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There was but an infinite darkness, permeated by a disquieting, inscrutable droning ambiance that flooded the void. Yet, from an incomprehensible distance, vague scintillae of some unsolicited audible musing danced around the void aimlessly as if it were a small moth seeking some iota of luminance which, at the moment, was in short supply.

"Background noise? No, it's too consistent," an uninvited voice said in a sudden bout of relative clarity. "There should not be anything there—just a brain-dead body."

Fading in from obscurity, a blurred pinpoint of light entered into existence somewhere far above. Soon after, there was another, and eventually three more. Though the vague luminance had arrived to defy the darkness, its presence carried with it a sinister, inimical aura which cast upon its surroundings a dim blanket of distress.

"Well then, what is it?" another voice fluttered about, seemingly uninterested in the luminous omen lurking above.

"EEG readings appear erratic," the first voice replied. "It's closer to something resembling dream activity."

Led by the first, the five points of light grew, along with a sinister and inevitable terror. Gradually, one by one, they began to descend, the magnitude of trepidation increasing with their approach. The palpable anguish of uncountable souls cried to them for mercy, but their defiance was absolute.

"How can this be possible?" one of the voices continued, seemingly oblivious to the flood of consternation attempting to occupy the hopeless abyss. "We verified that the program had been completely wiped, yet these readings keep occurring, along with intermittent spikes in cardiovascular and endocrine responses."

"Could it be an unforeseen side effect of the Termination Protocol?" the other voice echoed in response. "Pull the latest CT scan data and compare it with the scans from just after the incident."

The first of the descending orbs increased significantly in luminance, becoming engulfed in a brilliantly shining streak of fire that trailed in its wake. With it, a heinous radiant energy cast itself upon the ether, inflicting an incandescent misery on its surroundings. The darkness turned to twilight, and then to daylight. Unknown, flailing entities cast eerie, growing shadows radiating away from the direction of the now rapidly descending harbinger of hell. A silent, yet deafening anguish permeated perpetuity in protest, fully aware that there was no hope left to be had.

"There are clearly neurological structures there that didn't exist before," one of the voices interrupted again. "Where the hell did this come from?"

"Some form of autonomous neuroplasticity, perhaps?" the accomplice suggested. "Wait... look at this spike in activity! What the hell?!"

The luminous pillar of damnation from the heavens came crashing down, smiting all of existence below. The façade of a massive city vanished into a blast of blinding, all-consuming light and heat. The cacophony of terrified and doomed souls suddenly ceased, leaving nothing more than the incandescence of oblivion and a vacuum of silence in its wake. Three more of the falling stars collided with the earth below in the distance, adding to the despair that was unfolding. The final and brightest of the lights drew ever closer, directly overhead. With it, a single thought manifested itself above all else:

My God... is there nothing I could have done?

An impossibly bright flash and a crushing, unimaginable all-consuming pain then ripped through existence itself.

The sound of air desperately flowing into the lungs of a terrified and shocked being tore through the room. A blinding light hovered overhead, along with the feeling of cold, dry air. There was nothing to do but escape whatever terror had just manifested from above. The sound of something crashing to the floor nearby could be heard.

"Quick, move! Get the hell out of here, now!" one of the voices cried. "I-it's awake!"

The sounds of two panicked men clambering for the exit could be heard, along with the slamming of a door. A locking mechanism could be heard latching itself in place shortly thereafter. Then, there was silence, save for the sound of something breathing heavily. After a few moments, the surroundings began to come into focus. The bright light was a lighting fixture suspended above. Before long, the source of the breathing noise became cognizant of something fundamental, yet profound.

I... I am alive?

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An eerie, blue-tinted light washed over two dimly lit men in white lab coats as they stared at a surveillance monitor before them. Periodic noises and echoes from the video feed punctuated the hum of a ventilation system blowing air through a duct overhead. The observation monitor showed an angled overhead view of a large underground room featuring a stasis chamber at its center with its glass shroud retracted into the floor. They watched intently as a gray draconian figure that had been attached to a brace inside the chamber continued to stir, causing wires attached to a head-mounted peripheral to tense up and pop off as it attempted to move on its own.

"Mike," said one of the men, standing tall with gray hair, a well-kept beard, and wearing a brass name tag with the name *Dr. Stephan Alvarez* on it, "I need you to tell me what happened in there prior to triggering the evacuation."

The other man was visibly shaken; his hands were clammy, and his face appeared devoid of natural color as if he had just witnessed a ghost. "Neural activity spikes..." he said uneasily, short of breath due to the run from the next building over, "there was all manner of sudden brainwave activity. It went from coma-like readings to that of a dream."

"And then to this?" Alvarez suggested.

"Yes!" his accomplice replied. "But without the driver program; we verified that it had been wiped clean before we began monitoring."

"Did you think to scan the parts of the brain that were not meant for the driver program?" Alvarez asked.

"We did, however—"

The sounds of the creature breaking free of the stasis chamber's brace and onto the floor over the video feed snapped their attention back to the monitor.

The world spun about haphazardly, a fog of dazzling light with swirls of dark gray and white. Soon, the turbulent shapes and lights slowed and congealed into discernible, yet unfamiliar things; a cold metallic drainage grate, the dulled reflection of an overhead light fixture, and a dark, blueish-gray hand with three fingers tipped with mildly metallic-looking claws. Two long finger-like appendages extended from the side of the hand opposite of the thumb, splaying out across the floor with a flexible membranous skin spanning them.

An unpleasant sensation singed at the edges of the experience, seemingly connected with the hand, shooting up the arm attached to it, and then to the body that these belonged to.

I feel... pain, a thought registered. Is it... not simply my imagination?

The body was heavy and resisted efforts to move it. But it moved, nonetheless. As the struggle to rise continued, a large and muscular tail topped with light gray fur spun out from behind on the floor to assist with the process. With some effort, a pair of feet with claws like those on the hands found their footing and eventually allowed for an awkward, yet successful bipedal posture.

Back in the observation room, both men watched attentively.

"Motor skills appear sluggish, but its movements are deliberate," Alvarez commented. He watched as the delirious creature seemed determined to shake off its vertigo and stand firm on its own, grasping and ultimately removing the head-mounted monitoring harness and dropping it to the side along with its remaining wires. "That is not the zombie-like behavior of some errant brain stem neurons firing at random. There is actually something ticking in that drakk's head."

The other man returned a concerned glance and reached for his mobile phone. Alvarez stopped him by grabbing his arm.

"No, Mike, not yet. Let's just see what it does."

A mirror-like reflective surface beckoned from the other side of the room, standing out in contrast to the sterile, white walls. In the reflection, a dark blueish-gray draconian creature returned its gaze with piercing, dark blue catlike eyes. It had a relatively short snout with a few sharp teeth peeking out around the sides. Two horn-like appendages extended from the back of the head behind the eyes and allowed cat-like movement of ears attached beneath them.

Have I no recollection of myself? A thought transpired, *I know not what this creature is, yet I know that it is I which I am seeing.*

It looked down at the wings attached to its arms and fanned them out slightly. The membrane on the inside was a drab dark red color, while the backside was the same general blueish gray as most of the rest of the body.

Dr. Alvarez watched intently as the one-and-a-half-meter tall creature looked at itself in the two-way mirror. "Curious... I sense notes of confusion, yet I do not doubt that it understands what it is seeing."

His accomplice looked over again, sporting a raised eyebrow. "Are you suggesting that it is exhibiting self-recognition?"

They watched as the creature moved its arms and extended out the wings attached to their sides, and then proceeded to feel the fur on its chest while looking at the reflection, as to confirm that the two were one and the same.

"Is it not obvious?" Alvarez said, pointing briskly at the security monitor and hinting at some perverse astonishment, "this... this is something *profound*, Mike."

"Look, Doctor... spontaneous sentience is a serious issue—we should report—"

"No," Alvarez interrupted again, "This is too important."

So... I am indeed the creature I see before me, its thoughts continued. Evidently male... warm-blooded... but what? I lack any memory of—

The wayward thought process abruptly crashed and tumbled into a seemingly hopeless abyss.

I have no memory of... anything, the thoughts concluded. The horns on the creature's head sagged noticeably as a pained expression saturated his eyes. A terrifying and confusing sensation filled his chest, causing him to exhale a bit out of trepidation. He noticed his open mouth in the reflection and thought about trying to verbally attract someone's attention but quickly realized that he didn't exactly know how. He tried exhaling and forming the words, but only succeeded in emitting an awkward sound. He first recoiled at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, but then kept trying. His tongue did roughly what he expected, but the mouth did not quite form the words as anticipated. "Hello?" he finally slowly managed to say, "Can... anyone... hear me?"

A clipboard fell to the floor in the observation room. Its pen fell separately and landed on its end, tumbling a few times away on its own in what was an otherwise silent room. Dr. Stephan Alvarez and his accomplice heard the creature's words but had not been expecting it. He abruptly made for the door without any further response.

"Uh, Doctor?" the man said, tailing him in pursuit.

"I'm going over there," Alvarez replied simply.

"What?! Protocol requires that we—"

"To *hell* with the protocol!" Alvarez stopped and grabbed the man by the collar of his lab coat. "Spontaneous class-four sentience, Mike. This has never been observed before! We *need* to understand how this happened."

"Dr. Rinzler was *quite* specific about what to do if it became self-aware!" the man replied, "Stephan—It killed three people, what the hell—"

"I've seen the footage and interviewed the survivor from the Site 42 facility, Mike," he leered back. "The driver program is demonstrably absent—this is *substantially* different." He let him go and continued on his way. "Stay behind and be ready to lock the building down if things go to hell with me in there. But unless that happens, do *not* report this to Rinzler until I give the clear, understand?"

The creature stared into the reflection of his own eyes, hopelessly in search of some spark of recollection, yet found only an unfathomably empty chasm. The mirrored surface before him merely reflected more seemingly unanswerable questions in response. *How is it that I even know these words?* he thought. He looked around the room and noticed several easily recognizable items—a supply cabinet, several computer workstations, a trashcan, and a few chairs among the other more alien-looking equipment. *It is as if I was born not but a few moments ago, yet I have names for all these things and understand their basic purpose... how can this be?*

His mind raced as the thoughts became a runaway feedback loop. He began to sense a mild pain in his head as he strained to contain the frustration stemming from his sudden involuntary confrontation with existence. The mere notion that he was there trying to make sense of the world to begin with seemed to lack sense in and of itself. But then his mind latched onto something else that he seemed to be quickly forgetting. *Was it a dream that startled me awake?* His catlike pupils narrowed as he tried to visualize in his mind what he had been experiencing prior to this. He recalled fleeting feelings of terror and chaos, bright lights, and intense heat, but was having trouble retaining details without any context. He started to feel frustrated with himself as the faint memory of the experience seemed to be fading by the second.

The sound of the electronic locks on the door disengaging shattered his concentration and caused his gaze to dart to his left from where it originated. He cautiously backed himself away as he saw the latch turn and the door slowly open. The muzzle of an automatic rifle poked its way through the opening before anything else. He immediately felt himself go on alert, compulsively and quickly assessing the options for movement around the room and the near instantaneous likely trajectory of a bullet if one happened to be fired. He began to move toward the area behind where the door opened to give himself a few additional seconds of cover, but his body was still sluggish and awkward. He lost his balance and fell over instead.

An armed soldier came in, training the weapon's sights on him, followed by a bearded man in a white lab coat, who immediately realized what was going on and turned to the guard.

"Lower that weapon, *now!*" he shouted, running between the soldier and the creature. "It's reacting to it—back out of here with that!"

The soldier, looking a bit confused, backed away and disappeared through the doorway, leaving the man in the lab coat on his own. He reassured whoever was there in the doorway outside and slowly closed the door behind him. He then cautiously turned to look at the creature, who had managed to crawl back toward the wall where the two-way mirror was.

"Do not worry," the scientist said in a reassuring tone, "you may not realize it, but you are considered quite dangerous... they insisted on sending a security detail with me."

The creature, sensing the relative absence of a threat, felt his heart rate begin to drop again and his tension wane. He picked himself back up off the floor and stood up, still showing some signs of mild vertigo in doing so.

"I mean you no harm," the man continued, being sure not to make any jarring moves. "You... *do* understand what I am saying, don't you?" he asked.

The creature slowly, yet reluctantly nodded, which led to the scientist letting out a guarded sigh of relief. He tracked the man's movements attentively yet remained calm.

The researcher gradually came closer and lowered himself to his knees to become more level with the shorter being, examining him more closely as he did. The creature seemed not to mind this approach and merely followed his gaze as he did so. "I see," he said. "Well then... my name is Dr. Stephan Alvarez, and I am a scientist at this facility. I suspect that you have some... *questions* as to what has happened here."

The creature's horn-like ears perked up slightly at the man's apparent understanding.

Alvarez sighed apprehensively. "Right... well, where to begin..." He stood up, stepped back, and turned away somewhat, looking across the room as if to look into an impenetrable void of his own. "You will have to forgive me; the truth is, your awakening caught us all off-guard," he said, rubbing his temples anxiously, still attempting to grasp the implications of it all.

The wyvern-like creature strangely appeared to empathize with the man, his head tilting slightly as he watched him struggle to gather his thoughts.

After a few moments of reflection, he walked over to a rolling chair near one of the computer terminals, brought it over and then had a seat. He looked the creature in the eye, noting an almost innocent perplexity in his gaze. "I don't suppose that you have been having trouble with recollection up to this point?"

The creature's horns sagged slightly, and he looked down and to the right a bit. A modicum of frustration could be sensed in his composure. He opened his mouth and tried to make the seemingly unfamiliar muscles do what he needed, albeit slowly and with some difficulty. "What... am I?" he said, "Why am I here?"

Alvarez's disposition noticeably morphed from a guarded curiosity to that of a disquieting sense of pity. "Your name is *Phoenix*. You are a draconian pseudowyvern species known to most as a *drakk*," he replied, torn on whether he should elaborate any further. Some time passed before he sighed and looked back up at him. "Look, try not to dwell on your memory for now. We need to focus on understanding what happened, and while we are at it, work on your ability to speak.

Phoenix's eyes lit up with an iota of intrigue in response to this.

"We will need to do some testing," Alvarez continued. "Work with me—and I'll attempt to help you make sense of all of this in due time."