

Mild REBOOT

STORY

PLASSAT, PENSEC, GRANIER, GEOFFROY

2025

No one really remembered the last time the sun warmed their skin. After the Upload, humanity had abandoned Earth in favor of "UtopiaNet", a hyper-connected, digital paradise where every desire was fulfilled, every fear erased. Pain was a concept taught in history classes...

"Never go back. Nature is chaos. Utopia is order." That was the mantra. Repeated. Programmed. Obeyed.

Yet somewhere in the perfect code of UtopiaNet, a glitch was about to be found by five young souls who remembered they had once been human with real perceptions.

Chapter 1

UtopiaNet was ruled by a single figure: Chancellor Veylor, a human being but perfected in algorithms. Veylor was neither seen or questioned but his voice was everywhere. His laws were encoded. Every citizen wore a Neural Crown, a band of silver that connected their consciousness to UtopiaNet.

There was no hunger, no crime, no uncertainty because choice itself had been eliminated. Memories of Earth were classified as "Toxic Nostalgia," punishable by forced memory erasure. Curiosity was a disease; compliance, the cure.

Tana, Anastasia, Bloom, Eugene, and Matthew were different. They were "outsiders", teenagers whose Neural Crowns occasionally glitched, producing flashes of forbidden images: blue skies, wild rivers, the scent of rain. They gathered in secret, whispering about legends of the "Exit Points" hidden deep within the code.

Eugene, a gifted hacker, found it first an ancient, forbidden program called "The Root Key". It was a backdoor to the physical world.

On a stormy night in UtopiaNet's virtual sky, they came together. Eugene uploaded the "Root Key" into their Neural Crowns. Immediately, alarms ring in their ears, red warnings flashing across their visions.

"Unauthorized action detected. Disconnect in progress."

Their bodies, who were sleeping for a very long time, awoke in a forgotten physical facility: cracked screens, vines everywhere around them, dust hanging thick in the air. They had escaped from the digital world and they were now, in the new world. Able to explore it.

Chapter 2

The world outside was full of wilderness. They walked through cities surrounded by forests, skyscrapers wrapped in moss, highways cracked by roots. At first, it felt like paradise. Real food tasted wild and intoxicating because it was new for their bodies. Real rain touched their skin like needles but made them laugh uncontrollably, they were having fun discovering their senses.

"This... this is freedom," Bloom whispered one night, staring at a sky not made of pixels but burning stars.

But soon, they noticed weird signs: bones half-consumed by plants, flowers that caught their ankles with venomous teeth. Eugene was the first to fall. Bitten by a vine that injected a hallucinogenic poison into his blood. As his fever raged, he spoke like the represent of the forest's desire. The forest was, in reality, a collective mind that saw the five teenagers as threats.

Anastasia, leading the group, discovered the "Natives" : humans who had never uploaded. But these were no longer humans as the rebels knew them. Their skins were full tatted with plant patterns, their muscles enforced over the years with the strength of roots and soil. Their eyes glowed green in the dark.

The Natives attacked without mercy, merging with the forest as one living entity. Earth had evolved, rejecting the species that had once abandoned it.

While being separated during a surprise attack, Tana, Bloom, and Matthew raced through the ruins of an old metro station, now a nest of predatory plants, while Anastasia fought to free Eugene from dangerous roots blocking his body.

Realizing that nature was a living, hostile entity, they made a desperate plan. Matthew, the fastest runner, rushed to an ancient tower which was the last artifact connecting Earth to UtopiaNet. Hacking it with Eugene's knowledge, he sent a distress signal. Indeed, even though the teenagers wanted to permanently live as outsiders, they realised that nature took over the peace that it once had, making it unlivable for them.

High above, a black shape appeared upon the clouds, it was a drone from UtopiaNet. They had been found. The drone lowered a platform and said : "Return to sanctuary. Compliance required."

Exhausted, bleeding, terrified, the group hesitated between going back to the digital prison they had escaped ; or die fighting a world that wanted them erased?

"We came looking for truth," Eugene yelled. "We found it. We don't belong out there."

Bloom, sobbing, pulled out a wildflower that had tried to strangle her: "Maybe WE were the virus all along." One by one, they stepped on the drone, in order to go back into the digital world.

Except Tana, she was the only one staying.

She disappeared into the forest, determined to adapt herself, to survive on her own terms. She would either become part of this new Earth, or perish without ever going back again.

Back inside UtopiaNet, the others were received like lost sheeps. Their Neural Crowns reattached to their brains, and their memories "corrected."

Chancellor Veylor's voice echoed in their dreams : "You are safe. You never left."

Yet deep within their synthetic hearts, something did not feel right : the memory of pain, of freedom, of stars. And far beyond the digital world, Tana watched the wild grow, feeling the rythm of a world that had no masters.

Waiting.

THE END