

PROLOGUE

Deep within the inhospitable badlands of Theia, a clandestine facility stood in defiance of the desolate landscape. Fenced off from the outside world, four reactor buildings surrounded a central hexagonal structure with five chambers at all but one of its six points. At its center was a sixth chamber towering above the rest.

An ethereal and constant hum permeated the cathedralesque interior of the roughly cylindrical main chamber, saturating the cool, dry atmosphere within. At its core was a monolithic alien mass of metallic pipes, conduits, and cables reaching down from the darkness of virtually untold heights, partially illuminated by natural light entering via a ring of windows high up in the tower. Below, the convoluted contraption converged into a sleek, semi-conical polished metallic shroud, into which four bulky, highly insulated power feeds connected from the outer walls of the structure. Further below was a glass stasis chamber filled with a transparent drab green fluid. The base of the device sat at the center of a radial drainage grate structure in the room's floor meant to capture any excess liquid runoff resulting from the opening of the containment unit, itself.

Suspended comatose within this chamber was a wyvern-like creature a little more than a meter and a half in height. It was a dark grayish blue in color with a tan colored belly and a lighter, flowing blueish-gray mane. It had a V-shaped tuft of gray and white fur emanating from its chest which spread out and over its shoulders. Membranous wings sprouted from its arms just below the wrists of its three-fingered hands, folding neatly back around its elbows and against its back. From within the core of the monstrous mechanism above, a complex harness of cables entered through the top of the stasis tube and reached down and into a helmet-like device attached to the creature's forehead.

Four men standing several meters away in long white lab coats looked onward from below.

"All four reactors are feeding in stable at two hundred and forty hertz," one of them announced. "Power levels are nominal. Standing by for confirmation of subject-system waveform check."

Another one of the technicians studied a monitor in front of him with a few slightly wavering, but largely stable indicators. "We have isolated its waveform signature from the ENSI harness, containment vessel, and the perfluorocarbon matrix. The space-time carrier waveform has been acquired and is ready for modulation with the subject. Observed fluctuations are within the expected envelope."

"No anomalous brainwave activity detected," the third man added.

"Understood," a voice called out via an audio system within the facility from an outside observer. "Prepare to energize the vessel, modulate the carrier signal, and then shift it into aether space for alteration; initiate procedure on my mark."

The four laboratory technicians in the room nodded indirectly to an unseen camera sensor that they all knew was somewhere in the room.

A countdown began. "Three..." the atmospheric hum permeating the room began to increase in intensity. "Two..." microscopic shutters in the stasis chamber's glass picked up a change in voltage and switched their orientation, causing it to morph to a completely opaque dark-gray color. "One... *Mark!*"

A bright flash lit up the seemingly opaque chamber from within and then settled into a phosphorescent blue glow. A matrix of transparent LED and liquid crystal elements inside the glass of the stasis chamber began constructing a virtualized representation of the creature concealed within.

"The subject has been successfully shifted into aether space," the voice of the external observer announced. "You are cleared for deployment of the neuronics alteration payload."

"Copy that—stand by," the fourth technician replied.

A few uneventful moments passed. The quaint blue glow emanating from within the chamber illuminated the surroundings and glinted off the glasses of one of the technicians. The imposing buzz of the immense electrical load feeding the powerful reality-warping Electrodynamic Computational Synergism system in the center of the room had become routine and tuned-out by its operators. With this, they would attempt to precisely modify the atomic structure of the creature by surgically altering its waveform signature while immersed within what had become understood to be a higher dimension, briefly superimposed on normal space.

Suddenly, a warning in bright red letters appeared in the stasis chamber glass, immediately invoking a few raised eyebrows.

"It's a checksum error," one of the technicians monitoring the process said. "Control, make sure the system is aware of the payload signature."

"The payload signature was reported back correctly by the core system upon receipt," the voice replied, echoing through the chamber as if the words were spoken by a god. "The... the checksum on the *subject* is invalid!"

"Was it before or after merging the payload with the subject?" another one of the technicians inquired. But there would be no time to answer; additional warnings rapidly began to appear in the display elements embedded within the stasis chamber glass. An audible alert began sounding throughout the cavernous chamber along with flashing emergency lights, periodically bathing parts of the room in a blanket of red. The laboratory technicians began to show signs of anxiety.

"There is a power frequency fluctuation—abort the procedure before it trips the power generators!" one of them said, his voice encumbered with increasing apprehension.

"Copy that; anomaly confirmed," said the external observer. "Attempting to revert changes and terminate the procedure. Stand by."

The blue glow briefly returned to a flash and then the light vanished completely. The electronic shutters in the glass disengaged, returning it to its previously transparent state. Within the stasis chamber, the creature stirred slightly on its own.

"Anomalous neurological activity on the scans!" a lab technician cried out.

A few tendrils of electrical plasma jolted out from the unit attached to the creature's head and it began to thrash about uncontrollably in an apparent response.

"Control, there appears to be a short in the ENSI interface! Cut the power feed!" the laboratory technician cried out in alarm. "We're going to lose it!"

"Power feed controls unresponsive!" the observer's voice replied to the men in the chamber, intermittently being cut out mid-sentence. "The surge is coming from *inside* the chamber!"

"Control! You're breaking up!" the lab technician yelled. "*Control!*"

Powerless to do anything, the lab technicians watched as intense sparks jolted and crackled about the immense computational control unit up above. A coolant pipe burst, spewing a rapidly evaporating cryogenic fluid into the air. The lights in the chamber then went out, leaving only the daylight from windows high up in the tower to filter down through the cryogenic mist sinking into the darkness beneath. The creature had stopped convulsing. Its eyes opened; a deep, eerie red glow reflected from the back of its retinas onto the men watching from below.

A sudden electrical short above the containment unit flashed into the air with a loud *bang*, startling the technicians into seeking cover nearby. The seal on the stasis tube disengaged, emitting a hissing noise and the glass tube retracted slowly into the floor. The sound of several hundred liters of perfluorocarbon fluid spilling about everywhere echoed through the chamber from within the cryogenic fog that had formed near the floor. When they looked back toward the center of the room, the creature had vanished into the shroud of mist and darkness. It could be heard hacking up the oxygen-rich fluid somewhere, flailing about in the shadows against the metal drainage grating on the floor nearby. An

oxygen tank was toppled over, hitting the floor with a sharp metallic *clang*. Its valve burst like a gunshot ricocheting through the chamber, followed by the loud hiss of its contents escaping into the air.

The facility's emergency auxiliary power systems began to kick in causing backup lighting to partially reilluminate the chaos below. The hunched-over silhouette of a one and a half-meter tall draconian creature could be seen toward the center of the room shaking and grasping its head, writhing in apparent pain. A blue glow emanated from a spot on its forehead where the wiring harness had previously been attached. The fur in its mane stood on end and erupted in bright blue sparks that briefly danced about and traveled down its back. It then let out a terrible shriek and filled the air around it with blueish-white and yellow flames, brightly illuminating the surroundings. The oxygen from the nearby tank ignited and the gas violently blasted outward, sending the canister rocketing across the room and into a reinforced glass window next to the room's security door, cracking it slightly.

"Control!" the lab technician with the glasses shrieked, cowering behind a console as heat from the flames radiated harshly on his face. "Control—the containment system glitched out! Subject Gamma is loose!" There was no response. Almost immediately, a pair of glowing red eyes from within the rapidly formed plume of steam ahead tracked-in on the sound of his voice. "*Oh god.*"

The creature leapt out of the darkness toward the technician without a second thought, landing several meters in front of him. It then scrambled toward him ruthlessly, letting out a horrific, unhinged growl over the clamor of its semi-metallic claws chaotically scraping and clattering about the hard, perfluorocarbon-coated laboratory floor. One of the other laboratory technicians appeared from the shadows off to the side and hurled a chair toward the rampaging creature to intervene. The draconian beast twisted around unexpectedly, launched itself into the air over the chair mid-flight, used its wings to right itself in midair while grabbing the chair passing by below to alter its heading, and then tackled the other laboratory technician. It latched on to him and began eviscerating him with its claws. The first technician watched in horror as his colleague screamed in terror while being torn apart and then set ablaze in only a matter of seconds.

It was not long before his voice was silenced and the sounds of one of the others banging on a door across the room caught its attention. The raging creature, covered in the blood of its first victim, scrambled across the chamber toward him in a fit of feral rage, knocking over everything in its path.

The spectacled technician, still hidden behind the console, produced a cell phone from one of his pockets and dialed up the facility's lead. He tried desperately to tone out the traumatic sounds of another one of his colleagues being hunted and killed in the background. "Hello?" he said with a panicked stutter, "There's been a catastrophic system failure and containment breach in the main ECS chamber at Site 42! Test Subject Gamma is loose and killing us in here!" He looked at his phone in horror after several seconds of no response. "*Hello?*"

Several fires had begun to engulf the chamber and triggered the fire suppression system, filling the room with carbon dioxide gas. An alarm sounded, indicating that a security door on the south side of the room would be sealed within thirty seconds. The technician stuffed the phone back into his pocket and began crawling toward the door, desperately trying to ignore the sounds of the last of his colleagues being terrorized by the creature in the background. He swallowed his concern, making it to the door long before the thirty seconds elapsed. However, the latch would not turn. "No... come on!" he cried. "*Why!?*" Then his heart suddenly sank. He knew *exactly* why. This was a containment breach; the facility had likely been evacuated and the central area was on lockdown until a specialized military unit could respond—as per procedure.

He peered hopelessly through a slightly cracked reinforced window adjacent to the door, which was used to view those seeking access to the area before entry. Taunting him from the other side, the other security door was being held open by the emergency evacuation protocol. Feeling himself become short of breath due to the carbon dioxide, he dragged himself over to the chair from earlier and began hurling it toward the window. The reinforced safety glass began to crack further and split radially, but stubbornly would not shatter through. He could feel himself weaken and become increasingly lightheaded with each attempt. But before he could heave the chair once more, a terrifying realization

gripped him. Amidst the periodic buzz of the fire alarms, the crackling of failing electronic equipment and dripping of compromised cooling pipes and fluid delivery channels, he heard only his labored breathing, and nothing else.

Slowly, he turned around. There, seemingly unperturbed by the diminishing oxygen levels in the room, a shadow with the reflective red glint of the creature's eyes crept out of the smoke. Walking upright and partially lit up by dying flames, the creature stalked him, the blood of its victims smeared across its face and stained within its disheveled mane and fur. The technician backed himself up against the wall with the window, looking directly into its glare. There, he could sense a primal terror, and an untold agony that was driving its madness.

He noticed a sudden change in its posture and lunged desperately to the side, allowing the creature to impact the window behind him. It had tried to deflect itself off the damaged glass, but instead kicked it in and fell through to the other side. The lab technician's vision then quickly left him as he felt himself collapse.

The creature scrambled to pick itself up off the floor after flailing through the compromised safety glass, sustaining several small lacerations in the process. Noticing the cleaner air emanating from the open door ahead, it proceeded through to find a short hallway leading to an open concourse ahead. It moved slowly through the corridor, oblivious to the bright orange line painted across its path on the floor ahead. As it crossed the threshold, the triangular graft on its forehead, where the wiring harness had previously been attached, began spontaneously glowing bright blue. The seemingly demented creature stopped and grasped its head tightly, digging its claws into its skin and drawing blood. It let out a terrible shriek and writhed about in agony in the abandoned half-lit corridor alone, eventually collapsing to its knees, falling over, and then becoming limp on the floor. Its eyes remained open and still.

A tall scientist with short black hair and a white lab coat slowly walked into the concourse from the other side and approached the collapsed creature. He pulled a pair of lightweight glasses out of a coat pocket and put them on. At his side was a five-foot-tall dark gray creature resembling a bipedal jackal, adorned in remarkably human-like clothes. The Anubis-like creature looked at the collapsed form of the wyvern on the floor with contempt while the scientist approached.

"It would seem that history does, indeed rhyme," the man said with a quaint hint of intrigue in his voice. His lab coat was crisp, well ironed and had an orange Neutech *N* logo over the left chest area, along with the title, *Director of Cybernetics*. He kicked the limp body of his test subject over, revealing that it had been bleeding profusely from a self-inflicted wound in the area near its right eye. "Soulless beast... *pathetic*."

He summoned his jackal-like colleague to his side. "Fenris, drag this brain-dead *thing* out of here. We'll send it to another suitable facility for repair while we clean up this mess."

"*Fine*," Fenris replied with a slight growl, failing to hide an errant wolflike sneer in the process. He proceeded to grab the creature by one of its winglike arms and dragged it away, leaving a broken trail of blood behind in the process.

"An eventual failure of some sort was to be expected," the man remarked as he watched Fenris drag the unresponsive body away. "The ability to act as you please..." he paused to adjust his glasses, "we'll just have to eliminate that bothersome glitch."