured tactile feedback mechanisms, allowing Ayd to interact with virtual content using touch, gestures, and even subtle vibrations that enhanced haptics to give a sense of realism.

To further enhance Ayd's cognitive abilities, the pod integrated with his Meridian. It was one of the Sterlings' methods of monopolising over all experiential technology, and how they had become one of the largest entities in Opus.

The Rada and Meridian combination applied electrical impulses and focused magnetic fields to specific regions of Ayd's brain, promoting enhanced memory retention, information processing, and creative thinking. This neurostimulation worked in harmony with the pod's ambient lighting, which emitted a soft, warm glow to create a relaxed mental state that prolonged the time spent in the virtual worlds.

The Rada was his haven and portal to those virtual worlds. The displays of the Rada and the ceiling of his study melted away as a mesmerising swirl of colours into the dreamlike haze of his quietened subconscious.

Subtle nudges alerted Ayd to incoming notifications, sketching out the day ahead. Meridian confirmed that it had already organised a meeting with Fujin, the Guild responsible for creating GoodWilled, for later that day.

“As the seas rise”, cursed Ayd. He had bought tech from Fujin before, which is why he knew that this meant he had to leave the Compound today.

A number of Guilds, Fujin being one, were untrustworthy of meeting Staffers who used implant technology like a Meridian. They feared being analysed and manipulated and the theft of trade secrets. Ayd had worked for the Sterling's for long enough to know that this was very much the case. You don't amass their wealth and power by being fair.

Ayd's job for the family was a delicate dance, navigating the intricate web of Guilds and their potential technological treasures. The Guild's hoarded new technology created by themselves or the Bugs to create a trove of secret gemstones. They hoped to strike lucky and catch the eye of a family to turn a profit and get rewarded in a Corp Currency fee.

As an emissary for the Sterlings, Ayd manoeuvred between maintaining a good personal reputation and connections with the Guilds while purchasing the most widely applicable technology they owned, at a beneficial price, before other rival families discovered them.

Meridian provided a guiding hand through the labyrinthine of Guilds and their technology. It sifted through data, cross-referenced historical precedents, and calculated the potential outcomes of each decision. Meridian became Ayd's oracle, offering insights, recommendations, and counsel.

Most Staffers never needed to leave the comfort of the Compound though. Nearly all the senior family jobs could be done using their personal Rada's to interact virtually. Whether that was remotely managing drones, organising AI assistants or the occasional human to human meeting.

"Needs must though", Ayd reasoned as he started pulling on his Aug Suit. The Aug Suit is a state-of-the-art protective suit developed by the Sterling's. It is infused with nanotechnology, granting its wearer the ability to use adaptive camouflage and an exoskeleton to boost physical abilities. And, if that failed it was a self-healing material with the capacity to block most hazardous substances, which Ayd hoped he wouldn't need today.

As Ayd prepared himself, adjusting the suit's snug fit, he felt the gentle rhythmic drumbeat of his heartbeat start echoing in his ears and the tingle of energy shudder down through his body.

"Your adrenaline levels are starting to spike. I'll temporarily up your acetylcholine and serotonin", noted Meridian.

Meridian's voice again filled Ayd's consciousness, its digital tones echoing in his mind. "Security Authorization complete, Ayd. You are cleared to proceed to the Compound's gate."

Ayd nodded, his attention on a holographic display before him. "Alright, Meridian. Let's make sure we take the most discreet route. I don't want to attract any unnecessary attention."

Meridian's response was swift and decisive. "Understood, Ayd. Initiating dynamic route calculation based on current security protocols and Bug activity. I will take you by the safest and least conspicuous path."

Ayd stepped out of his apartment, his senses artificially attuned to the world beyond the Compound. He moved with a purpose, each step calculated and deliberate. As he made his

way through the bustling corridors, the polished surfaces blurred as he moved through the throng. The familiar landmarks and passersby now appeared diluted into a distant hum of detachment as Ayd's mind was focused on the upcoming meeting with Fujin.

"Meridian, what can you tell me about Fujin's recent developments?" Ayd inquired, his voice tinged with curiosity.

Meridian's response came instantaneously, its tone conveying the completeness of its calculated analysis. "Fujin has been making significant advancements in bio-enhancement technologies specialising in nanotechnology. Afterall, they made some of the precursor technologies in that suit you're now wearing. My analysis shows that they have been experimenting with gene matching techniques by integrating nanobots that won't be rejected by human hosts."

Ayd listened intently. He knew that Fujin's innovations could provide an invaluable edge to the Sterlings, but the risks associated with dealing with such a powerful Guild were not to be underestimated, even for him.

"Monitor their behaviour closely, Meridian," Ayd instructed. "We need to stay one step ahead as GoodWilled seems like an outlier for them."

"Of course, Ayd," Meridian responded. "I will continue to gather real-time data and provide you with any new insights".

Ayd's steps quickened as he approached the towering wall of the Compound, the projected mountain range looming closer as he craned his neck to try and see the peak.

"I wonder if it's to keep us in or the world out?" Ayd mused.

"The Sterlings value your safety and wellbeing" parroted Meridian.

"And their own synthed skins" retorted Ayd.

As Ayd neared the entrance, a line of security robots stood guard, their sleek metallic bodies gleaming in the fake sunlight, casting long shadows. Each robot, equipped with biometric sensors and frequency scanners, meticulously checks every individual seeking access to the Compound, or those that wanted to leave.

"Identity verification in progress," Meridian announced.

"Identity confirmed. Ayd Sang. Access granted," one of the robots stated, its voice holding a deliberate hint of faux mechanical warmth.

The discrete outline of a doorway in the Compound's domed wall began to shimmer, partially revealing the obscured world outside. Ayd stepped forward, passing through the barrier with the same tinge of anticipation and excitement every time he left the Compound.

As Ayd walked away from the Compound, he couldn't help but steal a glance back at the outer facade. From the outside, it appeared as nothing more than another low-walled part of the city, blending seamlessly with the bustling landscape surrounding it.

High fidelity projected displays adorned the exterior wall of the dome, creating an illusion of a continuation of the bustling cityscape of Opus. The images depicted randomised everyday scenes of ordinary life, with people going about their routines and buildings rising into the skyline.

It was a deliberate choice by the Sterling family to project a façade that concealed the true extravagance hidden within. No hints were given to the advanced technology, comparatively opulent living quarters, and grandeur that lay beyond the unassuming walls.

Ayd stood there, his gaze fixed on the details in the projected cityscape. The hypocrisy wasn't lost on him. While the outside projected an image of normalcy, inside the Compound, the Staffers lived a life far removed from the average citizen of Opus.

"Real-time Threat Analysis is now active, monitoring for any potential risks. Route optimization engaged." Meridian's voice pulled him out of his malaise.

Ayd turned on his heel and headed for what looked like a small parking lot's worth of auto-tech. There was a convoy of Committee escort drones flanking Sterling's personal travel capsule alongside another decoy travel capsule. The drones hovered completely motionless in the air, as if they were frozen in time. The travel capsules stood tall and formidable, their heavy armour glistening in the sunlight.

"Always so discreet", Ayd shook his head. "The Mayor really is one for theatrics".

"Looks like they're putting on quite the show, Ayd. My calculations say we should be ok, despite the additional attention", chimed in Meridian.

Ayd scanned the crowd for any familiar faces or anyone that was showing signs of being interested beyond hoping to spot a celebrity of the Sterling's virtual entertainment empire.

Ayd was suddenly encased in a tomb of darkness. The only light coming from the travel capsules flood lights that glinted off the drones lenses.

The holographic and sensor shield obscured Ayd and the convey from view as he clambered into the travel capsule. Meridian had already inputted the preset destination along with the lowest risk route. The capsule and support convoy started its journey. Ayd watched the internal

feed as the decoy capsule, flanked by escort drones took the first right turn and headed into the outskirts of Opus.

After he had gotten a little further from the Compound he set the entire capsule to one-sided transparent viewing and continued to watch the cityscape unfold all around him. A sea of century's old monotonous grey concrete sprawled ahead of them. The weathered walls were swathed in rusting metal trellising. A lasting testament to the failed attempts at the greenwalls of yesteryear. The global water shortage had meant that there wasn't enough left for drinking water and agricultural water, let alone to maintain the token effort to capture pollutants inside of cities.

The patchwork of grey and reddish brown was punctuated occasionally with a gleaming glass facade providing the backdrop to much of the outskirts of Opus.

However, Ayd knew he was getting close to the city centre as the sunlight started to dance off the surfaces of the building as if the buildings themselves were slowly shifting and breathing. It was the residual effect of the bio-architectural wonder of an algae resin based building material now used in construction and nearly all manufacturing. It had boomed initially during the climate crisis of the late 21st century. The resin photosynthesizes sunlight, generating clean energy for the building, and it acts as a natural bio-filter, purifying both air and water. All while being a carbon positive building material to begin with.

'Building back while giving back'. Ayd thought, recalling the slogan of the Avery family who developed the technology in the 2070s.

The divide between the haves and the have-nots always shocks me. Ayd noted as the convoy passed an interactive hologram for Svarok, the notorious space tourism and asteroid mining company, rippling alongside one of the buildings. He let himself relax into the advert and the immersive visuals and senses overtook him courtesy of his Meridian.

Ayd felt the rush of excitement as the whole building morphed into one of Svarok's sleek mining craft. He was suddenly piloting it with the heavy thrum of the engines reverberating through the cabin. He was soaring up to an asteroid field. He started to plot a delicate path through the treacherous terrain ahead. His gloved fingers piloted the spacecraft as he weaved through the labyrinthine cluster of hurtling rock and ice. He dared to take a quick glance around him.

Gleaming fragments of cosmic rock, varying in size and shape, cast glimmers of refracted light as the ship tumbled and pirouetted through space. Some appeared as majestic monoliths, their rugged surfaces etched with the scars of aeons, while others were delicate jewels, their facets catching the distant glint of distant suns.

He flipped the autopilot on and unbuckled his belt, a mischievous grin spread across his face. With a gentle push off a wall, he launched himself into a graceful somersault, limbs outstretched as he spun like a cosmic dancer. Each revolution brought a sense of freedom, a moment of weightlessness

"It is a stark difference to the Bug population's existence." Meridian interrupted the advert and the white matte interior of the capsule materialised again in front of Ayd's eyes.

"The Sterlings and other Families' influence is felt well beyond their own Compounds. We have now arrived at the Fujin guild's complex, Ayd. Remember, their security protocols are notoriously stringent." Meridian noted.

Ayd nodded, his gaze sweeping over the palatial buildings towering above him. Its walls appeared fluid, constructed of the now popular translucent algae resin, which shimmered in shades of green and blue depending on the light's angle. It wasn't just the foreboding height, but the whole building seemed to pulse with life.

He indicated to Meridian to open the doors to the capsule and he stepped down onto the walkway that led to the entrance.

Rising several stories high, the entrance was flanked by two monumental compressed earthen pillars, reminiscent of ancient Japanese torii gates. These pillars, while evoking age-old traditions, were embedded with nano-circuits, faintly glowing and pulsing with a gentle rhythm.

Delicate lasers, originating from hidden points within the earthen pillars, danced across the facade. They converged to craft the guild's emblem, which seemed to float, suspended and glowing, on the building's liquid-like surface. A double helix intertwined with a golden circuit, surrounded by the words, "In Minima Maxima." It was a grand display, reminding all of the Guild's ethos of the enormous power of nanotechnology.

"Ayd, you know the process. Cross between the pillars and wait." Meridian instructed.

Taking a deep breath, Ayd walked forward, letting the emblem's lasers play over him. He felt the awkwardness of having to do nothing, which felt like it dragged on for eternity.

"Meridian, are we cleared?" Ayd asked.

"Meridian..?" his voice wavering slightly.

Ayd momentarily froze staring at the lasers flickering over his body, "Meridian!".

"Security clearance successfully granted, Ayd. They have confirmed your identity." confirmed Meridian.

"Paused for an update or something?" Ayd questioned Meridian, only half joking.

Ayd approached the monstrous wooden doors. They were made from a vast expanse of charred wood, however the texture was a paradox – simultaneously rough from the charring, yet

seemed smooth to the touch. He never found out if it was smooth to touch as the doors opened automatically for him and he entered into the foyer of the Fujin.

"Proceed to the meeting room as planned. I will lead you". Meridian instructed.

Ayd found himself walking into a room on the 12th floor. The room was vast and open, illuminated by a gentle glow that seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. The algae-resin had been moulded into gentle waves, casting soft, dappled light across the room, reminiscent of sunlight filtering through forest canopies. It created a calming ambiance.

At the room's centre stood a large oval table crafted from the same wood as the grand entrance door. Its deep black hue of charred patterns contrasted with the ambient glow. The chairs accompanying the table were elegantly minimalist, with slender frames made of brushed steel. Their seats and backs were crafted from a flexible, translucent algae material that conformed to the sitter's shape, providing adaptive support. This material had a luminescent quality, mirroring the gentle glow of the walls.

To the side, a mini zen garden added a touch of tranquillity. Among the raked sand and carefully placed stones, tiny robotic ladybugs roamed, their movements delicate and purposeful. To any observer, they seemed merely decorative, a nod to nature. However, in reality, they were designed with nanotechnology to maintain the garden, ensuring each grain of sand and each stone remained in its intended position.

Moments later, the doors at the far side of the room slid open, and Fujin's representatives entered the room. Ayd stood to greet them, extending a polite gesture of welcome. Meridian debriefing him in real time as to their names and positions.

The leader of the guild, Tian, took a seat opposite Ayd.

"Greetings, Ayd," her voice resonating with a mix of confidence and caution. "We appreciate you coming here today. Now, let us discuss the matter at hand, GoodWilled."

"Not one for small talk is she" remarked Ayd mentally to Meridian.

"My research indicates she's of the strong belief that time is money", Meridian informed Ayd.

"Of course, Tian. Let's get to the point then instead of counting the credits tick by. If somehow GoodWilled doesn't already infringe on our patented design for using neuro-receptors, and you somehow can get it sanctioned by the Committee, then you still have to find a commercial manufacturer and then advertise it within our Rada to reach a large enough audience to buy it".

"That may have been too much to the point", Meridian observed as it watched the body language stiffen of the Fujin representatives around the table.

"We believe in its extreme value in the potential to transform society. By selecting the correct ownership, we can ensure its responsible and equitable distribution." Tian countered a little waspishly.

"This is going to cost you, they will want a high price and believe they can sell to any of the other families". Meridian warned.

"Tian, the Sterlings have been at the forefront of improving people's lives through the advancement of our technology for nearly a century now. I am sure that your technology will be a huge hit in the marketplace and we could look at a licence with a residual percentage of any sales if you wanted to maintain a controlling ownership". Ayd offered.

"Thank you Ayd, that's a very considerate offer". Tian replied.

"She's hesitant, I'm near certain they are looking for a full scale sale", Meridian analysed.

"How about you share the schematics with me and I'll take it back to the Sterling's. If it's a complete acquisition that you're looking for I have the authority to pay an exclusivity holding fee today." Ayd pushed, trying to determine the ultimate motivation of Tian and the guild.

"That is most generous, 3,000 Sterling is our non-refundable holding price". Tian said with a thin smile.

"I won't insult you by giving you our standard 1,000 credit offer. However, if my superiors watch this back later I do need to show them that I at least tried to negotiate. 1,500 Sterling?" Ayd allowed warmth to seep into his voice and gave a big grin.

"Agreed", Tian said with the slightest nod of her head.

"Fantastic. I'll authorise my assistant to pay the credits into your account before we leave the building. I look forward to going over the schematics and I will be in touch with you later this week." Ayd said as he stood up and pushed the chair back from the desk and made his way to the door.

"Worth putting on their record that they believe our standard holding fee is 1,000. Just in case anyone else runs into them in the future and offers them the standard 2,500." Ayd silently instructed Meridian, with a sly smile and sense of satisfaction as he walked through the ornate, blackened doors back and into the heart of Opus.

Chapter 3 - Be the Star

“What a great day”, Ayd chatted away to Meridian. He had filed his report on Fujin and GoodWilled back to his boss, a curmudgeon of the family called Diembe, who he was now meeting tomorrow morning. *Thankfully that’s virtual*. Ayd sighed, closing his eyes. “I don’t want to leave my apartment tomorrow”.

“It was a very productive day, but it’s important you are ready to meet Diembe tomorrow” Meridian lightly chided.

“Fine, I’ll make it a quick stint in the Rada and if you schedule my sedatives for 10pm in case I lose track of time please”, Ayd requested.

“Done, and which simulation would you like to explore tonight?” Meridian asked.

“I fancy some olde world fantasy escapism tonight. Take me back into the Chronicles of Elandrya please”. Ayd requested as he lay all the way back in his Rada.

A world rushed into view all around Ayd. In the centre of it was his Drakari character standing at an imposing eight feet tall, its scales shimmering in a palette of iridescent greens and blues. Instead of traditional armour, it wore strategically placed obsidian guards that enhanced their natural scale protection.

In their powerful grasp, he wielded a monumental two-handed warhammer, a weapon of legend. Ayd had faced the Shadowmaw, a monstrous creature of darkness with eyes that glowed like molten lava in a previous adventure. A relic infused with the power of the ancient gods of Elandrya.

The world did one last spin around the Drakari’s head, crowned with a set of curved horns that spiral gracefully upwards and entered through its eyes, golden and slit-pupiled.

I had forgotten how cool this hammer was. Ayd said as held it in front of his eyes, slowly spinning it around. Forged into the menacing shape of the Shadowmaw’s open maw, gleamed with Eldorian steel, its enigmatic runes casting eerie reflections reminiscent of the creature’s glowing eyes

Ayd picked up where he left off before and ventured deeper into the uncharted territories of the Eldergrove.

Picking his way through the dense forest he stumbled upon a secluded clearing nestled amidst ancient trees and moss-covered stones. His curiosity piqued, he cautiously approached the site, where a figure, wrapped in a hooded flowing cloak, sat in deep contemplation.

I reckon I can take them, they probably have some decent gear I can loot. Ayd thought, eyeing up the stranger.

The mysterious figure looked up as Ayd drew nearer. Etched upon their face were digital tattoos, a fusion of ancient runes and ever-shifting binary code.

"Greetings, seeker of knowledge," the stranger said, her voice carrying a melodic cadence.

Either a poor hermit or a powerful mage. Ayd mused considering how to respond.

"What brings you to this sacred haven, where the whispers of forgotten wisdom intertwine with the secrets of the cosmos?" she continued.

As Ayd watched her he noticed the intricate markings possessed a unique quality—they could transform and reshape themselves, adapting to her thoughts and emotions.

I think she's a hermit, but let's err on the side of caution. Ayd decided.

Ayd's gaze locked with the hermit's, slightly captivated by the enigmatic presence before him.

He inclined his head slightly, "I seek understanding, wise one," he replied in his best adventurers tone. "I hope to uncover the treasures that lie lost and their stories that yearn to be told."

The hermit nodded, her eyes shimmering. "Ah, the thirst for understanding and adventure, a noble quest. The answers you seek will break through the known and the unknown, the tangible and the ethereal."

Ayd's heart slightly quickened, sensing that the hermit held secrets and hopefully to a legendary chestplate. "Tell me, venerable one, how can I navigate the Eldergrove and unlock its wonders?"

The hermit's gaze held a depth of insight that now seemed to penetrate Ayd's very essence. "Listen closely, Chosen One, for the answers you seek are not solely found in Eldoria, but also in the depths of your own being. To begin, you need to search the..."

"Ayd", interrupted Meridian. "Ayd! Your parents are connected and are asking to meet with you".

"Come on. I was just about.." faltered Ayd.

"You know I can pause this simulation, you won't miss a thing.

"But...fine." conceded Ayd. "Let them know I'll be joining them now".

Ayd somewhat reluctantly let the world of Eldoria rush away as he connected into their shared space.

In their shared space, the unique tether of their Meridians pulsed in harmony. Ayd and his parents didn't just converse; they felt, understood, and lived moments through each other's senses. Their bond transcended physical presence, weaving a tapestry of shared memories and emotions.

Ayd's parents appeared before him. Warm smiles on their faces and arms outstretched for a hug as they walked towards him.

Despite their busy schedules as Staffers of the Sterling family, they always made time to check-in with their son.

"Ayd, my dear, it's wonderful to see you. How is your day going?" Ayd's Mother greeted him.

"Mother, Father, it's great to see you. As I'm sure you already know my day has been eventful. I met with Fujin today, they have some pretty interesting tech." Ayd responded, his tiredness and excitement mixed together and emanating across the shared connections.

"We had heard and it's fantastic, Ayd!" Ayd's Father chimed in, taking his turn to give his son a huge bear hug. "We've always admired your courage for leaving the Compound and the risk that brings. It's clear that you're making an impression with the Family."

Ayd smiled, his heart warming at his parents' words of encouragement and with them amplified by the emotions flowing through the shared connection. He knew he always had their unwavering support and it meant the world to him.

"Thank you, Father. I actually wanted to discuss something important with you both. Tomorrow, I have a meeting with Diembe to pitch him Fujin's technology. I'm hoping that it will be the last push that gets me promoted".

"Diembe is hard to predict. I am succinct when I talk to him and try to focus on what's the most important thing I want him to take away. It's very likely his mind will be elsewhere while you're talking". Ayd's Father advised.

Ayd's mother stepped closer, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Ayd, either way we couldn't be prouder of you. You've worked dutifully to reach this point and look at how far you've come. Believe in yourself."

"As always your Mother is right," his Father smiled. "You have what it takes to make a difference, not just for our family but for the Sterling Family and the entire Compound".

“Right, we will let you get back to your adventure” Mother said with a twinkle in her eye. “Good luck tomorrow. We love you”.

With that Ayd's parents closed the connection and the Eldergrove rushed back into place around him.

Ayd took a second to reorientate himself. He looked around him with a puzzled look on his face. The hermit had gone.

“Meridian! You said you would pause it. That I wouldn't miss anything! Come on, I really wanted that loot”.

Ayd started looking around the clearing. Not far away was an ancient tablet, covered in the same flickering sequences of runes that decorated the hermit's face. A primal energy pulsed through the air around the tablet.

I'm pretty sure that wasn't there before. Ayd reached out to pick it up.

His fingertips made contact. The world warped around him. It dissolved and warped into a deep, bright red mist, as if he had entered a realm beyond comprehension. Two circles, like giant black eyes, appeared before him in the sea of crimson. They pierced into his soul. He tried to tear his eyes away from their bottomless dark.

The deep, primaevael black eyes imprinted themselves in Ayd's consciousness, leaving an indelible mark.

As quickly as it had appeared, the deep red hue dissipated, returning the Eldergrove clearing to its familiar colours.

“Well, that felt like eating a whole bag of Bytes.” thought Ayd out loud trying to clear his head. “Now what?”

He was still holding the tablet, runes and numbers danced over it. He looked at it closer, inspecting it in case there was some clue in the pattern of the codes and symbol. Something that would bring him closer to the monster in the mist.

Nothing obvious. Ayd said starting to lose patience. *This was meant to be a fun escape tonight.*

Ayd reached over his shoulder to his weapon sheathed on his back. He recited some wisdom his father had given him while fixing his workstation back in the Compound.

“If in doubt, bring the hammer out”, Ayd smiled to himself at the memory.

While a two-handed warhammer was probably not exactly what his father had meant, Ayd had found that it had helped on some of his previous adventures.

Gripping the handle tightly, the weight of his massive war hammer momentarily unbalanced him as he swung it down out of its holding.

Ayd brushed the moss off a large flat rock in the clearing. Carefully he placed the rune down on the exposed patch of stone. The tablet, seemingly impervious to his previous attempts to decipher its secrets, now lay vulnerable before him. In a decisive motion, he hefted the war hammer high above his head, channelling his frustration and pent-up energy into a single strike.

The air crackled with anticipation around the hammer as it glowed with power. Suddenly Ayd sent it hurtling towards the tablet with an almighty force his eight foot Drakani body could muster. The impact was thunderous, sending shockwaves through the clearing. The ground trembled beneath Ayd's feet, echoing the intensity of his frustration.

As the dust settled and the echoes subsided, Ayd realised that his strike had not left a mark on the tablet. It remained intact, its enigmatic symbols unaltered.

I knew I should have chosen to be a wizard or a rogue. His shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

Taking a step back, Ayd surveyed the scene before him. The rune, still positioned on the stone, shimmered with an ethereal glow, untouched by the forceful blow of the war hammer.

Lowering his war hammer, Ayd's irritation gave way to curiosity. He realised that perhaps the tablet held a deeper meaning, one that could not be unravelled through brute force alone.

"When I said that the answers you seek will break through the known and the unknown, I didn't mean for you to attempt to smash my gift".

Ayd jumped out of his skin as the voice of the hermit came from behind him. He fought to quickly regain his poise, determined not to reveal his momentary fright. With a nonchalant smile, he turned to face the hermit.

"Well you didn't leave me many other options". Ayd said a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

As Ayd watched her, with the hood of her cloak now down around her shoulders he noticed a peculiar detail he hadn't observed before. The deep, abyssal blackness veiled her eyelids when she blinked.

Ayd maintained his facade of cool indifference, not wanting to give away his fascination and slight unease that tugged at him.

“So, Wise One, do you have a name?” he said distractedly, still slightly taken aback by the hermit’s sudden reappearance.

The hermit watched Ayd, her presence emanating an aura of ancient power. Her response came in a soft, melodic voice that carried a hint of mischief.

“You may call me...Gardener”.

“Well then Gardener, I still find myself in need of your guidance please. My efforts to understand the meaning of your gift were fruitless”.

The Gardener's eyes, occasionally fluttering dark and deep as the night sky, observed Ayd.

“Patience Ayd. Patience. It is the key to unravelling all of the mysteries that confound you. Stop clinging to your desire for immediate answers and rewards. Be like the flowers in my grove. Each bud blooms in their own time and can’t be rushed, but together they create a beautiful spectacle. Being part of something larger than ourselves. That is the greatest treasure of all.”

“Are you sure? There’s no trove of hidden gold? No chestplate made of rare meteorite and imbued with the essence of the Phoenix?”. Ayd sensed that there must be more to this encounter, the simulation is personalised to him after all.

The Gardener stood there, impassive and watchful.

“How about we check out your hut together instead? In case there’s a clue hidden there or something...” Ayd trailed off, cooly. Half hopeful and half desperate to get to the end of this meeting and on with the rest of the simulation before his bedtime sedatives kicked in.

In response to Ayd's question, the Gardener continued standing still for a moment, as if weighing up his proposal. With a slow, deliberate motion, she untied the clasp on her cloak that draped around her shoulders, letting it slip from her grasp and onto the floor around her. Under it she was wearing a thin dress, adorned with intricate floral patterns and delicate embroidery. Each stitch seemed to breathe life into the fabric, as if the very essence of the natural world had been woven into its fibres. The colours shifted and blended, mimicking the hues of a blossoming garden in full bloom.

“Ok, now we are getting somewhere” Ayd remarked appreciatively.

She began walking towards Ayd, her movements confident and purposeful.

Ayd's excitement grew, his heart pounding in anticipation of what was to come.

Her lips, full and inviting, curled into a sinister smile as she closed the distance between them. The air crackled with an unsettling energy, the contrast between her enticing appearance and

the foreboding atmosphere creating a sense of unease within Ayd. He was both enchanted and terrified, unable to tear his eyes away from the Gardener as she closed the gap between them.

The Gardener's voice echoed through the stillness, filled with a haunting resonance. "Oh, Ayd, you seek treasures that lie well beyond your grasp. Desires can be alluring, but they can also ensnare us, trapping us in a web of illusions."

A wave of panic washed over Ayd and he found himself unable to move, trapped within the grasp of an unseen force. He tried to muster his strength, to break free from the invisible shackles that held him.

Ayd's heart pounded in his chest as he struggled to regain control over his body. He stared into the now permanent black abyss of the Gardener's eyes, desperately searching for answers, for a way to escape the snares of this mysterious encounter.

"In the realm of hunger, Ayd, there is suffering," she spoke with an unsettling calmness. "Attachment to the material, to the sensual pleasures, binds us in a cycle of craving and dissatisfaction."

Time seemed to stand still as the Gardener bottom jaw began to lower, transforming into a lower mandible that defied the laws of any humanity. It was a grotesque sight, an aberration that sent chills down Ayd's spine. He felt the panic rising within him as he realised the true nature of the encounter. The world around Ayd seemed to fade to black, enveloping him in darkness.

The Gardener's grotesque mouth loomed larger and larger. It was the only thing he could now see. The moment of the impending kiss became an abyss of terror, and Ayd's mind was consumed by a maelstrom of fear and confusion.

And then, everything went black.

"That was not how I saw my evening going", grumbled Ayd to Meridian as he swivelled out of his Rada. "I was expecting a dragon, maybe some giants, I would have even taken a few orcs to splatter".

"I'm sorry you didn't enjoy your time. Your readings were spiking with enjoyment though". Apologised Meridian.

"Ah, err, it's complicated", Ayd cleared his throat.

"Ok. Would you like to transfer new credit onto your Rada?" continued Meridian. "You are low and have used your last sedative".

"Definitely, otherwise I'm going to have nightmares of that Gardener for a while", shuddered Ayd.

“Ok, I’ve transferred 0.10 Sterling from your account and processed your sedative request”.

Not much later Ayd closed his eyes in his sleeping pod, his sedatives starting to take effect. His brain processed the visceral images of what he had been through that day.

He found himself trapped in a labyrinthine maze in the streets of Opus, the rippling walls of the living buildings closing in on him with each step.

The air grew heavy and whispers echoed through the corridors of his subconscious maze. Faces twisted with malevolence leered at him from the shadows, their eyes filled with a darkness that seemed to consume all light.

He tried to escape the clutches of his own mind, but the nightmares held him captive. Visions of the Gardener's transformation flashed before his eyes, her jaw unhinging like a monstrous predator ready to devour its prey. The sensation of helplessness washed over him, his body paralyzed in the face of this grotesque inevitability.

And then, like a gentle wave washing over the shore, the sedatives kicked in, their calming effect lulling Ayd's mind into a state of tranquillity. The nightmarish visions began to fade, their intensity diminishing until they were mere flickers in the recesses of his subconscious. Gradually, the turmoil subsided, replaced by a soothing emptiness that enveloped his thoughts.

As the sedatives took hold, Ayd's consciousness slipped into a deep slumber, shielded from the harrowing visions that had plagued him. His mind became a tranquil sanctuary, a refuge from the nightmares that had threatened to consume him. In this dreamless sleep, Ayd rested, allowing his body and mind to heal and rejuvenate.