

ANCESTOR

by Jacob Long

Feeling began to slowly fade from Leif. The tingle in the tips of his fingers washed into numbness. All light and vision narrowed to a pinprick until that too vanished to darkness. Not a void of nothingness but a tangible material darkness. It trickled up his body until its embrace was absolute. Among this darkness he was alone. No feeling, sight, smell or sound. No sense of physical self. No arms, legs or even a head. But memories kept him company. They always did after he died. Especially after deaths so violent as this one.

The memories which heralded death always came first: Shallow breathing. Warm streams of blood running down his face. The flickering of a shattered light. The barrel of a rifle pointed at his leg. But these gave way to memories more distant.

Leif was wearing his full array of Andvel Corporation standard issue combat gear. He stood in front of the ruined chrome body of a humanoid robot, its chassis and outer plating shredded by bullet holes.

“Damn, how’d the son of bitch already get scrapped?” said Urden, standing behind Leif as he peered down at the robotic corpse. He was wearing a set of combat gear identical to Leif’s, with the addition of an intricate lieutenant’s medal on the breast of the armor. Not but a few nights prior had Leif finally been able to bestow it to him.

Leif looked up from the robot and scanned the environment: a small open air marketplace, seemingly decimated by combat.

“That’s what seems odd to me,” Leif finally responded, “we get a call for a rogue bot on a rampage and when we get here its already dealt with?”

“Maybe one of them took it down,” Urden pointed at a number of bloodied bodies next to the robot. They looked like unarmed civilians.

“Unlikely. Take a few men and give me a sweep of those side rooms.” Leif turned and gestured to an entryway on the edge of the marketplace. When he looked back, he locked eyes with Urden.

“You’ll be fine,” Leif reassured him, putting a hand on his armored shoulder. “Mom always said you’d be a leader someday. Go prove her right. Just a simple room clear.”

Urden nodded with mustered courage and rounded up a pair of soldiers standing at attention behind them. The three of them approached the side rooms and swiftly entered one by one with their rifles pointed up.

Leif returned his attention to the robot. He leaned down and inspected the bullet holes: high caliber rounds. He turned the robot on its side. As he expected, Leif found the frayed wires and sheared metal of the droid's destroyed high-velocity shield emitter. That was a common tactic; get up close to take out the shield generator, then light them up with firearms. Except few survived a melee with a security bot.

It was then that Leif heard the boom of an explosion followed by screams from three voices. Some filled with shock others with pain. They came from the side room Urden and his men had just entered.

"Dammit!" Leif leapt to his feet and sprinted towards the screams.

Urden burst out of the side room doorway in a sprint, covered in blood. He ran to a ruined pillar and immediately trained his rifle on the doorway, breathing raggedly. He looked back at Leif running towards him and motioned to find cover. Leif ducked behind a smoldering market stand and aimed his weapon at the doorway.

"Urden, are you okay?" Leif yelled.

"He killed them," Urden kept his eyes towards the doorway, his rifle shaking.

"Are you injured?"

"I barely even saw him."

"Urden, the blood!"

Urden looked at his bloodied armor then back at Leif with wide eyes. "Not mine. It's not mine."

Leif sighed with relief. "Try and stay focused. We need to disengage and wait for back—"

A figure breached the doorway, moving with inhuman speed. Urden and Leif opened fire. The twin set of automatic gunfire echoed violently within the marketplace. Bullets slammed into the figure, but its movement was unimpaired as a shimmering blue light of an energy shield danced across their body. Before Leif knew it, the figure was on top of Urden.

There was a grunt and violent exhale as Leif saw a hand burst through Urden's back, the tips of pointed metallic fingers closed together like a spike.

"No!" Leif yelled as the figure pulled its arm from Urden's body.

Standing still, Leif now saw a clear image of his attacker. A man with hawk-like features. His arms, nearly long enough to reach the floor, appeared to have unfolded and extended, exposing steel and plastic under synthetic skin.

The man took a helmet shaped device from his waist and bent down to attach it to Urden's head.

Leif charged forward, firing his rifle at the long armed man. The man ignored the attack as bullets harmlessly ricocheted off the shimmering blue lights surrounding his body. Leif threw down the rifle and unsheathed a knife, continuing his charge. As he approached, the man whipped around with a lightning fast strike, slamming Leif on the side of the head with a metallic backhand. The blow knocked him on his back. His vision began to dim as he saw the blurry figure of a helicopter darken the sky above him. The long armed man adjusted the device on Urden's head before hoisting him on his shoulder and grabbing hold of a cable which had descended from the helicopter.

"Worry not," he said to Leif with a sadistic smirk, "he will soon be part of something great."

As the man ascended with Urden's body, swirling darkness consumed Leif. As memories faded, he was once again alone, still and silent.

Soon the darkness dissipated. A buzzing raged in the back of his skull. Some semblance of feeling returned. He could feel he had a head again. Arms and legs began to twitch as the buzzing ran down his spine and spread to the very tips of his fingers and toes. It all stopped in an instant as he gasped for air and shot up from the gurney. Instinctively he shielded his eyes from the blinding white medical lights. The artificial eyes of his new body adjusted immediately to the dramatic change in brightness. The room came into focus. The lab; brightly lit and immaculately clean. The back of the gurney he sat on was connected to a jungle of pipes and wires leading to a massive computer making up an entire wall of the room. A small nervous looking man with a white lab coat loosely dangling from his shoulders frantically poked and prodded the half dozen touchscreens in front of him. The fast paced beeping of a heart rate monitor screamed. A holographic monitor displayed the brain of Leif's new body. Various sets of sine waves fluctuated rapidly. His digitized consciousness: a neo-psyche.

Leif leaned back down to lie on the gurney, closed his eyes and released a long drawn out sigh.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," said Steven, still tapping his screens.

"Son of a bitch," Leif groaned as he opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling.

"Not a pretty one I take?"

"Bastard shot me right in the femoral. Watched me bleed out."

"And that's why I like my job much more than yours."

The heart rate monitor began to stabilize, and the brain waves began to steady.

“Alright, neo-psyche stabilization is one hundred percent and bio-readings are green. You’re good to unplug,” Steven said.

Leif reached around, feeling his way to the cable protruding from the connection port at the base of his skull and yanked it out.

“Let me get you some clothes,” Steven offered, and turned to a neatly folded jumpsuit on a small rolling table.

“Right,” Leif said as he looked down at his unclothed body. It was male again. Stockier and shorter than the last one. Steven returned with the jumpsuit. Leif thanked him and donned the clothes as he stood up from the gurney. Steven stood nearly four inches taller than Leif. This one was much shorter than the last. Annoying, but Leif couldn’t control which body he got. So, he shoved his annoyance to the back of his mind.

Leif gave a glance to the sturdy looking sliding door at the back of the lab and lingered there, reading the sign:

Warning: Cold Storage. Thermal suit required.

“Don’t ask,” Steven said, noticing Leif’s contemplative gaze. “It says in your contract not to ask where we get the bodies.”

Leif continued to stare at the door for a brief moment before bringing up his hand to inspect it thoroughly. Like many of the bodies he was given, this one was heavily modified. Grooves of metal ran down the length of his arms, intertwined between lifelike synthetic skin, hiding a variety of weapons and tools.

A new day meant a new body. Another death led to another life. The cycle continued. That’s the way it had been for forty years, that’s how it will be. Leif had no

control over things so much larger than himself. So, there was no point in over thinking it. Afterall, he had a job to do and a brother to save. If he was even still alive.

“Right,” Leif chortled, “never even crossed my mind.”

Leaving Steven to his computer screens, Leif entered into the janitor's closet containing the hidden door into the labs. Outside were the rhythmic bassy thumps from the dance floor music, muffled by the reinforced concrete walls. The door to the labs closed with a hiss, followed by the opening of the closet door and a wall of thunderous bass flooding the cramped room. Leif ventured through the dark and empty backstage, where a smattering of broken stage lights, dusty speakers and empty cans littered the floor. On the walls were the graffitied symbols of the Clect, the street gang which ran the club. It was no corporate headquarters, but companies so often had to work with gangs if they wanted to get their hands dirty on the streets with a certain level of plausible deniability.

Stepping into the heart of the club, Leif's senses were assaulted by the flashing lights, reek of cheap liquor, and jostling crowds. Perfect cover for corporate espionage. A crowded public area ensured rivals couldn't resort to full scale attacks without drawing the ire of the public.

Leif passed the bar, catching sight of Dandi. As he passed, he met with her pupilless reflective chrome eyes as she poured a bright red drink from a shaker into the glass of a drunk patron.

He decided he may as well pay her a visit. Her smile always reassured him while he was recovering from a death.

“Leif,” Dandi smiled as Leif pushed his way into a spot at the bar, “I recognize that gait.”

“Somehow you always do,” Leif shouted over the thumping bass.

“Did you find a way to get him out?”

Dandi shoved the bright red drink into the hands of the drunken patron and gave him an encouraging push towards the crowd of dancers.

“I think so.”

Dandi’s eyes widened. She gestured for Leif to follow and stepped into the kitchen door behind the bar.

Leif followed. Inside, a number of robotic arms were positioned on tables cutting vegetables and mixing bowls of food.

Dandi turned and leaned in with an empathic yet inquisitive look. “Is he even...alive?” she asked quietly.

Leif paused before responding, “I don’t know. The program Andvel Corp tasked me to steal...it’s not just some software, its neo-psyches. Dozens of them.”

“And Urden is one of them.”

Leif nodded, “except it doesn’t feel like him. Not all of him at least.”

Dandi ran her fingers through her hair with a knitted brow.

“But you can save him? Extract his mind or something?” she finally asked.

“I’m going to try.”

She patted him on the side of the arm, “just do what you need to.”

He nodded in response and left the kitchen, back into the noisy crowds of the club. He pushed through the crowd of patrons chaotically flailing to the aggressive beats

blaring from the dozens of speakers. The front doors of the club slid open into the streets of the city.

A film of moisture darkened the walls of the rows of tightly packed buildings. Neon lights from the signs of resale stores, clubs, and restaurants reflected off of the oily puddles housing the various potholes in the asphalt, disrupted by the constant trickle of rain. If you could even call it rain. Runoff from the upper city, dripping down to the lightless lower districts, bringing the filth and muck with it.

As he walked out of the club an alert for an incoming call appeared on the heads up display of his ocular implants. He set the tip of his finger to his temple. The voice of his caller streamed directly into his mind.

“You’re back online I see,” the voice hummed, “and already wasting company time.”

“I apologize. I’m getting on task as we speak.”

“No luck last attempt, I assume?”

“I’m close. I only have a limited time to break the Destiny Program’s shackles before the security systems fry me.”

“I don’t need to remind you how important this is. Another quarter is coming to a close and Andvel is leagues behind its rivals. You have one more attempt before we pull the plug on this. We can activate an EMP directed at the lab, make it look like a power outage.”

“Sir, that would...destroy the Destiny Program.”

“Better for no one to have it if we can’t. But of course, I’d much rather have it. So, stop wasting time and get us that damn program.”

“Of course, sir.”

Leif removed his finger from his temple, looking up at the bright holo-advertisement which stared at all those exiting the club.

Andvel Corp: We make your future, today.

He stepped into the muck posing as rain and began to walk down the street towards the bakery. He passed the laundromat still offering its limited time discount. He passed the diner with the owners in the alley, still bickering about why the trash hadn't been removed. He passed the beggar who never begged but stared at Leif as he walked by. He passed the apocalyptic prophet, still screaming at pedestrians about the imminent second great flood. Until he reached the doors of the bakery. The details of its facade escaped Leif's mind. He knew what it looked like and where it was. But if asked to describe its appearance, he would not have been able to.

Without a second of hesitation, Leif turned to the alley of the bakery, which was blocked by a chain link fence topped with razor wire. With habitual dexterity, he sprung from the nearby dumpster, kicked off the wall of the bakery and glided over the razor wire, noiselessly landing on the other side of the fence on his feet.

The back alley door slid open. Leif quickly stepped into the dark, as a man leaned from the door tossing a stuffed trash bag onto the rain soaked asphalt. As soon as the man turned his back, Leif noiselessly dashed to the door, slipping in before it closed. He waited for the trash tossing man to walk back down the hall before creeping up to a rack holding an assortment of grease stained aprons. He put his fingers on the hook holding the apron on the right, before turning it with a click. He brushed the aprons

aside, where the outline of a door could be seen. He pushed it open, revealing a long steep set of descending stairs, lit by fluorescent white lights. He followed them down.

The air became stale and moldy as he pushed deeper and deeper beneath the ground. At the bottom was a sturdy looking pair of sliding doors. Leif wedged the tips of his fingers between them and began to pull. The metal of the doors began to strain, and mechanical whirring came from Leif's cybernetic arms until the doors gave in. They slid open, sparks flying from the metal grinding on the floor. On the other side was a sort of waiting room. Rows of chairs sat in front of a large desk. The walls were riddled with bullet holes. A light fixture, once hanging from the ceiling, flickered on the ground. Leif cautiously stepped into the room. He passed by a body on the floor, sitting in a large pool of blood with a vicious hole in its upper thigh. His old body. He picked up the handgun resting in the holster on his old body before heading towards a door on the opposite end of the room.

As he pushed further into the room someone shoved him from behind. Instinctively, Leif whipped around with an extended elbow. His elbow made contact with his attacker, sending them back a few feet. Leif immediately followed his attack by extending his handgun towards the assailant and opening fire. Yet his fire was met with the faint blue glow of a high velocity personal shield which enshrouded his attacker.

As the shield's glow began to dissipate, Leif got a good look at his opponent. A man with hawk-like features wearing a sinister smirk. The Killer. The one who took Urden.

"I must say, I'm having a lot of fun killing you," he said.

"I could say the same," responded Leif as he tossed his handgun on the floor. It would be useless against that shield.

“Unfortunately, my employers are having far less fun with you trying to steal their precious tech.”

As soon as the Killer finished his sentence Leif noticed it. Flashing warning light lit up the heads up display of his optical implants.

Warning: connection disrupted. Neo-Psyche in peril. Counter disruption protocols at 1%.

Panic struck Leif. He grasped at the connection port at the base of his skull. In it he found the spike disrupting his neo-psyche’s connection. Despite his panic, he knew better than to try and yank it out, as doing so would more than likely fry his brain. And without a stable connection to upload his neo-psyche, it would mean death. Permanently.

“Uh no,” said the Killer, smiling wickedly, “is something the matter?”

With a flurry of mechanical clicks and whirs, his arms began to unfold, exposing metal and plastic and nearly doubling in length.

Leif read his warning signs again.

Counter disruption protocols at 15%.

Without any indication of attack, the killer lashed out his extended arms with a right hook, slamming into Leif’s temple and knocking him onto the floor. His head spun and his vision dimmed. The blow would have knocked an ordinary man out cold. But Leif’s body was equipped with skull liners, along with a multitude of other physical upgrades.

Shaking off the blow, Leif saw the Killer standing above him readying a double fisted blow. He put his foot behind The Killer's ankle and yanked with all his might.

The Killer toppled over onto his back. Leif flexed his forearm. A blade, hidden within the arm, hissed as it extended from between his middle and ring finger. He leapt to his feet and was on top of his foe in an instant. He drove his blade down towards the Killer's throat. With no more than a fraction of a second to lose, the Killer grabbed Leif by the arm, preventing the blade from being driven further down.

Counter disruption protocols at 25%.

Keeping one arm to defend from the blade, the Killer shifted his other arm, grabbed Leif by the throat and threw him off of himself. Leif's back hit the wall with a thud. The Killer was on him in an instant. He ducked to the side as the concrete wall where he once stood was turned to rubble by two strikes from the Killer's reaching arms. But a follow up strike didn't follow as Leif expected. One of the lengthy arms was stuck in the wall.

Counter disruption protocols at 50%.

Leif took advantage of his opponent's misfortune. He cleaved down with his blade towards where the Killer's neck met his torso, but he dodged swiftly to avoid the attack. Leif's blade, while missing the Killer's vitals, cleanly cut through the arm stuck in the wall, just above the elbow. He yelled in surprise as the arm fell the floor.

Counter disruption protocols at 78%.

The Killer used his free arm to grab Leif's ankle and yank him off balance. Followed by a shoulder check, Leif found himself on the floor. The Killer grabbed his bladed arm preventing any counterattack. The two writhed on the ground as both attempted to control the razor sharp blade protruding from Leif's hand.

The Killer managed his way on top of Leif, pinning him on his back, still holding onto his bladed arm. The blade sat near the Killer's shoulder, inches from a successful blow.

Counter disruption protocols at 91%.

Cybernetic fluid seeped from the stub of the Killer's severed arm. He thrust the stub downwards, piercing Leif's side with jagged metal. Leif yelled in pain as he felt the warmth of blood seeping into his clothing.

Counter disruption protocols at 99%.

Leif flexed his forearm once again. The tip of the blade extended and rotated on a hinge, folding over like a claw, now resting over the killer's shoulder like a guillotine.

He pulled the blade down. It passed through the Killer's shoulder with ease, spilling a mixture of blood and cybernetic oil on Leif's face. The killer wheezed and screamed as he fell on his back.

Leif slowly got to his feet, spitting the taste of iron and grease out of his mouth. He looked upon his now armless opponent, who lie on the ground gasping for air. But on his face was the faintest smirk.

"See you again soon," he choked.

"Not this time."

Counter disruption protocols at 100%.

Leif violently grabbed the Killer's shoulders and flipped him on his back. He ripped the spike out of his own head and shoved it into Killer's.

"No. NO!" screamed the Killer as he writhed underneath Leif.

Leif raised his blade and thrust it into the Killer's spine, ending his writhing for good.

He stood above the body, clutching his bleeding wound. His head still spun from the blow it had taken. He couldn't dwell in the present or on his pain. He had to save Urden. He walked to the door on the wall opposite of where he entered. On the other side, there was a maze of clean, well-lit hallways. Labs housed countless computers. Enormous vats of coolant had outstretched pipes running along the walls. Leif followed the pipes until he reached what appeared to be a central hub, where every wire, cable and pipe converged. Unlike the halls and labs, this room was covered in darkness, illuminated only by a lone computer screen sitting on a thin protrusion from the center of the room's floor. Leif approached the screen. Just below it was a connection port. He took a thick loose cable from his pocket and inserted it into the computer. He laid on his back, took a deep breath and inserted the other end of the cable into the port at the base of his skull.

All light and vision narrowed to a pinprick until it vanished to darkness. Not a void of nothingness but a tangible material darkness. It trickled up Leif's body until its embrace was absolute. Among this darkness he was alone. Until he felt what seemed like eyes flutter open, as if waking from a long restful sleep, and gaze at him. There was another in the darkness. Or rather many others. He knew its eyes were on him.

"Destiny," he said.

"Issue of Leif," they responded. Their voice echoed a thousand times within Leif's mind. Dozens of voices speaking at once. "You are back."

Destiny spoke with complete assurance. Designed to analyze data of the past to predict people's actions in the future, they did not make guesses or postulations, they made statements. Only an artificial intelligence, connected to every bit of information in the digital world could speak with such confidence.

"Did you know that the average organic human replaces nearly 330 billion cells per day?" Destiny echoed. "After seven years, nearly the entire body is replaced."

In the voice of Destiny, Leif heard him. Urden. What was left of him. The digital scraps of his mind, meshed with dozens more.

"I know," Leif reached out into the darkness, his consciousness linked to the computers within the labs. He searched for anything. Any clue or indication on how to remove Urden's neo-psyche from Destiny. How to detach it from its dependency on the facility which housed the AI.

"We know what you attempt," Destiny stated. "Why do you wish to take this neo-psyche from us?"

"He's my brother. I have to try," Leif responded, trying to remain focused on his task. Finally, he found it: a way to unshackle Destiny from the lab's computers. He could release the entire program. But he only needed Urden.

"Each neo-psyche is dependent on the next. Removing just a single one will terminate this program."

Destiny's voice shifted. What was previously a chorus of voices became one. A product of many, yet wholly independent.

"I don't want to die."

Leif stopped his search. Urden was dead. His brother had died over forty years ago. He had known for a long time. Whatever facsimile of a scattered mind which remained in Destiny was not his brother but a piece of a newly born unique and independent being. Leif's efforts were a pointless waste, and he knew it.

"Then I won't let them kill you."

Leif let go of Urden and released Destiny.