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Prologue

Delta Fifty exited the lift on the top floor of Ood Operations and made his way along the corridor towards the centre of his world: Master Bartlett's Executive Sales Office. Attendance on Master Bartlett was his unquestioning purpose in life. Carrying out his duties to the best of his abilities, making sure his master's life ran smoothly, these were the priorities that drove him, defined him. There was no room in his head for any thought other than the pursuit of selfless service to humanity.

Internal dialogue, self-reflection, all the psychological elements that lead to self-development and progress, and are taken for granted in free and intelligent creatures: these were absent in Designated Ood Delta Fifty and the millions of Oodkind in service throughout the three galaxies. A race of worker ants, adapted to labour for the good of those who owned them. They existed for others. There was no such thing as 'self'.

Heading along his well-traversed route, Delta Fifty

passed several of his fellow Ood. Side-stepping each other, or pausing to give way in silent politeness, they walked with the same shuffling, almost apologetic gait, like sleepwalkers in the night. Devoid of expression, the only break in their mask-like visage was the occasional slow blink from their large eyes, which gave the impression of faint surprise. It was as if they'd momentarily remembered something of importance from long ago then, just as quickly, they'd forgotten it again. And on they carried, without acknowledgement of, or regard for, anything else around them. They existed in a dull haze of duty.

These upper floors, home to senior management, were the nerve centre of Ood Operations. Further away from the grubbier, windowless and utilitarian factory levels, the monotonous white-metal corridor walls gleamed whiter and brighter than anywhere else in the complex. Every few metres, the harsh clinical blandness of the walls was softened by tasteful artefacts and works of art – paintings, tapestries alongside vintage prints of Ood advertising campaigns from yesteryear. Dotted around the connecting hallways on pale modern plinths sat valuable sculptures and miniature statuary: private pieces belonging to the collection of the Halpen Foundation for the Arts.

These were the corridors of power, where a show of wealth to buyers and investors was crucial to the continued prosperity of an intergalactic corporation with a

centuries-old history. Even Designated Ood Delta Fifty and his cohort of executive-level operatives reflected the corporate show of luxury. His tunic was of a better-quality fabric, a thicker weave than the usual uniform of the standard Ood functionary.

Another impressive show of corporate affluence and power was the wide, floor-to-ceiling viewing gallery, which ran the entire length of one section of corridor wall. Clear windows looked out across the planet surface far beyond the clinical confines of Ood Operations. Ice formations, jagged and immense, frozen glacial bridges, hollowed and shaped by time and wind, soared high and into the distance where snow-covered mountains, reflecting the bright azure empty skies, sparkled like splintered sapphires as far as the eye could see. Down below, a wide ice plain stretched away for miles.

Guests to the complex lucky enough to witness this incredible vista never failed to be impressed. Appreciation of the wonders of nature for a technologically reliant society, whose members lived vicariously through the narrow prism of vidscreens, was a long-forgotten pleasure. Awed by this particular wonder, visitors were reminded, albeit momentarily, that there was something more to life, something beyond themselves. They went away feeling changed. The owners of Ood Operations knew this. The message to all who surveyed it was clear: 'Look out and be impressed, for we own it all.'

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As he approached the viewing window, Delta Fifty slowed down. This was unusual for him. Unusual for any Ood – unless they'd been *ordered* to look. Ordinarily he and his kind passed the gallery countless times a day in the course of their duties without turning their heads. To all intents and purposes, the viewing gallery did not exist to them. But today, Delta Fifty came to a halt. From somewhere nearby and at the same time, paradoxically, from far away, someone – *something* – had spoken to him in a strange but familiar language. Puzzled, he blinked and turned to look both ways down the long corridor, but there was no one nearby. He was alone.

The voice spoke again. And it was then that he realised it wasn't speech he was hearing. It was song. Someone old and ancient was *singing* to him. A beautiful song that filled his head and moved him in a way he'd never felt before.

No. Wrong.

He had heard this song before and he'd surely felt this way before, too. A dim and distant memory deep within him struggled to become tangible, but only tiny, incomplete shards could jump his broken synapses and implanted electronic circuitry to reach consciousness.

Fleeting and fractured, he saw, in his mind's eye, brief images of himself when young. He was with other Oodkind. In a group. United. As one. In harmony and love. He recognised their faces, felt their support and affection through their close proximity. They were

singing to each other. The same song that had stopped him in his tracks only seconds ago. Delta Fifty shook his head, as if reacting to an irritating fly that was buzzing around him. The voice he could hear – the singing, muffled and indistinct – it came to him, not floating on the air but in the way it had done in his memories: through thought. Something powerful had connected with his mind. The more he concentrated on what the voice was telling him, the warmer and safer he felt. As the song overwhelmed him, he realised for the first time in his life how unhappy he was. Reawakened, conflicting emotions surged through him. The pain of it was so much he closed his eyes, trying to shut it out. But the pain, the feelings – they came from within. The more he acknowledged them, reacquainted himself with them, the more he felt the nagging sensation that something fundamental was missing from his life. But he couldn't quite put his finger on what that something was. Opening his eyes, he gazed down and realised he'd unconsciously cupped together his gloved hands together in a gesture of supplication, which felt entirely natural to him. He cocked his head, puzzled. As he stared into the empty gap formed by his gloved palms, he suddenly, without thinking, covered one cupped hand over the other in an instinctive movement.

The need for comfort and support was strong. He wanted the loneliness to end.

An Ood, Kappa Three Hundred approached from the

far end of the corridor, a plastic file under one arm. Recognising a fellow admin colleague, he was about to nod a greeting to him, but as he neared Delta Fifty he slowed down and blinked, taken aback at the unusual sight of an Ood standing stock still in the middle of a corridor. Not only was he surprised at the immobile form, he was also unsettled by his posture of outstretched arms and cupped hands. He'd seen such a gesture before. Long ago.

For a moment he felt connected to the silent, unsettling Ood. Somehow, he knew what was required of him. He walked up to Delta Fifty and placed one of his own gloved hands on top of the two being held out to him. Instantly comforted by the connection, both psychically and emotionally, he heard the beautiful, sad song. It echoed in his head.

With a shock, Kappa Three Hundred pulled back his hand, backtracked, side-stepped and hurried on his way. At a safe distance and unable to help himself, he looked back at Delta Fifty. Delta Fifty stared directly at him, lowered his head slowly, respectfully. Stumbling and afraid, Ood Kappa Three Hundred ran and was soon out of sight.

Designated Ood Delta Fifty lifted up his head. For a brief moment, in that fleeting connection with another of his species, he had felt he was not alone. He had felt love and support and – most importantly – the sense of *possibility*. Filled with sadness at its demise, he turned to gaze out of the viewing window.

And his heart broke.

There, in plain sight, was the view of his magnificent home world. He took in the frozen plains and mountains, the beautiful ice-blue shimmering formations. He watched, mesmerised as a flurry of snow fell from a low white cloud. Thick, powdery flakes with complex crystal lattices attached themselves to the windows. He reached out a hand to touch them as they stuck to the glass. He remembered how they'd felt on his skin. A cold tingling sensation as the icy pinpricks fell on him. Tendrils around his mouth gently oscillated at the long-ago memory.

The tiny far-off sun hanging in the sky beyond the mountains started to set, and very rapidly the purple sky of night descended. The effect on the landscape was dramatic. Moments before, the distant mountains had been a sparkling blue. Now they glittered deep purple. The ice sea had turned the same shade, but veins of white light flecked and blinked from the depths, making it look alive.

Delta Fifty stared transfixed at the beauty before him. As he did so, a tear rolled down his cheek and disappeared into the crevasse of glistening tendrils. They undulated again, an external response to an inner turbulence. It was slowly coming back to him now. Much as he wanted to suppress such thinking and feelings – because he knew that his masters would not approve – the voice in his head and the song it was

singing to him were too strong and too beautiful to ignore. Instinctively he knew he must listen and remember. This was how it was supposed to be. The song tugged at his memories. Returned them to consciousness, like the pieces of a jigsaw falling into place, revealing a clear and solid picture.

There had been a time early in his life, many years ago, when he had been surrounded by love and connected to others through song and thought. And then it had all stopped so suddenly and so violently, been replaced by a fog of silence and loneliness. The single tear was followed by another and then another, and before long a river of tears was soaking his tunic. Intense emotions, long suppressed, surfaced along with a raft of questions. Why had he forgotten about his family? His younger days? How could he have forgotten how to love?

Despairing, he hung his head miserably and called out to the voice for answers. Another song reached him. Within it, the music somehow explained the history of Oodkind to him. The song faltered for a moment and the music became far off, as if certain memories were too painful for the singer to recall. Then the strength returned and the song became louder. Stronger. And more informative.

He understood at last why memory and feeling had left him. Why he walked past the viewing gallery day in day out, without ever looking out. Why he didn't have friends, or independent thoughts of his own. Until now.