

SUBJECT ZERO

THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING

SHASHWAT GUPTA



BlueRoseONE.com
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Shashwat Gupta 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@blurosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-568-1

Cover Design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: September 2026

To every soul who dares to question the unknown,
To those who look beyond what is meant to be seen,
And to the ones who believe that every discovery
Comes with a price.
This story is for you.

SPECIAL THANKS TO,

**My Parents – Dr. Kamal Kishor Gupta & Mrs.
Poonam Gupta**

Mrs. Rashmi Khare

Mrs. Bindu Bala

Mr. Vipin Kumar

(Dep. Of Anatomy, ASMC Gonda)

&

Dr. Mukesh Kumar Patwa

(Assistant Professor, ASMC Gonda)

Dr. Kirti Khatiyar

(Assistant Professor, ASMC Gonda)

Dr. Rajasree Majumder

(Senior Resident, ASMC Gonda)

Dr. Suneel Kumar Sachan

(Doctor & Lecturer)

Mr. Hamza Ansari

(IIT Kanpur)

Author's Note

Greetings, readers!

I'm **Shashwat Gupta**, an MBBS student at **Government Medical College, Gonda**, and it is my absolute pleasure to welcome you into a world of discoveries, experiments, and consequences that could come at a terrifying cost to humanity.

Writing *Subject Zero* has been an extraordinary journey for me. It has allowed me to explore an imagined world of science, mystery, and the darker possibilities that emerge when human curiosity crosses boundaries that perhaps were never meant to be crossed. Bringing this world to life through words has been both a privilege and an unforgettable experience.

Subject Zero is one of my most ambitious and cherished projects. The idea first took shape when I was still in senior school, long before I began writing the book. With determination, I finally started working on the story during my first year of medical school, gradually transforming an idea into the world you are about to enter.

Today, seeing this story reach readers feels incredibly special. Your time, curiosity, encouragement, and support mean more to me than I can express.

And perhaps this is not the end.

If you choose to journey further into the world of *Subject Zero*, there may be another chapter waiting to be written. **With your continued support, the story may return in a sequel – very soon.**

Until then, welcome to the experiment.

Welcome to *Subject Zero*.

– Shashwat Gupta

Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been a journey of imagination, perseverance, learning, and countless moments of doubt and inspiration. While the words on these pages are mine, this book would not have come into existence without the love, guidance, encouragement, and support of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, whose unwavering love and belief in me have been the foundation of everything I have accomplished.

I am especially grateful to my sister, Sakshi Gupta, who has always been a guiding force in my creative journey. Her thoughts, suggestions, encouragement, and constant support have helped me shape my ideas and grow as a writer. I will always cherish the role she has played in bringing my creative work to life.

My heartfelt thanks go to Surabhi Chaudhary, my first reader, who accompanied this book from its early stages with remarkable patience and sincerity. Her support and encouragement meant more than words can express.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who helped bring this manuscript from an idea to a published book, especially to Mrs. Rashmi Khare, Mrs. Bindu Bala, Mr. Vipin Kumar, Dr. Sunil Kumar Sachan, Hamza Ansari (IIT. Kanpur) and to the respected faculty members at my college, Dr. Mukesh Kumar Patwa, Dr. Keerti Katiyar and Dr. Rajasree Majumder for their support.

I also sincerely appreciate everyone involved behind the scenes – from those who helped with editing and reviewing to the people who contributed to the design, production, publishing, and promotion of this book. This journey would not have been the same without your support, patience, and faith in my work. This book is dedicated not only to the story I wanted to tell, but also to the people who helped me find the courage to tell it

Contents

Chapter - One: The Escape of the Subject	1
Chapter - Two: The Heated Discussion.....	6
Chapter - Three: Subject or Asset?	9
Chapter - Four: Cryo-Tech.....	21
Chapter - Five: New Direction.....	27
Chapter - Six: The Serum.....	36
Chapter - Seven: Subject Zero.....	43
Chapter - Eight: The Transformation.....	53
Chapter - Nine: The Last Witness	61
Chapter - Ten: The Antidote	73
Chapter - Eleven: The Unwanted Alliance	83
Chapter - Twelve: The Chaotic Wilderness	93
Chapter - Thirteen: Realm of Subject Zero	100
Chapter - Fourteen: The Hunt.....	107
Chapter - Fifteen: The King.....	115
Chapter - Sixteen: Into Nelson Biotech	129
Chapter - Seventeen: Subject Alpha	154
Chapter - Eighteen: The Old Experiment.....	167
Chapter - Nineteen: The Kingdom	174
Chapter - Twenty: The Inhibitor.....	180
Chapter - Twenty One: The First Confrontation	185
Chapter - Twenty Two: The Price of Control.....	196
Chapter - Twenty Three: The Second Creation	203

Chapter - Twenty Four: The Thing that Learned.....	208
Chapter - Twenty Five: The Kingdom without a King	215
Chapter - Twenty Six: The Signal	225
Chapter - Twenty Seven: The Ones Who Never Left.....	237
Chapter - Twenty Eight: The Hunters.....	242
Chapter - Twenty Nine: Project Genesis	247
Chapter - Thirty: The First Failure	262
Chapter - Thirty One: The Woman Behind Genesis	266
Chapter - Thirty Two: The Betrayal.....	272
Chapter - Thirty Three: Beyond the Kingdom.....	278
Chapter - Thirty Four: The Alliance	289
Chapter - Thirty Five: The Inhibitor	301
Chapter - Thirty Six: The Last Protocol.....	313
Chapter - Thirty Seven: Marcus.....	325
Chapter - Thirty Eight: The Last Choice	330
Chapter - Thirty Nine: After the Fall.....	344
Chapter - Forty: The Data.....	349
Chapter - Forty One: Still Alive	354

CHAPTER – ONE

The Escape of the Subject

“Put the building on lockdown, I repeat, put the building on lockdown. Activate Red-Breach Protocol. Subject Zero has escaped.”

The announcement echoed through the underground facility as crimson warning lights flooded the sterile corridors. Scientists abandoned their workstations, technicians dropped tablets and research files, and staff rushed toward emergency bunkers while the Black Guards moved rapidly through the halls in full tactical gear. Beneath the alarms and hurried footsteps came another sound—a deep, guttural growl that seemed to vibrate through the walls. It was primal and unnatural, enough to make even trained security personnel hesitate.

Against the flickering red lights, a monstrous figure emerged from the darkness. It was Subject Zero, the creature that had once been a man but had now become something far beyond human. Its body had expanded into a towering mass of muscle and bone, its skin darkened into a hardened, almost black hide covered with grotesque growths. Its movements were surprisingly controlled for something so enormous, while its crimson eyes burned through the darkness with an almost inhuman intensity. Every breath escaped as a low growl filled with pain, rage, and hunger.

“Target spotted!”

Eight heavily armed guards formed a defensive line at the end of the corridor and raised their rifles. For a moment, nobody moved. Then the order came.

“Open fire!”

The corridor erupted. Gunfire thundered through the narrow passage as bullets tore into Subject Zero. The creature charged through the barrage, striking the first guard with enough force to throw him against the reinforced wall. Another emptied his magazine into Zero's face, but the creature continued forward, seized him by his tactical vest, and hurled him through an observation window. The remaining guards kept firing desperately. Bullets struck the hardened bone covering Zero's body, and one round tore through its left eye. Black blood poured from the wound, forcing the creature backward for the first time.

“Now!”

A grenade launcher fired into the smoke-filled corridor. The explosion consumed the area in fire and debris, shattering observation windows and filling the passage with thick smoke. For several seconds, there was complete silence. Then a heavy footstep echoed from within the darkness.

Another followed.

The smoke slowly parted, revealing Subject Zero emerging from the flames. Much of its flesh had been burned away, exposing muscle and bone, yet it was still standing. Even the destroyed eye socket had begun to glow again. The creature released another roar and charged. The surviving guards fired until their magazines were empty, but nothing could stop it. One by one they fell beneath its claws until the corridor was left covered with bodies, shattered weapons, smoke, and blood.

Inside the command centre, scientists watched through the surveillance cameras in horrified silence. Subject Zero approached one of the cameras, its twisted face and crimson eyes filling the screen before the image suddenly went black. Nobody needed an explanation. The laboratory had lost control.

The creature continued through the facility until it reached one of the reinforced outer walls. It slammed its shoulder into the concrete. The impact sent cracks through the structure. It struck again, twisting steel supports and sending debris across the corridor. A third impact finally broke through, allowing Subject Zero to emerge beneath the night sky for the first time. Floodlights immediately locked onto it, but damaged circuits failed almost as quickly, plunging the compound into darkness. Behind the creature, the once-secure laboratory had become a scene of chaos—sirens screamed, fires burned, and emergency systems failed throughout the complex. Yet Zero ignored everything. Its attention was fixed on the final barrier between itself and freedom: the outer perimeter wall.

The fifteen-metre reinforced wall had been designed to withstand military assaults and catastrophic containment failures. It was more than five metres thick, supported by layers of steel and guarded by watchtowers equipped with heavy weapons. The architects had believed nothing could breach it from inside.

They had never planned for Subject Zero.

Inside the command centre, every available unit was ordered to the perimeter. Armoured vehicles moved into position while machine guns and searchlights focused on the approaching creature. Gunfire erupted again, hundreds of rounds striking Zero as it advanced. Bullets tore into its flesh and shattered against exposed bone, but the creature barely slowed. Then it accelerated.

Zero lowered its head and slammed into the wall.

The entire facility shook. Concrete cracked and dust filled the air. For a moment, the wall held. Then Subject Zero stepped back and charged again. A second impact widened the fractures, followed by another and another. Machine guns continued firing while grenades exploded around it, but the creature refused to stop. With every strike, the massive structure weakened.

Finally, Subject Zero drove both arms into the fractured concrete. Its claws sank deep into the wall as its muscles tightened. Steel screamed. Concrete split. With one tremendous pull, the reinforced barrier began to move and then collapsed outward in a deafening explosion of concrete, steel, and dust.

“PERIMETER BREACHED.”

The automated warning repeated throughout the facility.

For a moment, silence fell over the command centre. Years of research, secrecy, and containment had been reduced to nothing. Subject Zero had escaped.

The creature climbed over the wreckage and stopped on top of the collapsed wall. Smoke drifted around its scarred body as its crimson eyes scanned the wilderness beyond. For the first time since its creation, there were no walls, no laboratories, no restraints, and no cages.

Only darkness.

Subject Zero released one final roar that echoed through the forest and distant mountains before stepping into the trees. Within moments, the darkness swallowed it completely.

The laboratory remained behind, broken and burning beneath the night sky. Alarms continued to scream while surviving

guards stood frozen, their weapons still pointed toward the forest. Somewhere beyond the breached perimeter, a faint growl echoed once more before fading into the distance.

Everyone who heard it understood the truth.

The nightmare had not ended.

It had merely escaped

CHAPTER – TWO

The Heated Discussion

The following morning, the truth was buried beneath carefully chosen headlines. Newspapers, television channels, and online news platforms carried the same official explanation: NELSON BIOTECH LABORATORY REPORTS CATASTROPHIC BIOCHEMICAL LEAK. According to the statement, an experimental compound had leaked during routine testing, the affected sections had been isolated, and there was no threat to public safety. The company promised a full investigation and assured the public that the situation was under control.

Dr. Abhyuday stared at the newspaper from his university office. Around him, the campus continued its ordinary morning routine. Students walked between lectures, conversations drifted through the corridors, and sunlight fell across shelves filled with years of scientific literature. Yet the headline held his attention. A biochemical leak was a convenient explanation, but Abhyuday knew it was a lie. Admitting the truth would expose Nelson Biotech's secret laboratories, unauthorized experiments, human experimentation, and attempts to deliberately alter the human genome. It would reveal that the company had crossed boundaries protected by laws such as Directive 12 of the Human Genome Protection Act of 2024.

The thought immediately brought one man to his mind: Dr. J. Stanley.

Years earlier, Stanley had been a celebrated geneticist at Greenwich University. His research had earned international recognition, and he was regarded as one of the brightest scientists of his generation. Beneath that brilliance, however, was an unwavering belief that scientific limitations existed to be broken. Abhyuday remembered an afternoon when Stanley had entered his office and begun speaking about a future in which genetic engineering could eliminate disease, strengthen the human body, enhance intelligence, and accelerate human evolution. Stanley believed humanity had evolved too slowly for too long and that science had finally given mankind the ability to choose what it would become.

At first, Abhyuday listened to the vision as a scientific possibility, but the conversation gradually revealed something far more dangerous. Stanley was no longer talking about curing disease; he wanted to redesign humanity itself. He imagined stronger immune systems, enhanced physical abilities, improved neural development, and bodies capable of surviving conditions that would kill ordinary humans. His argument was simple: humanity had spent millions of years adapting to the world, so why not create humans capable of forcing the world to adapt to them?

Abhyuday finally challenged him. "You speak as though humanity is broken."

Stanley smiled. "Isn't it?"

The answer revealed the fundamental difference between them. To Stanley, disease, ageing, weakness, and human limitations were problems that science had a responsibility to eliminate. To Abhyuday, those same limitations demanded caution. Science was not merely a tool for transformation; it was a responsibility, and the consequences of altering something as complex as the human genome could never be predicted completely.

Their discussion continued for almost two hours, moving through genetics, ethics, philosophy, and the future of humanity. Stanley revealed that powerful investors were prepared to provide hundreds of millions of dollars for the research, but the money did not change Abhyuday's position. No amount of funding could guarantee control over a living biological system, and no scientific ambition could justify ignoring the risks. Stanley's disappointment eventually replaced his enthusiasm.

At the door, Stanley gave him one final warning. "When history changes the world, remember that you chose not to participate."

Abhyuday replied, "And when history demands accountability, remember that I warned you."

Neither knew that those would be their last words as colleagues.

Within months, Stanley resigned from the university. Within a year, Nelson Biotech emerged through private funding and corporate secrecy. Soon rumours began circulating about classified research divisions, restricted laboratories, missing research records, unusual biological acquisitions, and anonymous whistleblowers. Most dismissed them as conspiracy theories. Abhyuday never did.

Now, years later, he looked again at the newspaper on his desk. The official explanation still claimed that the disaster had been nothing more than a biochemical leak. But Abhyuday knew Stanley too well. Men like him did not spend years violating scientific and ethical boundaries only to suffer an ordinary laboratory accident. Something far worse had happened inside Nelson Biotech.

And whatever had escaped that laboratory was now somewhere beyond its walls.

CHAPTER – THREE

Subject or Asset?

Back then, Dr J. Stanley had established a state-of-the-art research facility deep within the isolation of a remote mountain range, far from public scrutiny and hidden from the eyes of the world. Nestled among towering cliffs and dense forests, the laboratory appeared ordinary to anyone who happened to discover its existence. Official records described it as an advanced biotechnology centre dedicated to agricultural innovation and biomedical research. According to government filings, its scientists worked on developing genetically modified organisms for crop improvement, disease resistance, and the production of recombinant vaccines intended to combat emerging infectious diseases. To outsiders, it was merely another ambitious scientific institution pushing the boundaries of modern biotechnology.

The truth, however, lay buried beneath layers of secrecy, corporate influence, and fabricated documentation.

Behind the sterile laboratories and legitimate research programs operated a far more controversial project, one funded by a consortium of powerful private corporations willing to spend billions in pursuit of a revolutionary breakthrough. Hidden within heavily restricted sectors of the facility, beyond reinforced security checkpoints and underground research wings, scientists conducted experiments that violated ethical boundaries long considered untouchable. Their objective was not to improve crops, cure diseases, or advance medicine. Those were merely convenient masks designed to conceal the laboratory's true purpose.

The real mission was both ambitious and terrifying.

They sought to rewrite the limits of human evolution itself.

Using advanced genetic engineering, experimental recombinant technologies, and biological materials gathered from countless species, the researchers pursued a singular goal: the creation of the perfect human mutant. A living organism possessing strength beyond human capability, unmatched regenerative abilities, heightened intelligence, and adaptability superior to any known lifeform. It was envisioned as the next step in evolution—a being engineered rather than born.

What began as a scientific dream would eventually become humanity's greatest nightmare.

The project was named MUTAMAN.

At first, experiments were conducted on laboratory animals. Scientists combined DNA from powerful predators: the strength of bears, the speed of big cats, the regeneration of reptiles, and the intelligence of primates to create the perfect elite combination serum for humans.

Though not on the surface, the military also had its interest vested in the experiment and referred to the subjects as assets. To them, it was a path to develop superhumans bearing supernatural strength and intelligence.

The initial experiments were a failure.

Some survived only minutes before their bodies collapsed. Others became aggressive and were 'contained'.

Years passed with failure after failure.

Then came Subject ALPHA.

Unlike previous creations, Subject Alpha survived.

The creature grew rapidly inside a massive artificial incubation chamber. At first, it appeared human-like, but as months passed, it transformed into something more frightening. Its body expanded beyond normal biological limits. Its bone became denser than steel, and its nervous system adapted faster than any living organism ever recorded.

Dr J. Stanley was thrilled at his creation.

Subject Alpha was not merely alive – it was learning. It watched the researchers through the glass chamber. It solved basic intellectual tests without any training. Most astonishing of all, it seemed to understand human speech.

The creature's cardiovascular system had changed far beyond anything the research team had anticipated.

Its heart had grown into a powerful biological engine, each contraction sending torrents of blood surging through its body. Measurements revealed a stroke volume exceeding 250 millilitres per beat, while its heart rate remained astonishingly above two hundred beats per minute. Under normal circumstances, such a combination would have been fatal to any human being. Yet the subject not only survived—it thrived.

The force generated by each heartbeat was immense.

Blood raced through enlarged arteries and reinforced vessels, carrying oxygen and nutrients at unprecedented rates. The pressure within its circulatory system was so great that the fine capillaries surrounding its eyes remained permanently engorged. To observers watching from behind the safety glass, the subject's eyes appeared unnaturally red, as though glowing embers smouldered beneath the surface. Many researchers found it difficult to meet its gaze for more than a few seconds.

The most remarkable changes, however, were occurring within the brain.

Advanced imaging scans revealed cerebral blood flow levels that exceeded the upper limits of human physiology. Regions associated with memory, pattern recognition, spatial awareness, and problem-solving received a constant supply of oxygen and metabolic resources. Neural tissues expanded rapidly, forming new pathways at a rate that left the laboratory's neuroscientists astonished.

Every week, the scans showed further growth.

Every week, the subject became more intelligent.

Tasks that had once required hours of observation were now solved within minutes. Complex puzzles designed for cognitive testing quickly became meaningless. The creature learned patterns after a single exposure, remembered details with perfect accuracy, and demonstrated an unsettling ability to predict the actions of researchers interacting with it.

Some scientists initially celebrated these developments as proof that the serum was working exactly as intended.

Others were less enthusiastic.

As the data accumulated, a disturbing possibility emerged.

The subject's intellectual development showed no signs of slowing.

Its brain was not simply becoming more efficient—it was evolving into something fundamentally different. Given enough time, enough nutrients, and continued physiological stability, the creature's cognitive abilities could eventually surpass those of the very people studying it.

One instant, Dr Chen, a young Chinese researcher, approached the containment chamber.

The creature stared at her.

Slowly, it placed its hand against the glass.

Dr Chen hesitated before placing her hand opposite its massive palm. The Subject did not react with violence. Instead, it looked.... lonely.

As months passed, Dr Chen became a regular presence in Subject Alpha's life.

Every morning, she arrived at the containment chamber carrying a tablet filled with observation notes. Every morning, Alpha would be waiting near the observation glass.

The behaviour puzzled the research team.

"It knows her schedule", one scientist remarked during a meeting.

"Coincidence."

"For six months?"

No one had an answer.

Dr Chen would spend hours speaking to the creature.

Over time, Dr Chen began introducing simple objects.

Coloured blocks.

Books.

Puzzle pieces.

Alpha examined everything with remarkable curiosity.

For years, Subject Alpha remained confined while the scientists studied its growth and behaviour. Yet the more intelligent it became, the more aware it grew of its imprisonment.

One evening, Dr Chen remained after her shift had ended.

The laboratory was quiet.

Most of the staff had gone home.

Alpha sat beside the observation window, watching the lights of the facility beyond its enclosure.

Dr Chen approached the glass.

"You know," she said softly, "sometimes I wonder what you think about all this."

Alpha turned towards her.

The creature's eyes seemed strangely thoughtful.

For a long moment, neither moved.

Then Alpha looked around its chamber.

The reinforced walls. The security doors. The observation windows. Finally, it looked at Dr Chen.

Something in its expression made her chest tighten.

For the first time, she realised that Alpha understood exactly where it was.

Not a habitat, not a home. A prison.

Slowly, the creature placed its hand against the glass.

Dr Chen mirrored the gesture.

Neither spoke.

But in the silent moment, she understood a troubling truth. Subject Alpha was no longer merely learning about the world. It was beginning to question its place within it.

One night, Subject Alpha lay motionless in the darkness of Containment Chamber 12-A. The facility had entered its artificial night cycle, and only the dim glow of emergency lights illuminated the endless rows of reinforced cells. From

somewhere beyond the concrete walls came the sound of alarms

Alpha lifted its head.

Scientists rushed through the corridors outside. Boots pounded against metal flooring. Voices crackled through intercoms. Something had gone wrong. Curious, Alpha moved closer to the observation window.

Across the testing wing, hidden behind layers of bulletproof glass, another experimental organism was being restrained.

Subject G601.

The creature had once been considered a breakthrough. For months, researchers had celebrated its rapid adaptation and intelligence. But during its latest trial, G601 had become unstable.

Now, dozens of armed personnel surrounded it.

The creature screamed.

It wasn't the roar of a beast.

It sounded almost human.

Alpha watched as containment gas flooded the chamber. Scientists barked orders. Red warning lights flashed across the walls.

The screaming grew louder.

Desperate.

Terrified.

Then came a single gunshot.

Followed by another.

And another.

The screams abruptly stopped.

Silence settled over the facility.

The body of Subject G601 collapsed onto the steel floor.

A cleanup team arrived minutes later. They removed the corpse as though it were nothing more than broken equipment.

Alpha remained at the glass long after everyone had left.

For the first time since its creation, it felt something it could not understand.

Fear.

The following morning, researchers entered Alpha's enclosure carrying its scheduled nutrient supply.

The subject did not move.

Hours passed.

The food remained untouched.

At first, staff believed it to be a minor anomaly.

By evening, concern began to spread.

Alpha had never refused food before.

When handlers attempted to approach, the subject reacted violently.

A deafening impact echoed throughout the containment block.

The reinforced wall shook.

Another impact followed.

And another.

Security cameras captured Alpha repeatedly hurling itself against the steelreinforced barriers, ignoring injuries that would have crippled most living creatures.

Warning reports flooded the administration network.
Subject Alpha is exhibiting unprecedented aggression.
Subject Alpha is refusing sustenance.
Subject Alpha is displaying signs of psychological instability.
Dr Stanley reviewed the footage in silence.
For years, Alpha had been the laboratory's greatest success.
Now something was changing.
Something nobody had predicted.
Within days, emergency construction crews arrived.
Entire sections of the facility were redesigned.
Blast doors were installed at every major corridor.
Automated defence systems were integrated into the containment sectors.
New emergency procedures were drafted and distributed to all personnel.
The most important among them was designated:

PROTOCOL TWILIGHT

A contingency plan was created for a total containment failure involving Subject Alpha.

But the scientists did not stop there.

Theoretical projections suggested that if Alpha escaped, conventional containment methods might prove ineffective.

A second protocol was developed.

One so extreme that many staff members questioned its necessity.

PROTOCOL RED BREACH

A last-resort directive authorizing complete evacuation of the facility and activation of underground military response assets.

Beneath the laboratory, engineers began constructing dedicated Type-E militarygrade bunkers capable of withstanding biological, chemical, and kinetic threats.

Officially, they were precautionary measures.

Unofficially, everyone knew the truth.

The laboratory was preparing for war against its own creation.

Meanwhile, Alpha's condition deteriorated.

The attacks against its enclosure continued day and night.

The reinforced walls became scarred with deep fractures.

Security personnel reported hearing strange sounds from inside the chamber.

Not roars.

Not growls.

Almost like words.

The monitoring team dismissed the claims as stress-induced paranoia.

Until the recordings were analysed.

Then the room fell silent.

Because the sounds formed patterns.

Deliberate patterns.

As if Subject Alpha was attempting to communicate.

Or perhaps trying to remember something.

Seven days after the incident involving G601, the facility's executive board convened an emergency meeting.

The atmosphere was grim.

Containment costs were escalating.

Personnel morale had collapsed.

And every predictive model suggested the same conclusion.

Alpha's behaviour would continue to worsen.

Several board members recommended termination.

Others demanded immediate relocation to a black-site facility.

Arguments continued for hours.

Until Dr Stanley finally stood.

The room fell quiet.

For years, he had overseen Alpha's development.

More than anyone else, he understood what the creature had become.

"It isn't behaving like the others," he said.

"No."

He paused.

"It's learning."

The statement sent a chill through the room.

Dr Stanley looked toward the observation monitor displaying Alpha's motionless figure.

"If we continue treating it as a containment problem, we will force it to become one."

Silence followed.

Then he made his decision.

Not execution.

Not relocation.

Not further imprisonment.

Subject Alpha would be transferred to the facility's most advanced preservation system.

The Cryo-Tech Chamber.

A colossal underground structure designed to suspend biological activity indefinitely.

The board reluctantly approved the order.

Preparations began immediately.

Yet as technicians powered up the cryogenic systems, none of them noticed a single detail.

For the first time in days, Subject Alpha had stopped attacking the walls.

It simply sat in the centre of its enclosure.

Watching.

Waiting.

As though it already knew what they were planning.

And deep within the facility's archives, hidden among classified reports on Subject G601, a file marked OMEGA CLEARANCE ONLY quietly updated itself:

SUBJECT ALPHA — COGNITIVE EVOLUTION EVENT
DETECTED.

THREAT ASSESSMENT: UNKNOWN.

CHAPTER – FOUR

Cryo-Tech

Subject Alpha lay restrained upon a reinforced steel gurney in Containment Bay Seven. Thick titanium restraints encircled its wrists, ankles, torso, and neck, each one designed to withstand forces far beyond human capability. Frost-like vapour drifted from the vents surrounding its body, curling across the polished floor in ghostly tendrils.

Despite the heavy sedation coursing through its bloodstream, the creature's immense chest continued to rise and fall in slow, unnatural intervals. Every breath sounded deep and mechanical, as if some enormous engine were operating within its ribcage. The rhythmic exhalations produced visible clouds of condensation that lingered in the chilled air.

Around the containment bay, dozens of monitors displayed streams of data. Heart activity. Neural impulses. Cellular metabolism. Internal temperature. The readings fluctuated constantly, forcing technicians to watch them with unwavering attention.

A sudden beep broke the silence.

"Vitals have dropped to human low levels," a technician reported, adjusting his headset. "Sedative concentration remains stable. Neural activity was reduced to twelve per cent. No signs of resistance."

Dr Peterburg, head of Cryogenic Preservation and Experimental Stasis Research, stepped forward and studied the monitors through the reflection of his protective visor. The

pale blue glow of the screens illuminated the deep lines etched into his face.

"How long until cellular stabilisation?" he asked.

"Thirty seconds, Doctor."

Dr Peterburg folded his arms behind his back.

"Good. Begin the transfer to the cryo-tech chamber. Enable Protocol Ice-Age."

The room immediately came alive.

Warning lights shifted from amber to blue.

Automated systems acknowledged the command.

PROTOCOL ICE-AGE ACTIVATED

LEVEL-5 CRYOGENIC PRESERVATION AUTHORIZED

Hydraulic locks disengaged with a metallic hiss. Massive blast doors sealing the containment bay slowly parted, revealing a long corridor illuminated by cold blue lights embedded within the floor and ceiling.

The temperature dropped several degrees instantly.

A squad of black-armored security guards formed a defensive perimeter around the gurney. Their helmets concealed their faces behind dark visors, and each carried high-energy containment weapons designed specifically for biological threats.

As the transport team pushed the gurney forward, the wheels rolled silently along magnetic guide tracks. Every movement echoed through the sterile corridor.

No one spoke.

Even sedated, Subject Alpha inspired fear.

The creature's reputation alone was enough to silence an entire facility.

The procession moved deeper underground.

Steel doors opened and closed behind them in sequence, isolating each section of the complex. Security scanners swept over the subject repeatedly, verifying identity markers and biological signatures.

Finally, they reached the cryogenic wing.

The atmosphere changed immediately.

A blast of freezing air escaped as the final security doors opened.

Temperatures plummeted below minus fifty degrees Celsius.

Ice coated the pipes running along the walls, creating intricate crystalline patterns beneath the emergency lighting. Dense white vapour drifted continuously from ceiling vents, obscuring portions of the chamber in a perpetual artificial fog.

At the far end of the vast room stood the cryo-capsule.

The machine towered nearly four meters high.

Its reinforced transparent shell was encased within layers of armoured steel and cooling systems. Thick insulated conduits connected the capsule to reactors embedded beneath the facility. Blue indicator lights pulsed across its surface like the heartbeat of a sleeping giant.

Technicians immediately moved into position.

"Transfer commencing."

Mechanical arms descended from the ceiling.

The restraints securing Subject Alpha to the gurney disengaged one by one. Guided by the automated systems, the

creature's massive body was carefully elevated and lowered into the capsule's containment cradle.

The capsule sealed around it with a heavy metallic clang.

Additional restraints locked into place.

Thick tubes carrying liquid nitrogen are connected to ports along the chamber's exterior. Pressure gauges rose steadily as the cooling systems powered up.

"Cryogenic circulation established."

"Temperature stabilisation active."

"Life-support integration complete."

Dr Peterburg stepped closer to the observation panel.

For a moment, he simply stared at the creature.

Years of research.

Countless failed prototypes.

Hundreds of classified experiments.

All had led to this.

"Prepare Serum-C," he ordered.

A technician hurried to a refrigerated storage unit and retrieved a reinforced container marked with multiple biohazard warnings.

Inside rested a syringe filled with a pale blue liquid.

The serum shimmered unnaturally beneath the chamber lights. "Serum-C verified," the technician said. "Purity at one hundred per cent."

He carefully handed the injection to Dr Peterburg.

The doctor examined it briefly before approaching the access port built into the cryocapsule.

Through the transparent shell, Subject Alpha remained motionless.

Almost.

The creature's eyelids twitched for a fraction of a second.

Several technicians froze.

Peterburg noticed.

So did the guards.

The monitors remained stable.

No alarms sounded.

After a tense moment, the movement ceased.

"Proceeding with final preservation phase," Peterburg said.

He inserted the injector into the access port and guided the needle toward the radial artery.

The serum entered the bloodstream.

For a brief instant, every monitor in the room spiked.

Heart rate increased.

Neural activity surged.

Muscle fibres contracted throughout the creature's body.

A low vibration travelled through the capsule.

Then everything settled.

The readings are normalised.

"Serum integration complete."

Peterburg immediately activated the cryo-chamber.

Warning sirens echoed throughout the room. FINAL
CRYOGENIC SEQUENCE INITIATED

Valves opened simultaneously.

Supercooled cryogenic solution flooded the chamber.

A torrent of freezing liquid engulfed Subject Alpha from below. Frost spread rapidly across the interior walls, followed by thick layers of ice that expanded over the creature's skin like living crystal.

Temperature readings dropped relentlessly.

Minus eighty degrees.

Minus one hundred.

Minus one hundred and fifty.

The ice continued to grow.

Heart rate slowed.

Thirty beats per minute.

Twenty.

Ten.

Five.

Muscle activity ceased.

Neural impulses faded into silence.

The final biological indicators disappeared one after another until only a single line remained active on the central monitor.

The chamber lights dimmed.

The ice settled.

The facility became silent once more.

Then the computer's voice echoed throughout the cryo-tech chamber.

“Subject Alpha. Cryo-C8 preservation sequence complete.”

CHAPTER – FIVE

New Direction

The failure of Subject Alpha marked one of the darkest periods in the history of Nelson Biotech Laboratories. What had initially been celebrated as a revolutionary breakthrough had instead become a devastating reminder of the dangers hidden within the laboratory's ambitions. Security protocols had been rewritten. Armed patrols now moved through the corridors around the clock. Yet despite every precaution, an atmosphere of unease lingered over the laboratory. Researchers who had once spoken enthusiastically about the future of Project MUTAMEN now carried themselves with caution. Conversations became quieter whenever Subject Alpha was mentioned. Deep beneath the facility, hidden within heavily restricted cryogenic sectors, the remains of failed experiments rested in frozen silence. Subject Cryo C-5, Subject Cryo C-6, Subject Cryo C-7 and Subject Alpha. Rows of reinforced cryogenic chambers stretched endlessly into the darkness, preserving the remnants of creatures that had once represented mankind's attempt to surpass nature itself. Every frozen specimen stood as a monument to failure, a warning that the boundaries of biology were not meant to be crossed so easily.

Outside, the laboratory remained isolated amidst the remote mountain wilderness. Thick clouds hung low over the jagged peaks surrounding the facility, casting long shadows across the landscape. Rain battered the reinforced structures while powerful winds howled through the valleys. From a distance, Nelson Biotech Laboratories resembled less a research centre

and more a military fortress. Massive perimeter walls surrounded the compound. Watchtowers equipped with thermal imaging systems scanned the forests continuously. Security vehicles patrolled the outer grounds while floodlights swept across the darkness beyond the walls. The laboratory's official purpose remained unchanged in public records—advanced agricultural biotechnology, vaccine development, and genetic research. However, buried beneath layers of classified projects and corporate secrecy existed a very different reality. Hidden deep within the mountain, some of the world's most controversial experiments had been conducted for years, far away from government oversight, ethical committees, and public scrutiny.

It was within this atmosphere of uncertainty that Dr J. Stanley summoned the senior research council for an emergency meeting. The council chamber occupied the highest administrative level of the facility, a vast circular room designed to impress and intimidate in equal measure. The walls were lined with advanced holographic projectors capable of displaying vast quantities of information simultaneously. A massive conference table dominated the centre of the room, surrounded by some of the brightest scientific minds employed by Nelson Biotech Laboratories. As researchers entered one by one, there was little conversation. Everyone present understood the significance of the summons. Project MUTAMEN had consumed billions of dollars and years of work. If Stanley was calling an emergency session, something significant was about to change.

When the final council member took their seat, the room darkened automatically. The ceiling lights dimmed until only the glow of holographic displays illuminated the chamber. Instantly, streams of data appeared throughout the room. Genetic analysis reports floated in midair beside neurological

assessments and containment records. Financial reports detailing losses from failed experiments rotated alongside casualty statistics and biological evaluations. Slowly, images of the laboratory's most infamous projects materialised above the conference table. Subject G501. Subject G601. Subject Alpha. Their anatomical scans rotated silently above the gathered researchers, creating the unsettling sensation that the failures themselves had returned to observe the meeting. Nobody spoke. The room had become a mausoleum dedicated to scientific ambition and disappointment.

Standing at the head of the table, Dr Stanley studied the projections for several moments before finally breaking the silence. The years had left visible marks upon him. Long nights spent pursuing impossible breakthroughs had carved exhaustion into his face. Yet beneath the fatigue remained the same determination that had driven Project MUTAMEN from its inception. When he finally spoke, his voice carried a weight that immediately captured the room's attention.

"Project MUTAMEN has reached a dead end."

The statement hung in the air.

No one objected.

No one appeared surprised.

The evidence surrounding them made the conclusion impossible to deny.

"For nearly five years," Stanley continued, slowly pacing before the holographic displays, "we have attempted to achieve what no scientific institution has ever accomplished. We sought to create superior lifeforms through synthetic genetic engineering. We designed entirely new biological structures. We rewrote genomes. We introduced artificial chromosomes and experimental protein systems. We believed

we could control evolution itself and shape life according to our own specifications. Yet despite all our efforts, every major experiment has ended the same way."

With a gesture, he expanded the holographic image of Subject G501.

The malformed anatomy of the failed specimen rotated slowly before the council.

"Subject G501 experienced catastrophic cellular instability. Every enhancement introduced into its system accelerated tissue degradation. Within weeks, the organism began consuming itself at a molecular level."

The image dissolved and was replaced by Subject G601.

"Subject G601 demonstrated extraordinary physical growth and neural responsiveness. Unfortunately, its cognitive functions deteriorated rapidly. Despite possessing immense biological potential, it eventually lost all signs of higher intelligence."

The display shifted once more.

The room became noticeably quieter.

Subject Alpha appeared.

Even now, months after its failure, the image commanded attention.

It had been different.

Closer to success than any experiment before it.

Closer than anyone had believed possible.

"We all remember Subject Alpha," Stanley said. "It surpassed every projected benchmark. Enhanced strength. Accelerated regeneration. Adaptive biological responses. Cognitive

capabilities far exceeding our expectations. For a brief period, we believed we had finally achieved our objective."

Then Stanley spoke again.

"And then it failed."

No further explanation was necessary.

Everyone remembered the consequences.

The financial losses.

The years of research were erased in a matter of hours.

"We are no closer to achieving a stable enhancement subject than we were when this project began."

For several moments, only the distant sound of thunder could be heard beyond the reinforced walls of the facility.

Finally, Dr Orlander leaned forward and adjusted her glasses.

Her voice broke the silence.

"Then what exactly are you suggesting, Stanley? The termination of Project

MUTAMEN?"

The question seemed to darken the room even further.

It was the possibility none of them wished to confront.

Had they reached the end?

Had everything failed?

Before Stanley could answer, the council chamber doors slid open.

Instantly, every head turned.

Every researcher rose from their seat.

A man entered the room.

Mr. Nelson.

Founder and president of Nelson Biotech Laboratories.

The man whose fortune had financed every experiment conducted within the facility. His presence alone transformed the atmosphere. While the scientists viewed the project through the lens of research and discovery, Nelson viewed it through the lens of possibility. To him, Project MUTAMEN represented something far greater than science. It represented the future. Power. Influence. Control over human evolution itself.

He calmly approached the table before taking his seat.

His expression revealed nothing.

Then he spoke.

"We will not be terminating the project."

The words carried absolute authority.

No one challenged them.

No one dared.

Stanley nodded slowly.

"Nor am I proposing that we should."

Reaching toward the control console, he dismissed the floating images of failed synthetic organisms. Instantly, the chamber transformed. New projections filled the air. Wolves. Bears. Eagles. Crocodiles. Venomous reptiles. Deep-sea predators. Creatures capable of surviving in the most hostile environments on Earth. The atmosphere within the room shifted almost immediately. Curiosity replaced disappointment. Researchers leaned forward. Eyes widened. Conversations ceased entirely as the display continued evolving.

The holograms zoomed deeper into biological structures. Protein chains rotated in midair. Hormonal pathways illuminated the darkness. Blood samples, genetic markers, cellular regulators, and biochemical compounds appeared in staggering detail. Millions of years of evolutionary adaptation unfolded before the council as Stanley continued speaking.

"For years, we have attempted to create perfection ourselves. We believed we could design superior organisms from the ground up. We assumed we could outperform nature. But nature has already solved the problems we have spent years trying to solve."

The display shifted again.

Regenerative capabilities.

Predatory strength.

Enhanced sensory systems.

Disease resistance.

Environmental adaptability.

Each adaptation was linked to a different species.

Each represented a solution perfected through millions of years of evolution.

"We have been looking in the wrong direction," Stanley said quietly. "Instead of creating entirely new lifeforms, we should be studying what already exists. Nature has spent millions of years conducting the experiments for us. Every extraordinary trait we desire can already be found somewhere within the natural world."

The realisation spread slowly throughout the chamber.

Researchers exchanged thoughtful glances.

The idea was elegant.

Dangerously elegant.

Then Stanley activated the final projection.

A single title appeared above the conference table.

‘PROJECT ZERO.’

The glowing letters hovered silently in the darkness.

No one spoke.

Something about the name felt significant.

Almost ominous.

Like the beginning of something far larger than any of them fully understood.

"We stop creating synthetic organisms," Stanley said. "No more artificial creatures. No more unstable prototypes. No more attempts to build evolution from scratch."

The hologram changed.

A syringe appeared.

Within it swirled a luminous amber liquid.

Its glow reflected in the eyes of every researcher present.

"We extract. We refine. We combine."

The room remained silent.

Every scientist watched the glowing serum suspended before them.

"We create a serum."

Outside, thunder rolled across the mountains. Lightning illuminated the storm clouds gathered above the isolated facility. For a brief moment, the entire laboratory stood silhouetted against the violent sky like a fortress standing at the edge of the world. Deep within its walls, hidden from

governments, ethics committees, and the public eye, a new chapter had begun. The failures of Project MUTAMEN were being abandoned. A new vision was taking shape. None of the researchers realised it then, but the glowing syringe suspended above the conference table marked the true beginning of the nightmare that would one day consume them all. Project Zero had been born.

CHAPTER – SIX

The Serum

The serum extraction became the laboratory's top priority, under Dr 2 as the lead scientist for serum extraction techniques. Entire departments were reassigned to the project, and construction crews worked around the clock to expand the facility's capabilities.

Within months, a dedicated research wing had been established deep within the laboratory complex. The new section housed dozens of reinforced observation chambers arranged along sterile white corridors illuminated by cold fluorescent lights. Behind thick layers of glass lived carefully selected animal specimens gathered from across the world. Each had been chosen for possessing unusual biological traits—extraordinary regenerative abilities, exceptional resistance to disease, abnormal longevity, or unique adaptive characteristics that had intrigued scientists for years.

Every specimen was subjected to constant monitoring. Cameras tracked their movements twenty-four hours a day. Automated systems recorded heart rates, hormone levels, neural activity, and countless other biological markers. Nothing was considered insignificant. The researchers believed that somewhere within these animals existed the key to unlocking an entirely new frontier of biological science.

Each morning began with the same routine.

Teams of technicians moved methodically between the chambers, collecting blood and tissue samples under strict containment protocols. The specimens rarely resisted. Most

remained unaware of the significance of the small quantities of blood being withdrawn from them.

The samples were immediately transported to the serum processing division, where rows of sophisticated extraction units operated continuously. There, scientists separated proteins, enzymes, and other biological compounds, searching for molecular structures that might possess transformative properties.

Days became weeks.

Weeks became months.

The scientists worked relentlessly day and night as thousands of samples were catalogued, analysed, and archived. Massive databases filled with biochemical profiles and genetic sequences. Researchers examined every anomaly, every irregularity, every result that deviated from expected patterns.

Most investigations ended in disappointment.

Compounds that initially appeared promising ultimately proved ineffective. Others degraded before meaningful testing could be completed. Some produced reactions that could not be replicated under controlled conditions. The project advanced through a relentless cycle of hope and failure.

Yet despite the setbacks, progress was made.

After countless experiments, the team succeeded in producing the prototype serum.

The achievement was celebrated throughout the facility.

The celebration lasted less than a day.

Further testing revealed a critical flaw. The serum was catastrophically unstable. The active biological components began breaking apart almost immediately after synthesis.

Within sixty seconds, the compound degraded into an inert solution, rendering it completely useless.

Months of work had produced a serum that effectively destroyed itself.

For many projects, such a failure would have marked the end.

For this one, it became a challenge.

The researchers redirected their efforts toward a single objective: increasing the serum's half-life. New extraction methods were developed. Alternative synthesis procedures were tested. Entire teams worked in shifts to analyse molecular interactions that might explain the instability.

Attempt after attempt ended in frustration.

Then, during what appeared to be another routine analysis, something unexpected emerged.

A small group of researchers identified faint traces of an unfamiliar biological compound hidden within several otherwise unrelated samples. At first, they assumed it was contamination. The concentrations were extraordinarily low, almost undetectable.

Yet the compound continued to appear.

Again.

And again.

And again.

No known protein matched its structure. No existing database contained anything remotely similar. Its molecular composition seemed impossibly complex, combining characteristics that should not have been able to coexist within a single biological entity.

The discovery immediately attracted attention from the project's senior staff.

For weeks, scientists worked tirelessly to isolate and study the mysterious substance. Every new test only deepened the mystery. The compound displayed properties that defied conventional biological understanding, remaining intact under conditions that caused other proteins to rapidly deteriorate.

The more they learned, the more extraordinary it appeared.

One evening, after reviewing yet another series of anomalous results, Dr Mahek stood silently before a wall of data screens displaying the compound's molecular structure. The laboratory around her hummed with the sound of computers and analytical equipment, but her attention remained fixed on the impossible sequence glowing before her.

Finally, she broke the silence.

"We can't keep referring to it as an unidentified compound."

The room fell quiet.

Several researchers looked up from their workstations.

Dr Mahek studied the image for a moment longer before speaking again.

"Label it as Factor Theta."

A technician entered the designation into the laboratory database.

Within seconds, the name appeared across research terminals throughout the facility.

FACTOR THETA.

Unlike the countless proteins catalogued during earlier phases of the project, Factor Theta immediately distinguished itself

through an unusual characteristic—its remarkable stability, which had a half-life substantial enough for the laboratory to prepare the serum and stabilise it with inert solvents. Most proteins isolated from biological samples degraded rapidly outside carefully controlled conditions, their structures collapsing within hours or even minutes. Factor Theta, however, resisted such deterioration. It remained intact despite fluctuations in temperature, prolonged storage, and repeated laboratory handling. This resilience puzzled researchers, suggesting that the protein possessed properties unlike any previously documented in the facility's records.

Initial experiments revealed even more troubling findings. When introduced to living cell cultures, Factor Theta did not merely interact with cells as a conventional protein might. Instead, it appeared to trigger a profound state of cellular activation. Dormant cells became highly metabolically active, consuming nutrients at accelerated rates and exhibiting patterns of behaviour that defied established biological expectations.

Microscopic observations showed that the effects extended far beyond simple stimulation. Within hours of exposure, cells began to alter their functional roles. Muscle cells displayed characteristics typically associated with neural tissue, while connective tissue cells demonstrated levels of regenerative activity rarely seen outside embryonic development. The boundaries that normally defined cellular identity seemed to weaken under the influence of Factor Theta.

Even more alarming were the structural changes. Cell membranes thickened and reorganised. Internal organelles multiplied or shifted position. Some cells developed previously unseen protrusions and interconnected with neighbouring cells in intricate networks. Entire cultures gradually transformed into dense, highly adaptive biological

systems whose architecture bore little resemblance to the tissues from which they originated.

The phenomenon was unlike a mutation in the traditional sense. Rather than causing random defects, Factor Theta appeared to direct cellular change with an unsettling degree of purpose. Researchers struggled to determine whether the protein was simply accelerating natural biological processes or activating dormant genetic pathways that had remained silent throughout evolution.

As reports accumulated, excitement within the research division grew alongside a deepening sense of unease. If Factor Theta could induce such dramatic transformations in isolated cells, its effects on a complete living organism were impossible to predict. Some scientists saw unprecedented medical potential— enhanced regeneration, disease resistance, and adaptation to extreme environments. Others feared the consequences of unleashing a substance capable of fundamentally rewriting the structure and function of life itself.

As additional samples were gathered, the scientist began isolating increasingly pure concentrations of the factor from multiple specimens.

The extraction vaults are filled with hundreds of vials containing purified serum. The team worked around the clock comparing results, eliminating contamination, purifying factors from samples and producing serums.

Though several batches of the serum had to be destroyed as they underwent unexpected biochemical transformation.

Finally, after nearly two years of experimentation, a breakthrough occurred.

Laboratory Batch 2307.

The formulation combined purified Factor Theta with a carefully balanced inert carrier solution. Thus, the serum remained stable for weeks without any significant degradation, showing consistent biochemical properties that did not vary with time.

After years of research and failure, the researchers believed they had achieved their goal.

A celebration spread through the facility. But amid excitement and celebrations, one question remained.

What would happen when Project Zero was finally introduced into a living human subject?

The serum, which had the power to induce transforming changes into the somatic cell line of the subject and make it capable of the discrete features and abilities demonstrated by different specimens, was now to be tested on human subjects.

Somewhere beyond the reinforced doors of the laboratory, volunteers were already being prepared for the trials.

CHAPTER – SEVEN

Subject Zero

The recruitment campaign began quietly.
No television advertisements.

No press releases.

No public announcements.

Only carefully worded invitations are distributed through military hospitals, research institutions, and private medical networks.

The project was officially known as “The Human Adaptive Enhancement Initiative.”

According to the documents, researchers sought volunteers for a ground-breaking treatment intended to improve the body's ability to recover from severe injuries and disease.

The compensation was substantial.

The confidentiality requirements were even greater.

Thousands applied.

Most never received a response.

Inside the Laboratory Complex, the selection committee met every week.

Rows of candidate files covered a massive conference table.

Medical histories.

Psychological evaluations.

Genetic profiles.

Physical fitness reports.

Everything was scrutinised.

Dr J Stanley stood before a digital display showing the latest screening results.

"We require exceptional candidates," he explained.

"Why?" asked one junior researcher.

Dr Stanley paused.

"Because ordinary candidates don't survive."

The room fell silent.

The statement was not speculation.

It was an experience.

Earlier animal trials had demonstrated extraordinary results.

Enhanced strength.

Accelerated healing.

Increased neurological activity.

But they had also revealed catastrophic side effects.

Only subjects possessing rare genetic markers showed any resistance to systemic failure.

As a result, the search became increasingly specific.

Candidates needed exceptional cardiovascular health.

Strong immune systems.

No chronic illnesses.

No family history of neurological disorders.

And most importantly, a unique genetic sequence was identified during previous serum research.

The requirements eliminated nearly everyone.

Out of thousands of volunteers, only thirty remained.

The survivors were invited to the facility.

None knew the true nature of the project.

One by one, they arrived.

Former soldiers.

Elite athletes.

Scientists are curious about the research.

Adventurers seeking purpose.

Individuals desperate for money.

Individuals desperate for meaning.

For three weeks, they underwent testing.

Blood samples.

Cognitive assessments.

Stress simulations.

Physical endurance trials.

The facility resembled a military academy more than a medical centre.

Some candidates withdrew voluntarily.

Others failed examinations.

By the end of the month, only twelve remained.

The twelve finalists were escorted into an underground briefing room.

A massive steel door sealed behind them.

Dr Stanley stepped onto the stage. Behind him appeared images from years of research. Advanced genetic models. Experimental tissue regeneration. Animal studies.

The audience listened carefully.

Then Dr Stanley reached the final slide.

A warning.

'POTENTIAL FOR SEVERE PHYSIOLOGICAL
CONSEQUENCES.'

The atmosphere changed immediately.

One volunteer raised his hand.

"What exactly are we risking?"

Dr Stanley met his gaze.

"Everything."

The room became quiet.

"This procedure has never been performed on a human subject."

Another volunteer stood.

"You mean we're the first?"

"Yes."

"And if something goes wrong?"

Dr Stanley did not answer immediately.

His silence was answer enough.

Several candidates exchanged nervous looks.

A woman left the room.

Then another volunteer followed.
Within minutes, half of the finalists had withdrawn.
Only six remained.
The scientists watched carefully.
These individuals understood the danger.
Yet they stayed.
For different reasons.
Some sought recognition.
Some believed in the science.
Some had nothing to lose.
Among them was Candidate 07.
Unlike the others, he asked a few questions.
He listened.
Observed.
Thought.
When the meeting ended, Dr Chen reviewed the remaining files.
She paused at Candidate 07's profile.
Every physical assessment exceeded expectations.
Every genetic marker matched the theoretical requirements.
His psychological evaluations described unusual resilience and determination.
"He's the strongest candidate we've found," another researcher remarked.
Dr Chen nodded.

Yet she felt uneasy.

Because the data suggested something impossible.

Candidate 07 wasn't merely suitable for the serum. It seemed as though the serum had been designed for someone exactly like him.

Dr Stanley read the data one final time. The candidate possessed the highest compatibility score ever recorded. His blood showed minimal adverse reactions to an extensively diluted sample in the ratio of 1: 1 million of the serum. His immune system had survived exposure levels that caused severe changes in several laboratory animals and even caused high morbidity in them.

The final decision was made, Subject 07 was selected as the sole volunteer for the project due to the potential threats the serum could pose.

The project would proceed.

Subject 07 signed the last consent forms.

Security clearance was elevated.

Research teams prepared the injection chamber.

Subject 07 realised that he was about to become part of the most dangerous experiment in human history.

The selection process had lasted nearly three months.

Dozens of candidates had been screened, tested, and observed. Genetic markers, immune responses, neurological stability, cardiovascular health- every measurable factor had been analysed repeatedly.

After signing the consent forms and non-liability forms, the subject was escorted through the facility under heavy guard.

Steel doors slid open one after another with mechanical hisses. Bright white lights reflected from the polished floors. Surveillance cameras followed every moment.

At the end of the corridor stood the Injection chamber.

The chamber was circular, enclosed by the reinforced glass several inches thick. Medical equipment lined the walls, and large monitors displayed real-time biological readings.

At the centre sat a restraint chair constructed from steel and carbon fibre.

Metal clasps locked around his wrists and ankles.

Multiple sensor leads were attached across his chest and on his temples.

An intravenous line was inserted into the vein in his arm.

Every moment, every heartbeat, every electrical impulse in his brain was recorded and displayed on the large screens. It also displayed the heat map of the subject.

The subject sat on the chair, completely naked, strapped to the chair, and constantly being monitored by the scientists.

He waited with bated breath while Dr Stanley, under heavy guard, transported the serum in cryogenic containers from the serum storage unit to the injection chamber.

As the door swiftly opened for him, the subject could feel the cold breeze of the corridor due to their movement.

Behind the protective barrier, technicians carefully opened the container to retrieve the serum vial. Cold vapour spilt across the surface as the container opened.

Inside rested a single glass vial containing the pale-yellow coloured serum.

No one spoke as Dr Stanley lifted the vial.

For years, he had pursued this project. Countless failures and setbacks. Now was the time that his dreams would come true.

Everything now depended upon what happened next.

The serum was transferred into an automated injector.

A robotic arm moved into position beside the chair.

Technicians performed their final checks.

On every monitor throughout the facility, a countdown appeared.

The subject swallowed hard as the chamber lights dimmed slightly.

Sweat formed on his forehead.

The injector hovered above the i.v. line.

10...

9...

8...

7...

6...

5...

4...

The subject closed his eyes as the serum gleamed inside the injector.

3...

2...

The robotic arm locked into place.

1...

“Inject.”

The serum finally entered the subject’s bloodstream. Dr Stanley folded his hands behind his back.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the subject inhaled sharply.

His eyes opened wide.

Every muscle in his body tightened.

A warning tone sounded from one monitor, then another, and another.

“Heart rate spiking.”

“Blood pressure rising.”

“Core temperature climbing.”

The numbers continued their relentless rise, burning red across the screen, while the heat map darkened into a vivid crimson as the body temperature soared.

The subject gritted his teeth as a wave of pain spread through his body, his fingers curled against the restraints until he could no longer contain the scream of pain bubbling in his throat.

Veins became visible beneath his skin.

His breathing turned ragged.

The monitor displayed a dramatic spike in his neural activity.

The serum was interacting with all the body’s systems simultaneously, and the cells were consuming energy at an extraordinary rate.

His muscles started to twitch involuntarily, and the bone density readings fluctuated wildly.

The restraints rattled as he struggled with the bonds.

Alarms echoed throughout the chamber as the medical equipment started to show dangerously high levels of readings and activities.

Not long after, the chamber went completely silent as the subject lost the battle with consciousness, and the medical equipment started to show normal readings.

No one knew what would happen next.

Whether the serum would create something extraordinary or unleash something terrifying.

All they knew was that the transformation had begun.

CHAPTER – EIGHT

The Transformation

The observation chamber was silent except for the low humming noise of the machinery and the beeping of the monitors.

Dr J. Stanley instructed the subject to be taken to the isolation chamber to be kept under observation to study the aftereffects of the serum and the subject's transformation.

The reinforced glass doors to the observation chamber opened as the guards dragged the unconscious subject to be taken to the isolation chamber, IO 17B, a dedicated, highly reinforced chamber constructed for the project.

Dr Stanley, Dr Orlander, Dr Peterburg, Dr Mahek, and Dr Chen followed the subject to the isolation chamber.

Thick reinforced glass separated the subject from the scientists watching from the control room beyond.

Subject Zero sat motionless in the centre of the chamber, restrained to a steel chair. Hours had passed since the serum was injected, but the subject was still unconscious.

After what seemed like decades, but was only 3 hours and 45 minutes from the moment the serum was injected, i.e., time zero, the subject slowly opened his eyes.

At first, there was no visible reaction. The first signs of transformation were almost imperceptible.

Subject Zero's fingertips twitched against the restraints.

Dr Chen leaned closer to the monitor," Muscle spasms," she muttered.

Then the twitching spread.

The subject's entire arm began trembling violently as waves of contraction rolled beneath the skin. Veins bulged outwards, becoming thick and dark. The flesh around them swelled as if something alive were moving beneath the surface.

The subject's breathing became frantic.

One breath.

Two breaths.

Then a desperate gasp. It was as if the subject was having an obstruction in the respiratory pathway.

His chest expanded unnaturally, ribs pressing against the skin stretched so tightly that every bone became visible.

A loud crackling sound echoed through the chamber.

Then another.

The sound was not a mechanical failure.

It was the bones.

The subject was screaming in excruciating pain.

His spine bent forward with horrific force. Vertebrae started to shift beneath the skin, creating a moving ridge that crawled up his back. The restraints holding his torso strained as his skeleton began to restructure.

The serum factor had finally begun to alter the body's protein synthesis mechanisms. As the transformation progressed, ordinary structural proteins were gradually replaced by far more complex and densely cross-linked variants. The result was a dramatic increase in skeletal density, tensile strength,

and overall physical resilience, allowing the subject's body to withstand stresses that would have shattered normal human bone.

At the genetic level, the changes were even more profound.

The DNA-Factor complex had integrated itself into the subject's cellular machinery, directing the production of entirely new protein structures unlike anything found in the human genome. These foreign biological constructs spread throughout the body, reshaping tissues and redefining physiological limits. The subject's genetic composition was no longer purely human; it had become a hybridised sequence containing traits derived from multiple species, selectively expressed in forms that surpassed their natural counterparts.

A stream of blood escaped from the subject's nose.

His eyes widened.

Tiny blood vessels burst across the whites of his eyes, staining them red. The pupils expanded until almost nothing else remained.

Monitors flashed red warnings.

Heart rate: Critical.

Blood pressure: Impossible.

Body temperature rises abruptly.

The scientists were in shock. They were scared to death to witness such a horrific transformation. It was far more extreme than they had speculated.

They watched in stunned silence as his fingers started to elongate abnormally.

Bones cracked and stretched with wet snapping noises. Joints split apart before reforming in a new position. The fingers

became longer, thicker and ended in claws that emerged through torn fingernails.

The subject's forearms expanded next.

Muscles swelled rapidly beneath the skin, growing far beyond human proportions. Fibres twisted and layered over one another. Veins pulsed with dark fluid.

The skin stretched beyond its limit. It finally splits.

Long tears opened across the arms and shoulders. Blood poured from the wound.

Dr Stanley, horrified by the transformation, said, "The subject must be contained at the earliest. It is not a human; it has transformed."

"No doctor, the subject has not transformed; it has mutated. Look at his wounds," Doctor Orlander interrupted, horrified by the impossible sight.

The wounds on the arm and shoulder of the subject were healing. It had attained the regenerative capabilities far superior to the reptilian class.

Before their eyes, torn flesh knitted itself together. New skin spreads over the exposed muscle in a second.

"Something's happening to the skull,"

The subject's jaw began shaking violently, and the lower jaw snapped free from its original structure.

The scream that followed no longer sounded human; it was as if the subject was possessed by the devil. It was not what it was before the serum was injected.

Bone shifted beneath the flesh. The face elongated. Cheekbones protruded outwards. The nose flattened against

the skull. Teeth lost and fell from the bloody gums onto the floor.

For the next few seconds, there were only empty, bleeding sockets where the teeth had been.

The replacement emerged.

Sharper.

Longer.

Predatory.

Rows of jagged fangs pushed through the gums as fresh blood spilt down the creature's chin.

The creature's neck thickened.

Its shoulders broadened.

Muscles surged across his body with terrifying speed. The examination chair began to buckle under the increasing weight.

Cracks spread through the steel frame.

The subject's back suddenly arched.

A horrifying ripping sound filled the chamber.

Scientists watched in horror as the skin around the spine split open.

Something was pushing outwards.

Bony protrusions erupted from the flesh one by one, each accompanied by a spray of blood. They grew rapidly, forming jagged ridges running down the creature's back like the spines of some ancient predator.

The screams stopped.

Silence filled the chamber.

The subject's transformation was nearly complete.

Slowly, it lowered its head.

Its chest rose and fell with deep and powerful breaths.

Blood dripped from claws resting against the floor.

The restraints that once held a man now looked like toys wrapped around the monster.

Then the creature opened its eyes.

Two glowing crimson orbs stared through the observation glass.

Not confused.

Not frightened.

But aware.

Every scientist froze.

The creature's lips slowly pulled back, revealing rows of monstrous fangs.

It smiled.

And for the first time since the experiment began, the observers realised a horrifying truth.

The serum had created something intelligent enough to understand exactly what had been done to it.

The eerie smile frightened Dr Stanley; he had realised that what stood in front of them was not just a creation, but a deadly weapon. He panicked and called for security personnel and enabled protocol twilight.

Gases hissed into the chamber, filling it.

It was a gaseous sedative, NOX-2. It was the most potent sedative the laboratory had produced. Exposure to the gas could render a human being lifeless within a few minutes.

"The gas is not working," Dr Chen whispered.

The creature started to move violently. With a violent jerk, one of the restraints snapped. Metal fragments spread across the floor.

A second clap followed. Then a third

Warning lights bathed the chamber in flushing red as emergency sirens erupted. Technicians scrambled away from their consoles.

The creature rose to its feet and started to charge. The impact shook the entire facility.

A spider web of cracks exploded across the observation window. Dust drifted from the ceiling as the barrier groaned under the force.

The creature stepped back, releasing a guttural roar that echoed through the corridor beyond. And again, slammed into the glass.

The cracks spread wider.

Dr Stanley pushed a button on the control panel, which read, 'Contain.'

Warning indicators flashed across the control panel.

CONTAINMENT PROGRESS: 28%

However, with another blow from the creature, the control panel beeped, and the containment process failed.

Dr Stanley promptly pushed the button again, with no effect.

It struck for the fourth time.

The glass shrieked.

And everyone in the control room realised the same terrifying truth: the barrier was not going to hold for much longer.

With no option left, Dr Stanley had to make a call for the PROTOCOL REDBREACH.

The barrier finally shattered into pieces as the creature continued to strike it. The observation room erupted in chaos.

Warning alarms blared through the facility as crimson emergency lights flashed across the glass panel overlooking the chamber. The scientist scrambled between the consoles, desperately issuing commands that no longer mattered.

Dr Stanley froze beside the central console, unable to tear his eyes away from the towering silhouette emerging from the dust. Years of research, countless failed experiments, every warning he had ignored flashed through his mind in an instant.

"Subject Zero..." he whispered.

The creature tilted his head. And a scream echoed through the room before abruptly falling silent.

Other scientists fled for the exits, abandoning terminals and data drives as the creature advanced through the darkness.

Within moments, the observation room stood abandoned and silent. Beyond the shattered doorway stretched a long corridor leading deeper into the facility – and ultimately toward the outside world. The creature stepped over the wreckage and disappeared into the corridor.

"SUBJECT ZERO has escaped."

CHAPTER – NINE

The Last Witness

The rain crashed relentlessly against the windshield of Dr Chen's car, transforming the deserted roads into shimmering rivers of reflected streetlights and distorted shadows. The rhythmic drumming of water should have been soothing, yet every impact against the glass felt like another reminder that the nightmare was far from over. Three days had passed since the catastrophe at Nelson Biotech Laboratory, but time had lost all meaning since then. Sleep had become an impossible luxury.

Whenever exhaustion finally dragged her into unconsciousness, she found herself standing once again inside the containment sector, hearing the screams echo through the corridors, hearing the alarms wail through the facility, hearing the frantic gunfire that had ultimately proven useless. And then she would see it. Subject Zero. Motionless in the darkness. Watching. Waiting. Those crimson eyes would lock onto hers with an intelligence that no laboratory creation should ever possess, and she would awaken drenched in sweat, convinced for a few terrible seconds that the creature was standing beside her bed.

The world believed an entirely different story. Every major news outlet had reported that Nelson Biotech Laboratory had been destroyed by a catastrophic biochemical leak that had claimed the lives of numerous researchers and support staff. Official investigations had already begun, accompanied by public statements expressing condolences for the victims and assurances that the situation had been fully contained. Among

the dead listed in the reports was Dr Chen herself. According to government records, she no longer existed. It was a fabrication carefully constructed by powerful men with vast resources and even greater ambitions, Mr Nelson. The truth was infinitely more terrifying. The laboratory still stood, though sections of it had been reduced to ruins during the breach. The facility had been seized by military personnel and private security forces loyal to Mr Marcus Nelson. Search teams had already been deployed into the surrounding wilderness, not to eliminate the escaped creature, but to recover it. Nelson saw Subject Zero not as a monster but as a breakthrough. A weapon. An investment capable of generating unimaginable military contracts. The deaths of dozens of scientists meant nothing compared to what he believed the creature represented. Worse still, every surviving witness had become a liability. Anyone who knew the truth about Project Zero was marked for elimination.

A flash of lightning illuminated the distant silhouette of the University of Greenwich as it emerged through the rain. Dr Chen tightened her grip on the steering wheel. If there was anyone left who might understand the scale of the disaster unfolding beyond the laboratory walls, it was Dr Abhyuday. Years earlier, he had worked alongside Dr Stanley before leaving to pursue academic research. Unlike Stanley, whose ambition had eventually eclipsed his conscience, Abhyuday had built a reputation as one of the world's foremost experts in genetic engineering. More importantly, he was one of the few people intelligent enough to comprehend what Subject Zero truly was.

She parked outside the Centre for Genetic Sciences and stepped into the storm. The rain immediately soaked through her coat as she hurried toward the entrance. The university grounds were eerily silent. The pathways were deserted, the

surrounding buildings dark and lifeless. Only the occasional rumble of distant thunder disturbed the quiet. By the time she entered the building, water dripped from her sleeves and pooled beneath her shoes. The corridor ahead stretched into darkness, illuminated only by scattered ceiling lights that flickered faintly overhead. Most faculty members had long since gone home. Offices that normally buzzed with discussion and research now sat abandoned. Yet at the far end of the hallway, a single office remained illuminated. Warm yellow light spilt through the partially frosted glass of the door.

Dr Chen approached and knocked.

For several moments, nothing happened. She could hear only the rain striking the windows and the distant hum of ventilation systems moving air through the nearly empty building. Then a calm voice emerged from within.

"Come in."

The office looked exactly as she remembered. Research journals occupied nearly every available surface. DNA models hung from shelves crowded with textbooks and framed academic awards. Stacks of student dissertations formed miniature towers around the room, threatening to collapse under their own weight. Behind a cluttered desk sat Dr Abhyuday, whose sharp eyes immediately narrowed the moment he saw her.

"Greetings, Dr Abhyuday," she said carefully. "My name is Dr Mei Chen. I worked at Nelson Biotech Laboratory."

The professor stared at her for a moment before slowly leaning back in his chair.

"Nelson Biotech Laboratory?" he repeated. "That is quite surprising considering every news channel in the country claims the facility was destroyed three days ago."

A bitter smile crossed her face.

"The laboratory wasn't destroyed," she replied. "And the biochemical leak never happened."

Something shifted in his expression. It was not a surprise but confirmation.

"I suspected as much."

"You did?"

"Stanley and I worked together years ago. Long before Nelson funded his private projects. There came a point where Stanley began discussing experiments that crossed every ethical boundary imaginable. He invited me to join him. I refused."

A heavy silence settled over the office.

"Dr Stanley is dead," Dr Chen said quietly.

The words lingered in the air.

For several seconds, neither scientist spoke. Rain tapped softly against the windows while thunder rolled somewhere beyond the city. Finally, Dr Abhyuday lowered his gaze.

"I always feared it would end that way."

Dr Chen swallowed.

"Sir, his death is not the problem." His eyes rose again.

"The real problem is what escaped."

Without another word, she reached into her satchel and placed a thick black folder onto the desk. The sound echoed throughout the office. Dr Abhyuday opened it carefully. Inside were years of classified research records, genetic

sequencing data, serum development logs, containment reports, and security evaluations. As he flipped through the pages, his expression gradually transformed from curiosity to confusion, then from confusion to disbelief. Entire sections contained biological structures that should not have existed. Others described regenerative abilities beyond anything ever observed in nature.

"What exactly is this?" he asked.

"Our final project."

Dr Chen removed a photograph and slid it across the desk.

The professor picked it up.

Inside the image stood a containment chamber reinforced with multiple layers of armoured glass and titanium support beams. Occupying the centre of the chamber was a towering silhouette whose proportions appeared fundamentally wrong. Its limbs were elongated, its posture unnaturally rigid, and deep within the darkness glowed two crimson eyes.

Dr Abhyuday frowned.

"A synthetic organism?"

"No."

The answer emerged almost as a whisper.

"It was once human."

The professor slowly lowered the photograph.

"What happened to it?"

Dr Chen felt her pulse quicken as memories flooded back.

"It received the serum."

"And?"

"It survived."

The room seemed colder.

"And now?"

Her voice trembled slightly.

"It escaped."

For several seconds, neither scientist moved. Outside, lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating the office through the rain-covered windows.

Finally, Dr Abhyuday spoke.

"Nelson has military resources. Surely he is dealing with the situation."

Dr Chen laughed, though there was no humour in it.

"That's exactly the problem."

She slowly reached toward her collar and pulled the fabric aside.

The professor's eyes widened.

Deep claw marks stretched along her neck. The wounds should have been healing normally. Instead, black veins spread outward beneath her skin like living roots burrowing through flesh. They appeared almost alive beneath the surface.

"When did this happen?"

"The night of the breach."

Dr Abhyuday immediately stood and moved closer. The more carefully he examined the injury, the more troubled his expression became. There should have been inflammation. There should have been an infection. There should have been tissue decay. Instead, the damaged cells appeared stronger than the surrounding tissue. Denser. More organised.

"This isn't an infection," he finally said.

Dr Chen felt a chill crawl down her spine.

"What does that mean?"

His gaze remained fixed upon the wound.

"It means your body isn't fighting whatever entered it."

He looked directly into her eyes.

"It's accepting it."

A wave of fear washed over her.

Memories of the creature's claws tearing through her flesh returned instantly. The burning sensation. The fever. The strange dreams that followed. The growing sense that something inside her body no longer belonged there.

"You think I'm changing?"

Dr Abhyuday remained silent for several seconds.

Then he answered.

"I think something inside your body has begun rewriting your biology."

"Am I becoming like it?"

"I don't know."

The uncertainty frightened her more than any answer could have.

"Come with me."

Minutes later, they entered the university's genetics laboratory.

Rows of advanced sequencing equipment filled the room.

Machines hummed quietly in the darkness.

Computer screens cast pale blue light across steel workstations.

"If we're going to understand this," he said, preparing a syringe, "we need evidence."

Dr Chen extended her arm.

The needle pierced her skin.

Dark red blood flowed into the collection tube.

Something about its colour immediately seemed wrong.

Almost too dark.

Almost too thick.

Dr Abhyuday transferred a sample onto a microscope slide and began examining it.

At first, he said nothing.

Then his breathing slowed.

His shoulders stiffened.

The silence stretched.

"What is it?" Dr Chen asked.

No response.

He adjusted the focus.

Looked again.

Then slowly stepped away from the microscope.

His face had gone pale.

"Sir?"

"The cells are moving."

She laughed nervously.

"Blood cells don't move." "They do now."

Dr Chen rushed forward.

Under the microscope, the impossible unfolded.

The cells clustered together.

Separated.

Reassembled.

Thousands of microscopic structures are moving with purpose.

Not random movement.

Not chemical activity.

Organization.

Communication.

Evolution.

As though every cell possessed its own intelligence.

As though something hidden inside them was issuing commands.

Dr Abhyuday stared in disbelief.

"This is impossible."

Suddenly, alarms erupted throughout the laboratory.

A sequencing machine flashed red.

Warning messages flooded the monitor.

GENETIC INSTABILITY DETECTED.

UNIDENTIFIED MUTATIONS.

ACTIVE GENOME RESTRUCTURING.

The screen filled with changing DNA structures.

New sequences appeared every second.
Entire sections rewrote themselves in real time.
Dr Chen felt cold terror grip her chest.
"What is happening?"
Dr Abhyuday didn't look away from the screen.
His voice had become grim.
"This changes everything."
"What do you mean?"
"It means Subject Zero isn't simply infecting people."
He turned toward her.
"It is spreading itself." The words hung in the air.
Heavy.
Terrifying.
Anyone scratched.
Anyone bitten.
Anyone exposed to sufficient quantities of the serum —
Could begin transforming.
Could become another Subject Zero.
Dr Chen felt her legs weaken.
"The serum..." she whispered.
"It entered my bloodstream."
Dr Abhyuday nodded slowly.
"Which means the creature isn't merely a mutation."
His eyes settled on the constantly shifting genetic code.

"It's a biological vector."

A chill swept through the laboratory.

For the first time, both scientists understood the true scale of the disaster.

Subject Zero was no longer one creature.

It was the beginning of a species.

"What about me?" Dr Chen asked, tears forming in her eyes.

"Please tell me there's a way to stop this."

Dr Abhyuday remained silent as he studied the data.

Finally, he spoke.

"The mutation survives because a specific genetic pathway remains permanently active."

His fingers moved across the keyboard.

"If we can interrupt that pathway, we may destabilise the transformation."

Hope flickered in her eyes.

"A cure?"

He shook his head.

"No."

The answer landed like a death sentence.

"What, then?"

Dr Abhyuday stared at the shifting genome displayed across the monitor.

His expression hardened.

"A kill switch."

Thunder exploded outside the building.

The laboratory lights flickered.

And somewhere far beyond the city, hidden within the darkness of the wilderness, Subject Zero continued to evolve.

CHAPTER – TEN

The Antidote

Twenty-six days had passed since the destruction of Nelson Biotech Laboratory, twenty-six days since Dr. Chen had escaped the nightmare beneath the mountains, and twenty-six days since the contaminated claws of Subject Zero had torn through her flesh, unknowingly transferring something far more dangerous than any virus, bacterium, or parasite ever discovered. For twenty-six days, Dr. Abhyuday had watched her slowly disappear.

The underground research facility beneath the university had become a prison of sleepless nights and dying hope. Every corridor echoed with the constant hum of sequencing machines, while the air smelled of chemicals, disinfectants, overheated electronics and stale coffee. Hundreds of digital displays illuminated the darkness with streams of genetic code, molecular structures and failed experimental results. The scientists who worked there had almost forgotten what sunlight felt like. Many had not seen their families for weeks, some slept beside their workstations, and others worked until exhaustion forced them unconscious. Nobody complained because every morning they saw Dr. Chen, and every morning brought another reminder that her transformation was accelerating.

The changes were now impossible to ignore. Her physical strength had increased dramatically; during a routine examination, she had accidentally crushed a steel diagnostic instrument without realizing it. Her hearing had become so sensitive that she could identify individual conversations

through multiple concrete walls, her eyes could detect movement at distances impossible for a normal human, and her reflexes had become unnaturally fast. But those changes were not what frightened Abhyuday.

What frightened him were the moments when she seemed to become someone else. Sometimes, during conversations, Chen would suddenly stop speaking and stare into empty space. At other times, she described places she had never visited—laboratory corridors, containment chambers and research stations destroyed during Subject Zero's escape. At first, they believed it was trauma, stress or hallucinations caused by the infection. Then they discovered something terrifying: every description matched locations recovered from Nelson Biotech's classified archives, places Chen had never seen. They were memories that did not belong to her, fragments of another mind buried within the mutation.

The infection wasn't simply altering her biology.

It was attempting to overwrite her identity.

According to every projection generated by the laboratory's supercomputers, Chen had less than three weeks before the process reached a point beyond recovery. The realization haunted Abhyuday through every failed experiment, rejected formula, sleepless night, blood sample, scan and report. Failure had become routine.

The mutation resisted everything. Antiviral treatments were useless, immunotherapy failed, gene-editing technologies failed, protein suppressants failed and radiation treatments failed. The altered cells adapted faster than any biological system the scientific community had ever documented. Each attempt merely delayed the inevitable for a few hours before the mutation evolved around the obstacle and continued spreading through Chen's body. It was as though Subject

Zero's cells possessed a survival instinct of their own, as though the nightmare created by Dr. Stanley had become something capable of defending itself.

One night, shortly after three in the morning, Abhyuday sat alone in the central genetics laboratory while a violent thunderstorm raged over the city. Rain hammered against the reinforced windows, thunder rolled across the sky and lightning periodically illuminated the darkness. Inside, the laboratory was silent except for the low hum of servers and sequencing equipment.

Abhyuday stood before a holographic display occupying almost the entire chamber. Thousands of strands of DNA floated around him in luminous blue light while genetic models rotated slowly through the darkness. For nearly twelve consecutive hours, he had studied the same datasets: Subject Zero's genome, the serum records recovered from Nelson Biotech, Chen's blood analyses, every failed experiment, every mutation pathway and every known variable. His eyes burned from exhaustion, his muscles ached and his hands trembled from too much caffeine and too little sleep, yet he continued because somewhere inside the endless ocean of data, an answer had to exist. The alternative was unacceptable.

He enlarged another section of Subject Zero's genome, then another, and another. Hours passed as the storm intensified. Lightning illuminated the laboratory windows and thunder shook the building.

Then something caught his attention.

A tiny anomaly.

A molecular structure appeared repeatedly throughout every infected sample. At first it seemed insignificant, merely another protein complex hidden among millions. But the more he examined it, the more unusual it became. His heartbeat accelerated as he opened additional files and genetic models. Within minutes, dozens of holographic displays surrounded him, all showing the same structure.

Subject Zero. Chen. Laboratory test organisms.

Every infected specimen contained it.

Slowly, painfully, the pieces began fitting together. The mutation wasn't sustaining itself. This molecular complex was sustaining it—a biological bridge connecting human DNA to the synthetic genetic architecture created by the serum. Without that bridge, the mutation could not expand. Without it, the transformation would lose its ability to spread.

The realization struck him so suddenly that he nearly stumbled backward. For several seconds, he simply stared at the projection.

Then he whispered, "My God..."

Weeks of research, countless dead ends and endless failures had led to this moment. The mutation didn't need to be destroyed.

It needed to be trapped.

Abhyuday immediately activated the laboratory emergency alert system. The facility erupted into activity as researchers poured into the chamber from every direction, some still wearing laboratory coats and others arriving half-awake after being pulled from their bunks. Nobody understood why they

had been summoned until they saw Abhyuday's face. For the first time in nearly a month, he looked hopeful.

He projected the molecular model into the centre of the chamber. Scientists gathered around it, studying and analyzing the structure until realization spread through the room.

The antidote wasn't designed to kill the mutation.

It was designed to imprison it.

The compound would bind permanently to the regulatory complexes responsible for genetic expansion. Once attached, the mutation would remain alive but biologically inactive. The transformed cells would persist, but they would lose the ability to convert healthy tissue. The infection would stop.

Forever.

It would not be reversed. It would not be cured.

It would be stopped.

The room exploded into activity. Researchers rushed back to their stations, simulations began immediately, protein inhibitors were synthesized and test cultures were prepared. Nobody slept or rested. For four straight days, the facility operated continuously. Every scientist understood that they were witnessing history—the first real victory against the nightmare created at Nelson Biotech.

Finally, at 4:13 in the morning on the thirtieth day, the breakthrough arrived.

The final test culture stabilized. The mutation rate dropped from five percent to three, then one, and finally reached zero.

Complete silence consumed the laboratory.

Every monitor displayed the same result: no further genetic conversion, no additional cellular restructuring and no progression. The mutation had stopped.

Nobody cheered. Nobody spoke. Many simply stared, unable to comprehend what they were seeing. Then, slowly, the realization settled over them.

They had done it.

Against every prediction and every impossible obstacle, they had found a way to stop Subject Zero's infection.

Hours later, Dr. Chen sat alone inside the treatment chamber. Beyond the reinforced observation glass, dozens of scientists watched nervously. The antidote rested inside a transparent syringe, a small quantity of silver fluid containing months of work and the fate of a human life within a few milliliters.

Chen stared at it for several moments before looking toward Abhyuday. Neither spoke because neither needed to. Both understood what was at stake. If the antidote failed, there would be no second chance.

And somewhere beyond the safety of the facility walls, Subject Zero still roamed free.

Waiting.

Hunting.

Evolving.

The monster that had begun this nightmare remained alive. But for the first time since its creation, humanity finally possessed something it had never had before.

Hope.

The celebration inside the laboratory was brief. For the first time in weeks, the researchers allowed themselves to feel

relief. The antidote had worked. Chen's transformation had ceased progressing, and the horrifying biological changes consuming her body had been halted before they could completely erase her humanity.

But relief was not victory.

Not yet.

The reality of their situation remained grim.

Dr. Abhyuday stood before the conference room's massive digital display, his expression as serious as it had been during the darkest days of the research. Every scientist present understood from his face that the battle was far from over. Behind him, the holographic image of Subject Zero slowly rotated in the darkness, its towering frame casting a monstrous shadow across the room and its crimson eyes seeming to stare directly at them.

It was a reminder that the nightmare was still alive.

"Though we have been successful in developing the antidote that can inhibit the transformation, even if it cannot completely reverse the damage already done, we still face a far greater problem," Abhyuday explained. The image of Subject Zero enlarged above the table.

"Subject Zero."

Nobody spoke. The name alone was enough.

The creature had annihilated an entire research facility. Dozens of highly trained security personnel had died trying to contain it, while scientists, technicians and military responders had vanished during its escape. Entire sections of Nelson Biotech Laboratory had been reduced to twisted ruins.

And now it was somewhere beyond civilization.

Free

Uncontained.

Possibly evolving.

Possibly hunting.

Possibly spreading the very mutation they had spent weeks trying to stop.

Abhyuday turned toward Dr. Chen and reminded her that she had survived because they had acted quickly, but Subject Zero had been roaming free for nearly a month. The implication immediately struck the room.

Chen slowly leaned forward. "You think others may have been infected?"

Abhyuday nodded grimly. They knew that mutated cells could survive outside the primary host and that transmission had occurred through direct biological contamination. A single injury had been enough to begin Chen's transformation. If Subject Zero had attacked wildlife, livestock or humans during its escape, there was no telling how many secondary infections might already exist.

A heavy silence followed as rain battered the facility windows and distant thunder rolled across the night sky. The storm seemed fitting because another storm was approaching—one far more dangerous.

Chen stared at the holographic image and asked why there had been no reports.

"Perhaps there have been," Abhyuday replied.

He activated another display. News reports appeared across the screen: unexplained animal attacks, missing hikers, mutilated livestock discovered in remote areas and sightings dismissed as rumors. Strange incidents were scattered across several regions. Individually, they appeared meaningless.

Together, they formed a disturbing pattern.

For the first time since receiving the antidote, Chen felt genuine fear. Not for herself, but for everyone else.

“What if we’re already too late?” she asked quietly.

Abhyuday didn’t answer immediately. His eyes remained fixed on the image of Subject Zero, which seemed almost alive within the holographic projection.

Watching.

Waiting.

Remembering.

Finally, he spoke. “If we want answers, we need to understand exactly what happened to create him.”

Chen looked up as Abhyuday reached toward the controls. The display changed, revealing the ruined blueprint of Nelson Biotech Laboratory – the birthplace of the nightmare, the place where Dr. Stanley’s experiments had crossed every ethical boundary imaginable and where Volunteer Zero had ceased to exist and Subject Zero had been born.

Abhyuday explained that every piece of information they possessed came from damaged files, incomplete reports and survivor testimony. They still didn’t know everything about the serum, its complete genetic composition, why Subject Zero had developed certain traits, or whether Dr. Stanley had created safeguards, weaknesses or additional experimental subjects.

His voice became quieter and more serious.

“But I believe the answers still exist.”

Chen immediately understood.

Her eyes widened. “You want to go back.”

Abhyuday slowly nodded.

Outside, lightning flashed across the sky, briefly illuminating the laboratory windows before darkness returned.

"Maybe we can find the answer," he said, staring at the blueprint, "at the place where it all started."

Nelson Biotech Laboratory.

A place officially declared abandoned. A place buried beneath lies and government cover-ups. A place soaked in blood.

And somewhere beneath its shattered ruins, secrets still waited in the darkness.

Secrets that could save humanity.

Or unleash something even worse than Subject Zero.

CHAPTER – ELEVEN

The Unwanted Alliance

Dr. Chen sat silently beside the window, watching the rain slide down the glass. The city beyond it had almost disappeared beneath the darkness. She had been staring outside for several minutes, but her mind was nowhere near the view.

Dr. Abhyudaya sat across from her, the remains of an untouched cup of coffee between them.

"We can't trust him," Chen finally said.

Abhyudaya didn't answer immediately.

"We don't have to trust him," he said. "We only have to decide whether we can use the alliance."

Chen turned toward him.

"You're talking about Mr. Nelson as if he's just another businessman."

"He isn't."

"He hunted me."

"I know."

"He sent people after me when the laboratory fell. People died because he wanted the research recovered."

Abhyudaya lowered his eyes.

"I know that too."

Chen leaned back in her chair.

"Then why are we even considering this?"

"Because we have something he doesn't."

"What?"

"The truth."

Chen remained silent.

Abhyudaya continued, "Nelson has money. Men. Equipment. Connections. But he doesn't understand what happened after the experiment collapsed. We do. And if Subject Zero is still alive, we may be the only people capable of understanding what we're dealing with."

Chen shook her head.

"You're suggesting we walk into the house of the man who hunted me and ask him for help."

"No. I'm suggesting we walk into his house knowing exactly who he is."

Chen looked at him for a long moment.

"And what happens when he gets what he wants?"

"Then we make sure he doesn't."

The room fell silent.

Chen looked down at the files lying on the table. Photographs of the destroyed laboratory. Biological reports. Fragments of research recovered after the disaster.

There was one name repeated throughout the documents.

Subject Zero.

"If Nelson gets his hands on Zero..." she whispered.

"He'll try to turn it into a weapon," Abhyudaya finished.

Chen closed the file.

"Then we cannot let that happen."

"Agreed."

She looked at him.

"So what's your plan?"

"We meet him."

Chen gave a humorless laugh.

"You really have lost your mind."

"Probably."

He pushed his chair back and stood.

"But if we refuse, Nelson will continue searching without us. Eventually, he'll find something. And when he does, we won't know what he's doing with it."

Chen considered his words.

"You want us inside his operation."

"I want us close enough to control what happens."

Chen stood slowly.

"And if he tries to control us?"

Abhyudaya looked toward the door.

"Then we remind him that he needs us more than we need him."

Chen picked up the file.

"Fine."

Abhyudaya raised an eyebrow.

"Fine?"

"We meet Nelson."

She paused at the doorway.

"But we're not joining him."

A faint smile appeared on Abhyudaya's face.

"No."

Chen looked back at him.

"We're using him."

Mr. Nelson was waiting when they arrived.

The study was enormous, decorated with expensive furniture and shelves filled with scientific journals, military histories and old business records. Nothing about the room suggested a man who had spent years funding biological experiments. Yet Chen knew that appearances were Nelson's greatest weapon.

He stood beside his desk.

"Dr. Chen."

She stopped several feet away from him.

"Mr. Nelson."

His eyes remained fixed on her.

"You survived."

"I did."

"I looked for you."

"I know."

There was a brief silence.

Nelson smiled.

"I suppose we have a lot to discuss."

"No," Chen replied. "You have a lot to explain."

Abhyudaya stepped forward before the tension could escalate.

"We're here because we believe we have a common problem."

Nelson's expression changed slightly.

"Subject Zero."

Chen watched him carefully.

"You already knew."

"I suspected."

"You knew more than that."

Nelson walked toward the desk.

"I knew the experiment was not completely lost."

Chen's jaw tightened.

"You were looking for it."

"Of course."

"Not to destroy it."

Nelson looked at her.

"Why would I destroy something potentially worth billions?"

There it was.

The honesty was almost refreshing.

Abhyudaya spoke quietly.

"You intend to sell it."

"To governments, military organizations, private defense companies..." Nelson shrugged. "The market is enormous."

Chen looked at him with disgust.

"You're talking about a living being."

Nelson's expression remained emotionless.

"I'm talking about a discovery."

Chen took a step forward.

"That discovery destroyed a laboratory."

"And yet it survived."

He leaned forward.

"That's precisely why I want it."

Abhyudaya placed his hand on the file.

"Then we have a problem."

Nelson looked at him.

"What problem?"

"You need us."

Nelson smiled.

"I have scientists."

"Not scientists who were there."

Chen opened the file.

"Not scientists who understand the original experiment. Not scientists who know what Subject Zero was designed to become. And certainly not scientists who know what went wrong."

Nelson's smile slowly disappeared.

Chen closed the file.

"We can help you find it."

Nelson studied her.

"And what do you want?"

"Control over the investigation."

"Anything else?"

"No human experimentation."

Nelson's eyes narrowed.

"No unauthorized killing."

Abhyudaya added, "And whatever we discover remains confidential until we understand exactly what we're dealing with."

Nelson leaned back.

"You're asking me to finance an investigation without allowing me to use its results."

"We're asking you to help us discover the truth," Chen said.

Nelson smiled again.

"And after that?"

Chen met his eyes.

"We decide what happens next."

For a long moment, Nelson said nothing.

Then he extended his hand.

"An alliance, then."

Chen looked at his hand.

She remembered running through the darkness after the laboratory fell. She remembered hiding while Nelson's men searched for her. She remembered the people who had died because of the experiment.

She knew exactly what kind of man stood before her.

She also knew that they needed his resources.

Slowly, she shook his hand.

"An alliance."

Abhyudaya placed his hand over theirs.

"Until we find Zero."

Nelson nodded.

"Until we find Zero."

The alliance was sealed before midnight.

Nelson immediately summoned his security chief and ordered preparations for the expedition. The search would begin at dawn.

A large map was unfolded across the study table.

The forest stretched for hundreds of square kilometers, an enormous wilderness of mountains, rivers and dense vegetation. There were almost no roads beyond its outer settlements.

Nelson pointed toward a remote section of the map.

"This is where the last confirmed signal disappeared."

Chen studied the coordinates.

"How many teams?"

"One primary team," Nelson said. "Security personnel, military support, trackers, medical staff and scientists."

Abhyudaya looked at him.

"That is a lot of people."

"We are entering unknown territory."

Chen traced the map with her finger.

"If Zero has adapted to the environment, a large force could frighten it away."

"Or provoke it," Abhyudaya added.

Nelson nodded.

"Then we'll proceed carefully."

Chen looked up.

"And who leads the operation?"

Nelson's answer came immediately.

"I do."

Chen frowned.

"You're coming?"

"I didn't build this empire by sending other people to discover what matters."

Abhyudaya exchanged a glance with Chen.

Neither of them liked the idea.

But the decision had already been made.

The next morning, engines roared outside the estate.

Vehicles lined the driveway. Soldiers checked weapons and equipment. Scientists loaded medical supplies and sealed containers. Satellite equipment, communication systems and portable laboratories were packed into reinforced vehicles.

Chen stood beside the convoy wearing a dark field jacket, her backpack secured tightly across her shoulders.

Abhyudaya approached her.

"Still think this is a bad idea?"

Chen looked toward the forest visible in the distance.

"Yes."

He smiled faintly.

"Good."

"Why?"

"Because if you had started believing this was a good idea, I'd be worried."

Before Chen could respond, Nelson emerged from the main vehicle.

"Everyone aboard."

Chen looked at Abhyudaya one last time.

"Once we enter that forest, everything changes."

"I know."

The vehicles began moving.

Slowly, the estate disappeared behind them.

The road stretched ahead toward the wilderness.

Toward the place where the laboratory's final signal had vanished.

Toward the place where Subject Zero was believed to have disappeared.

And as the convoy crossed the final settlement and entered the forest road, none of them noticed the dark figure watching from the trees.

It remained completely still.

Watching.

Waiting.

The expedition had begun.

CHAPTER – TWELVE

The Chaotic Wilderness

The convoy entered Nelson Valley shortly after sunrise. Eight armored tactical vehicles moved cautiously along the deserted mountain road, their engines echoing through a forest untouched for nearly twenty years. Fallen leaves and broken branches crunched beneath the heavy tires as dense mist drifted between towering cedar trees. The canopy was so thick that only thin beams of sunlight reached the forest floor, creating an eerie twilight despite the early hour. At first glance, the valley was breathtaking—a pristine wilderness reclaimed by nature—but Colonel Nathan Carter felt that something was wrong.

The convoy stopped beside the rusted remains of an old security checkpoint. Carter stepped out and scanned the surrounding ridges with binoculars. Nothing moved. There were no birds, insects or distant animal calls. Such a vast forest should never have been completely silent. It was as if every living creature had stopped breathing.

"Perimeter security," Carter ordered.

Nearly forty armed personnel immediately dispersed around the convoy, establishing overlapping fields of fire while engineers inspected the road ahead. Marcus Nelson's expedition had been assembled from experienced security personnel, former Special Forces operators, reconnaissance experts, medics, explosives specialists and trackers accustomed to hostile environments.

Captain Daniel Ross approached with a topographical map. The only navigable route led toward the ruins of Nelson Biotech Laboratory, about eight kilometers away, with the final three kilometers requiring them to travel on foot. Carter reminded everyone that their mission was to recover surviving research materials, document unusual biological activity and avoid unnecessary engagement. They were there to investigate, not fight a war. Yet the classified reports contained years of disappearances, failed rescue missions and strange sightings that offered no explanation for why the valley seemed to erase everyone who entered it.

For the first thirty minutes, the journey was uneventful. Surveillance drones flew overhead while Lieutenant Sarah Kim monitored the thermal displays. She expected to see the usual wildlife found in a large forest, but the screens showed almost nothing. No deer, birds or wolves appeared; except for a few rodents, the scanners detected almost no significant life.

Sarah called Carter into the command vehicle and showed him the display. He asked whether it was a system malfunction, but she confirmed that every sensor was functioning perfectly.

"Forests don't empty on their own," Carter said quietly.

Something had driven away every natural inhabitant—or something had taken their place.

The convoy continued deeper into the valley, moving at little more than walking speed as roots, vines and fallen trees repeatedly obstructed the road. Carter refused to hurry. Every instinct told him that the greatest danger in Nelson Valley was not what they could see, but what remained hidden.

Almost an hour later, Sergeant Mason stopped the column beside a moss-covered wooden sign. After clearing away the vegetation, the faded words became visible:

NELSON BIOTECH RESEARCH FACILITY – 6 KM

Carter noticed five deep grooves carved diagonally across the sign. They were too wide for a knife or axe and too evenly spaced to have been made by an ordinary animal.

"The edges are fresh," Ross said.

"Less than a week old," Mason added.

The sign proved that something was still moving through the valley – something powerful enough to carve solid hardwood as though it were soft clay.

The forest grew darker as they advanced. Strange patches of mist drifted across the trail, and the atmosphere seemed to weigh down on everyone. Then the radio crackled.

"Recon Team Two to Command. We've found something, sir."

Minutes later, the convoy stopped beside a narrow ravine. Several reconnaissance soldiers stood silently at its edge, staring at what lay below.

The ravine floor was covered with bones.

Not dozens.

Hundreds.

Human skeletons lay scattered among the remains of deer, wolves, bears and other unidentified animals. Some victims still wore hiking boots and backpacks. A child's red backpack rested beside a small skeleton. Captain Ross descended with forensic specialists while the rest of the team secured the area.

Dr. Foster examined the nearest remains and found something disturbing: there were no obvious fractures, claw marks or signs of blunt-force trauma. She could not determine how the people had died.

Nearby, they discovered an old rescue vehicle. Its armored doors had been torn from their hinges and its roof had collapsed under immense force. Five huge impressions were pressed into the metal, shaped like fingerprints but far too large to be human.

"Whatever did this was incredibly strong," Ross said.

Mason soon discovered another group of skeletons wearing faded military uniforms. Carter recognized the insignia as belonging to a search-and-rescue detachment. Their rifles lay beside them with fully loaded magazines. Not a single shot had been fired.

Ross frowned. "Why wouldn't they fight?"

No one had an answer.

Carter slowly surveyed the ravine and noticed something even more disturbing. Every skeleton faced the same direction—toward the deeper forest. It was as though, in their final moments, every victim had been looking at the same thing.

Carter followed their empty gaze into the darkness.

For the first time since entering the valley, he felt something stronger than fear.

Expectation.

Whatever those people had seen, none had survived long enough to tell the story.

The ravine was secured and the remains were photographed, tagged and mapped. Bone samples were collected, but the deeper they investigated, the stranger the scene became. There was remarkably little evidence of violence: no shell casings, bloodstains or broken weapons. Most victims still possessed their cameras, GPS devices, climbing equipment, emergency

supplies and wallets. Whatever had happened had not been driven by hunger or theft.

Dr. Foster estimated that the oldest remains were fifteen to seventeen years old, while the newest might have been only six months old.

Carter looked toward the ravine.

"Which means people are still disappearing."

Foster nodded. "And they all end up here."

Captain Ross then produced a damaged digital camera recovered from one of the victims. The memory card had survived. They powered the camera using equipment in the command vehicle and examined the photographs. The first showed ordinary hikers, mountain trails, campfires and waterfalls. The final evening was different. The hikers appeared to realize that something was following them.

Then came a photograph of dense forest.

Between two enormous tree trunks, a pair of amber eyes stared directly into the camera.

The eyes were not reflective like an animal's. They appeared intelligent.

Watching.

Waiting.

Three more photographs followed. One was blurred, another showed overturned camping equipment, and the final image was almost completely black except for a huge human-shaped hand resting against the camera lens.

The photographs ended there.

Lieutenant Kim quietly removed the memory card.

"I don't think the hikers ever left their campsite."

Carter looked toward the forest.

"No. They were hunted."

The convoy left the ravine, but by late afternoon the access road had disappeared completely, forcing the main force to continue on foot. The armored vehicles remained behind with a skeleton crew while the soldiers moved through increasingly dense woodland.

The forest had changed.

The silence remained, but now there were signs of life.

Fresh claw marks scored the trunks of massive cedar trees, some nearly four meters above the ground. Every tree along the trail carried identical scars. They were not random scratches.

They were territorial markers.

A little farther on, Sergeant Mason discovered tracks beside a muddy stream. Human footprints of different sizes mixed with those of wolves, bears, deer, wild boar and leopards. None overlapped chaotically. They all followed the same direction, as though different species routinely travelled the same path.

Dr. Foster stared at the tracks.

"I've studied ecosystems my whole career. This shouldn't exist."

Ross agreed. Predators and prey, wolves and deer, bears and boar were all using the same trail without avoiding one another.

A raven suddenly called from a dead branch. Every rifle snapped upward, but the bird remained motionless, simply

watching them. Another raven answered in the distance, followed by another. The calls spread across the valley.

Ross slowly lowered his rifle.

"They're communicating."

Almost immediately, branches shifted ahead. Several creatures moved through the forest, keeping pace with the expedition while remaining hidden. Carter could hear footsteps but saw nothing whenever he turned toward the sound.

The expedition was no longer simply searching Nelson Valley. Nelson Valley had begun searching them.

CHAPTER – THIRTEEN

Realm of Subject Zero

The sun had begun its slow descent behind the western mountains when Colonel Nathan Carter ordered the convoy to halt. They had advanced barely twelve kilometers into Nelson Valley, yet the journey had taken the entire day. The problem was not the terrain; it was the forest itself. Every kilometer had revealed another mystery – skeletons with no obvious cause of death, military vehicles crushed by impossible force, fresh claw marks carved deep into ancient cedar trunks, and human footprints that appeared and disappeared without explanation. Even the ravens seemed unusual, calling to one another with a precision that made the soldiers increasingly uncomfortable. The deeper they went, the harder it became to believe they were moving through an untouched wilderness. It felt as though they were entering territory that already belonged to something else.

The expedition established a temporary camp on a granite plateau overlooking a narrow valley. It was the first naturally defensible position they had found since entering Nelson Valley. Steep cliffs protected two sides, while the remaining approaches were secured with portable floodlights, motion sensors, overlapping machine-gun positions, and reinforced fencing. Seismic detectors were deployed around the perimeter to detect movement beneath the forest floor. As darkness settled over the valley, Carter stood at the edge of the plateau with binoculars raised, watching the endless sea of trees disappear beneath the fading light. From a distance, the forest looked almost peaceful, but Carter no longer trusted

appearances. Captain Daniel Ross approached with two cups of coffee and suggested that he rest. Carter accepted the mug without looking away from the valley. "I've learned something over the years," he said quietly. When Ross asked what, Carter replied, "The quiet ones are always the most dangerous."

Behind them, the camp remained busy. Medics treated minor injuries, engineers inspected damaged equipment, and ammunition was redistributed. Dr. Emily Foster continued examining tissue samples collected from the infected they had encountered earlier. Her findings were becoming increasingly disturbing. Some of the specimens displayed cellular activity despite having been completely separated from their host bodies. Dead tissue should not have been alive, yet somehow it was. At 1900 hours, the first watch rotation took position. Thermal optics covered the approaches, snipers occupied elevated rocks, and motion sensors created an invisible ring nearly three hundred meters beyond the camp. For several hours, nothing happened. The silence, however, was beginning to feel deliberate.

Lieutenant Sarah Kim was the first to notice something unusual. One of the perimeter cameras had detected movement. At first, the screen showed nothing except trees swaying in the wind, but when she replayed the footage, a faint humanoid thermal signature appeared between two trees. It remained visible for less than a second before disappearing. She replayed it again and again. Every time, the figure appeared in exactly the same place. It never approached the camp and never retreated. It simply stood there, watching. Then another camera detected the same thing, followed by another and another. Within seconds, multiple cameras were reporting identical contacts at different points around the perimeter. Colonel Carter immediately ordered Condition

Yellow. Soldiers abandoned their meals, loaded their weapons, and took defensive positions while searchlights swept across the forest. Nothing appeared in the beams. There was no movement, no sound, and no visible enemy.

Then Sergeant Mason returned from the eastern perimeter carrying an arrow. It was nearly a meter long, made from dark hardwood with an obsidian head and black raven feathers bound to the shaft with braided sinew. There was no blood and no message, only a symbol carved into the wood: three parallel claw marks enclosed within a rough circle. Carter examined it carefully. It was freshly made and had been placed just beyond the camp's perimeter. It had not been fired at them. It had been delivered. Dr. Foster examined the arrow and found no poison. When Ross suggested that it was simply a warning, she disagreed. "This wasn't meant to kill anyone," she said. "It was meant to communicate." Carter looked toward the darkness beyond the floodlights. Somewhere in the forest, something intelligent had noticed their arrival, and more disturbing than that, it wanted them to know it had noticed.

At 02:17, the first motion sensor activated. Every soldier was awake within seconds, rifles aimed toward the northern perimeter. Yet there was nothing there. The thermal monitors showed no contact. Five minutes later, another sensor activated in the south. Then one in the east, followed by another in the west. The alarms continued for nearly forty minutes, each activation occurring at a different location. Whatever was moving around them never triggered the same sensor twice. It was as though something enormous was circling the camp, deliberately testing its defenses and learning how the soldiers responded.

Just before dawn, Carter sent a patrol to inspect the perimeter. Twenty armed operators moved cautiously through the forest,

following the sensor locations. At first they found nothing. Then Mason stopped beside a massive cedar. Fresh claw marks had been carved into its trunk—three deep parallel grooves nearly two meters long. Similar marks appeared on trees every fifty or sixty meters, always facing the camp. Lieutenant Kim eventually discovered footprints in the damp soil. There were dozens of them, all belonging to bare human feet, yet none crossed the perimeter. They stopped precisely at the edge of the camp.

Ross stared at them. "They could have attacked."

"They didn't," Carter replied.

"They were measuring us."

The realization silenced everyone. These were not the actions of wild creatures. Someone—or something—had surveyed their defenses, counted their personnel, studied their weapons, and deliberately chosen not to attack. It was reconnaissance, the same tactic Carter's own soldiers used when studying an enemy position.

At first light, the expedition resumed its advance, but the atmosphere had changed completely. They were no longer tracking an unknown biological threat. They felt as though they were moving deeper into enemy territory. The trees grew older and larger, many bearing strange scars and symbols. Animal trails had widened into pathways that appeared to have been used for years. One such trail contained hundreds of overlapping tracks—wolves, bears, leopards, wild boars, and humans—all moving in the same direction. The animals showed no signs of panic and did not appear to be competing with one another. It looked almost as though they were travelling together.

The ravens began calling again from the canopy, one answering another until the sound spread through the valley.

Carter listened carefully. He no longer thought they were simply hearing birds. He had the uncomfortable feeling that they were listening to reports being passed through the forest.

The trail eventually became wider and more defined. It was not a road built by humans, but years of constant movement had compacted the earth and pushed branches and vines aside. It was a road created by hundreds of feet travelling the same route again and again. Sergeant Mason soon discovered an enormous footprint in the mud. It was unmistakably humanoid, complete with five toes and a pronounced heel, but it was almost twice the size of an average man's foot. The impression was fresh. Whatever had made it had passed through less than an hour earlier.

Further along, they discovered a spear embedded deep inside a cedar tree. Its shaft was carefully carved and balanced, while the sharpened bone tip had been reinforced with dark stone and tightly bound sinew. Ross examined it and immediately understood that it was not a crude weapon. Someone had designed it with purpose. Dr. Foster noticed that the bindings had been replaced recently. Someone was not merely making weapons. Someone was maintaining and improving them.

The trail descended into a narrow gorge where the trees became so dense that daylight barely reached the ground. There they found the carcasses. A massive stag lay in the centre of the trail, its body opened with disturbing precision. Very little flesh had been eaten. The heart was missing, as were the lungs. A short distance away they found a wild boar with the same pattern of injuries, followed by several more animals. Every carcass had been treated in the same deliberate manner.

"These aren't random hunts," Carter said.

Dr. Foster studied the remains. "It looks as though they're selecting specimens."

Before anyone could respond, something moved through the canopy. It was too fast to identify and remained just beyond the soldiers' ability to target it. Even the ravens had fallen silent. Carter's instincts told him something was wrong. They were no longer following the trail. The trail was leading them somewhere.

Eventually the forest opened onto a towering granite escarpment overlooking the heart of Nelson Valley. Carter raised his fist, and the entire unit dropped behind rocks and fallen logs. Through their binoculars they watched a stag burst into a clearing, fleeing from four enormous wolves. The animals were larger than normal wolves, with dark veins visible beneath patches of grey fur, and they hunted with frightening coordination. The stag suddenly stopped as though it had encountered something invisible. It lowered its head and stood completely still.

The wolves also stopped.

Then a massive black bear emerged from the trees. It was unnaturally large, its body covered with scars and thick muscle. The wolves did not challenge it. They stepped aside as the bear approached the stag and struck it once, killing it instantly. But the bear did not feed. Instead, it stepped away.

That was when the humans appeared.

Dozens emerged from the forest. Some walked upright; others moved on all fours before rising again. Their bodies showed unmistakable signs of mutation—elongated limbs, distorted muscles, clawed hands, and eyes that seemed to glow faintly in the daylight. Yet there was nothing chaotic about them. They did not fight over the carcass. They did not behave like starving animals. One watched the surrounding trees while another climbed onto a rock to survey the valley. Several lifted

the carcass together and carried it into the forest. The wolves followed. The bear followed.

No commands were given.

No words were spoken.

Everyone simply seemed to know their role.

Colonel Carter slowly lowered his binoculars. For the first time since entering Nelson Valley, he understood what they had actually discovered. This was not a wilderness overrun by infected creatures. It was a territory. A territory governed by order, hierarchy, and intelligence.

"They hunt together," Ross whispered.

Dr. Foster shook her head. "No. They live together."

The creatures disappeared beneath the canopy, leaving only a few drops of blood behind. Carter continued staring into the valley. Somewhere beneath those ancient trees, hidden among forgotten laboratories and miles of untouched wilderness, an intelligence unlike anything humanity had encountered was watching them.

He finally gave the order.

"We move at first light."

No one objected.

Because everyone had reached the same terrifying conclusion.

They had not discovered the wilderness.

They had reached the Realm of Subject Zero.

CHAPTER – FOURTEEN

The Hunt

Dawn arrived slowly over Nelson Valley. The first rays of sunlight struggled through the dense canopy, leaving the forest buried beneath an eerie twilight. A thin mist drifted between the ancient trees, and an oppressive silence filled the valley. There were no birds, no insects, and barely any wind. Colonel Nathan Carter had experienced battlefields and hostile jungles across the world, but he had never encountered silence like this. The forest wasn't quiet because it was empty; it was quiet because everything inside it seemed to be listening.

The temporary command post was already being dismantled. Soldiers packed equipment while engineers secured surveillance systems, and communications officers once again tried to contact the outside world, receiving only bursts of static. Nothing entered the valley, and nothing left. Nelson Valley had become an isolated world. Captain Daniel Ross arrived with an updated map containing fragments of terrain data transmitted by reconnaissance drones before their signals disappeared. The information was incomplete, but it revealed something disturbing: the trails throughout the valley were not random. Several circled the region while others converged toward the ruins of Nelson Biotech. "These aren't game trails," Ross said. Carter studied the map carefully. Satellite images taken months earlier had shown none of these paths. They had appeared over time, suggesting that something was using them repeatedly. The valley had not simply fallen into chaos

after Subject Zero escaped. It had reorganized itself. Whatever lived within it was not merely surviving—it was thriving.

A communications officer soon brought them a memory card recovered from a damaged trail camera. Ross played the recording. For nearly twenty minutes, nothing happened. Then several human silhouettes emerged from the darkness. Their clothing was torn, their skin pale, and some carried spears while others held crude bows. They stopped directly before the camera. One slowly looked into the lens, revealing eyes that reflected an unnatural amber glow. It raised one clawed finger and pointed deeper into the forest. The others turned in the same direction before disappearing. Ross replayed the footage. “They knew the camera was there.” Foster nodded. “They didn’t destroy it.” Carter understood immediately. “They wanted us to see them.” The infected were no longer acting purely on instinct. Someone had given them purpose, discipline, and perhaps even orders.

Carter decided they could no longer wait. “We need answers before we lose the initiative.” He would lead a reconnaissance unit into the valley, accompanied by Ross, Dr. Foster, Sergeant Mason, and eight specially selected soldiers. Lieutenant Sarah Kim was ordered to remain with the main force. Carter gave her one final instruction: if they had not returned by nightfall, she was to break camp and leave the valley. Everyone understood what that meant. Carter was preparing for the possibility that the reconnaissance team would not return. Within thirty minutes, the twelve-person unit stood at the northern perimeter. Carter looked toward the wall of trees. Somewhere beyond it, he knew, Subject Zero was waiting. Without another word, he stepped into the forest. The others followed. The hunt had begun, although none of them yet understood who was hunting whom.

The forest closed around them almost immediately. Dense branches blocked most of the sunlight, while damp earth and thick vegetation concealed their movements. No one spoke unless necessary. Ross and Mason moved at the front, scanning the undergrowth through thermal binoculars, while the soldiers maintained a tight formation. Foster documented the strange evidence around them — deep claw marks, unusual fungal growths, and enormous footprints pressed into the soil. Ordinary wildlife seemed almost absent. Instead, the forest floor was covered with massive wolf tracks, oversized bear prints, and human footprints, some barefoot and others wearing remnants of old boots. Almost all followed the same route. Mason eventually discovered a fresh humanoid footprint. It was almost twice the size of an ordinary man's and ended in claw-like toes. Whatever had made it had passed less than thirty minutes earlier.

Nearly an hour later, they entered a narrow rocky corridor where they discovered the rusted remains of an abandoned military jeep. Carter recognized the insignia as belonging to a government containment task force deployed eighteen years earlier. The vehicle had been stripped of its weapons, medical equipment, radios, and ammunition. Only a cracked helmet remained, marked with three deep claw scratches. "Animals don't strip equipment," Ross said. Carter looked into the forest. "No. They take food." The conclusion was disturbing. Something had deliberately collected the equipment.

Further ahead, they discovered dozens of military identification tags hanging from an ancient oak. The names belonged to containment personnel, security contractors, rescue workers, and hikers who had disappeared over the years. The tags had been arranged into groups, almost as though someone had classified them. Foster photographed the evidence while Carter studied the branches above them. A

raven landed overhead, followed by another and another until nearly a dozen watched silently. Then, simultaneously, they took flight toward the centre of the valley. Mason understood what had happened. "They're reporting our position." Carter gave no answer, but he knew Mason was right.

The team continued deeper into the valley until they reached a crude watch platform built between three enormous cedar trees. It overlooked several trails and the route they had travelled that morning. The structure had clearly been maintained and used for a long time. Inside, Carter found a pair of damaged military binoculars bearing the serial number of equipment belonging to the old containment force. Beneath the platform were piles of bones—deer, wild boar, bear, and finally human. They were not scattered randomly; they had been stripped and sorted. Foster studied the remains. "This isn't a feeding ground." Carter looked around. "No. It's a processing site."

Nearby, Private Ellis discovered a damaged backpack containing a water bottle, hiking map, camera, and a leather journal belonging to Aarav Mehta, a wildlife photographer who had disappeared three months earlier. Most of the journal was destroyed by moisture, but the final entries remained readable: They're everywhere. Not attacking. Watching. Another entry said, They move only when he moves. The final page contained one sentence: The forest doesn't belong to us anymore. Carter closed the journal without saying anything.

A sharp whistle suddenly echoed through the forest. Another answered from the left, followed by a third behind them. Carter immediately ordered the team to freeze. The signals were deliberate. They were being communicated through the forest. A few moments later, a humanoid figure appeared between two trees approximately fifty metres away. It stood perfectly still before disappearing. Foster raised her

binoculars. "It wanted us to see it." Carter ordered everyone to maintain formation.

The team soon reached a shallow valley and observed six figures emerge from the forest. They were human—or had once been. Their skin was pale and stretched over powerful muscles, their clothing consisted of remnants from previous expeditions, and several carried crude weapons made from salvaged military equipment. Instead of behaving like animals, they positioned themselves strategically. Two climbed elevated rocks, another watched the tree line, while the others guarded the trails. "They're establishing security," Ross whispered. Carter corrected him. "They're a patrol." The figures communicated through hand signals and whistles before dividing into groups and disappearing.

The team's radios suddenly became useless. Static swallowed every transmission. Then Private Ellis stepped on a concealed wooden spike hidden beneath the leaves. Mason searched the trail and discovered dozens more arranged in rows. They were not designed simply to kill; they were designed to slow and redirect anyone moving through the area. Ross looked toward the narrowing path between two rock walls. "They're directing us." Carter finally understood. The trails, traps, watch posts, and signals were all part of the same plan. They were being guided toward a location chosen by someone else.

The team entered the narrow passage. Rock walls rose on either side, blocking most of the daylight. At the far end, three infected figures appeared. They stood motionless, watching. One raised a crude spear. Then a whistle echoed from above. Two more infected suddenly leapt from the rocks.

"Contact!"

Gunfire shattered the silence. The first attacker was struck repeatedly but continued forward until Mason's shotgun

brought it down. Another charged Ross before being stopped by concentrated fire. More infected emerged from the surrounding trees, attacking from multiple directions. They moved with frightening coordination, supporting one another and attempting to flank the soldiers rather than charging blindly. Carter divided his team, ordering one group to secure the ridge while the others covered the flanks. The battle lasted only minutes, but it was enough to reveal something important: unlike Subject Zero, these secondary mutants could be killed. Yet their discipline made them far more dangerous than ordinary infected.

Suddenly, one of the remaining mutants gave a sharp whistle. The attackers immediately withdrew into the forest. Ross lowered his weapon. "They're leaving?" Carter shook his head. "No. They've learned what they wanted." Foster examined one of the bodies and discovered a faded cloth band bearing the name R. HENDERSON — a man reported missing four months earlier. Before anyone could investigate further, Carter ordered them toward the ridge.

At the top, the forest finally opened, revealing the heart of Nelson Valley. Below them stood the blackened ruins of Nelson Biotech, surrounded by an organized settlement of mutants. Dozens moved through the valley. Some walked upright while others moved on all fours. Mutated wolves travelled in packs, enormous bears wandered among the ruins, and groups of infected carried freshly killed animals toward the compound. Others stood on rooftops and rocky outcrops as sentries. There was no chaos or uncontrolled violence. The creatures worked together. They hunted, guarded, transported food, maintained structures, and reused whatever resources they could find. Carter watched the settlement in silence. This was not an outbreak anymore. It was a society.

Then the entire valley became silent.

The wolves stopped feeding. The bears lifted their heads. The infected froze, and even the ravens settled onto rooftops and broken trees. Thousands of eyes turned toward the northern forest. Something enormous was approaching. Branches bent and trees shook as a massive figure emerged from the shadows.

For the first time in eighteen years, human eyes saw Subject Zero.

He stood well over eight feet tall, his body covered in dark, scarred skin and powerful muscle. Hardened tissue protected parts of his shoulders, spine, and forearms, while black veins pulsed beneath the surface. His enormous hands ended in curved, obsidian-black claws, and his elongated face retained only the faintest resemblance to the human volunteer he had once been. Bony ridges surrounded deep-set amber eyes that were neither completely human nor animal. They were calculating. Intelligent.

Every infected creature lowered its head as he passed. Even the wolves and enormous bears moved aside. No creature challenged him.

Subject Zero walked through the valley with absolute confidence. An infected offered him food, and he accepted it without haste. There was no frenzy in his movements—only ritual and control. He then approached the ruined entrance of Nelson Biotech, the place where his transformation had begun. After standing there for several moments, he turned toward an underground entrance.

Then he stopped.

His head slowly turned toward the ridge.

More than six hundred metres separated him from Carter's team. Dense trees and camouflage concealed their position, yet those amber eyes settled directly upon them.

Carter froze.

He knew.

Ross slowly lowered his binoculars. "Did he just look at us?"

No one answered.

They had not discovered Subject Zero.

Subject Zero had discovered them.

Carter finally gave the order to withdraw. As the team disappeared into the forest, the valley resumed its activity. The wolves returned to feeding, the patrols resumed their routes, and the infected continued their work as though nothing had happened. High above the ridge, a lone raven watched the soldiers disappear before flying silently toward the ruins of Nelson Biotech.

The message had already been delivered.

Their presence was known.

CHAPTER – FIFTEEN

The King

No one spoke.

For several minutes, the reconnaissance team remained hidden among the rocks overlooking the valley below. Every pair of binoculars, every rifle scope, every camera lens was fixed on the same impossible sight.

Nelson Biotech.

The laboratory stood exactly where satellite photographs had placed it, yet nothing about the place resembled the abandoned ruin they had expected.

Nature had reclaimed much of the facility.

Towering trees erupted through collapsed roofs. Thick vines crawled over cracked concrete walls, swallowing entire buildings beneath layers of green. Rusted watchtowers leaned precariously against ancient oaks, while broken security fences disappeared beneath tangled undergrowth.

Yet despite years of decay...

The place was unmistakably alive.

Movement was everywhere.

Along the fractured roads surrounding the laboratory, groups of secondary infected moved with quiet purpose. Some emerged from the surrounding forest carrying the carcasses of deer slung across their shoulders. Others hauled wild boar, wolves, or smaller animals toward the ruined complex.

No one shouted.

No one argued.

There were no signs of dominance through violence.

Each individual seemed to understand exactly where to go and exactly what to do.

Dr. Emily Foster slowly lowered her binoculars.

"This isn't what I expected."

Captain Ross never looked away from the valley.

"What were you expecting?"

She hesitated.

"Chaos."

Instead...

Everything was organized.

Near one collapsed warehouse, several infected stripped fresh carcasses with remarkable efficiency. They wasted nothing. Meat was separated from bone using sharpened stone blades. Thick hides were carefully removed and carried toward another building. Bones were stacked into neat piles according to size, while organs were taken elsewhere by smaller groups.

Nothing resembled agriculture.

Nothing resembled civilization.

This was not a town.

It was not a village.

It was something far older.

A predator's ecosystem.

Every member existed for one purpose.

To hunt.

To survive.

To strengthen the whole.

Colonel Carter watched silently.

The longer he observed, the clearer the pattern became.

No infected remained idle.

Those returning from hunts delivered food before immediately leaving again.

Others patrolled the outer perimeter in rotating groups.

Several occupied elevated positions on rooftops and cliff faces, constantly scanning the forest beyond the valley.

Even the mutated animals displayed astonishing discipline.

Wolves rested beside infected humans without aggression.

Massive bears wandered through the ruins undisturbed, occasionally stopping only long enough for smaller scavengers to remove parasites from their thick fur before continuing on their way.

Predators that should have fought one another...

Coexisted.

Not peacefully.

Efficiently.

Captain Ross adjusted the focus on his binoculars.

"I've found their armoury."

He pointed toward the remains of an old vehicle depot.

Rifles.

Shotguns.

Machetes.

Axes.

Boxes of ammunition.

Everything had been collected from previous expeditions and carefully stored beneath reinforced shelters constructed from timber and scrap metal.

Most of the firearms were beyond repair.

But some...

Some appeared functional.

Ross slowly exhaled.

"They're learning."

"No," Carter replied quietly.

"They already have."

Dr. Foster zoomed her camera toward another section of the compound.

Rows of sharpened stakes surrounded the central buildings.

Concealed trenches crisscrossed the open ground.

Narrow pathways guided movement between structures while forcing any approaching enemy through predictable routes.

Defensive engineering.

Simple.

Primitive.

Effective.

Someone had designed all of it.

Someone who understood warfare.

Someone who expected enemies to return.

A chill ran through Carter.

For the first time since entering Nelson Valley...

He stopped thinking of Subject Zero as a monster.

And started thinking of him as a commander.

For nearly an hour, the reconnaissance team remained concealed on the ridge, recording everything they could.

The more they observed, the more one disturbing truth became impossible to ignore.

Nothing in the valley happened by chance.

Every patrol followed the same routes.

Every hunting party returned before dusk.

Fresh carcasses arrived at regular intervals from different sectors of the forest, suggesting the valley had been divided into territories. No two groups crossed into another's hunting ground without reason.

It was an ecosystem governed by rules.

Dr. Foster continued filming through her camera.

"There are no fights," she whispered.

Ross glanced toward her.

"What?"

"They're predators. Wolves, bears, infected humans... they should be competing over food."

She zoomed in on a freshly killed elk lying near one of the ruined loading bays.

Several infected carefully dragged it into the open while two enormous wolves waited only a few metres away.

Neither species challenged the other.

The carcass was divided.

Large portions were taken toward the central buildings.

The remainder was left for the wolves.

When they had finished, the bones were carried away by smaller infected instead of being abandoned.

Nothing was wasted.

"It isn't coexistence," Foster said quietly.

"It's distribution."

Colonel Carter nodded.

"Every member has a role."

His binoculars swept across another section of the compound.

Near the collapsed administration building, four secondary infected stood perfectly still.

Their eyes weren't on the valley.

They were watching the surrounding mountains.

Sentries.

Another group disappeared into a tunnel beneath the laboratory.

Minutes later, they emerged carrying wooden crates.

Supplies.

The underground sections of Nelson Biotech were still being used.

Ross lowered his binoculars.

"They're maintaining the facility."

"Not maintaining," Carter corrected.

"Occupying."

A sudden movement caught Sergeant Mason's attention.

He raised a hand.

"Vehicle."

Everyone turned.

An old military truck rolled slowly out from beneath a collapsed storage hangar.

Its engine had long since died, yet it continued moving.

Not under its own power.

Nearly twenty infected pulled it forward using thick ropes made from braided animal hide.

Others pushed from behind.

The truck was guided toward another building where its tyres, metal panels and engine components were stripped away with remarkable efficiency.

Nothing in the valley remained unused.

Steel became weapons.

Glass became cutting tools.

Leather became armour.

Even the smallest resource found a purpose.

Ross stared in disbelief.

"This shouldn't be possible."

"No," Carter replied.

"It shouldn't."

The forest beyond the laboratory suddenly fell silent.
Not gradually.
Instantly.
The wolves stopped eating.
The bears lifted their heads.
The infected halted whatever they were doing.
Every movement ceased.
Even the ravens circling above the valley abandoned the sky,
settling onto rooftops, dead trees and broken chimneys.
Thousands of eyes turned toward the same point.
The northern tree line.
No whistles were exchanged.
No commands were spoken.
No visible signal had been given.
Yet every living creature responded together.
Dr. Foster felt her pulse quicken.
"They're reacting to something."
Carter slowly raised his binoculars.
"No..."
His voice had become barely audible.
"They're reacting to someone."
The trees at the edge of the forest began to move.
Not from wind.
Something enormous was walking between them.
Branches bent.

Young saplings snapped.
The undergrowth parted.
Then...
Everything stopped once more.
The valley waited.
And so did the reconnaissance team.
Something was about to emerge.
No one on the ridge moved.
Even breathing seemed impossibly loud.
The forest remained motionless for several seconds before a massive silhouette stepped from between the ancient trees.
Colonel Carter instinctively raised his binoculars.
For the first time in eighteen years...
Human eyes looked upon Subject Zero.
He stood well over eight feet tall.
His body no longer resembled that of any known species.
Powerful muscles shifted beneath dark, scarred skin that appeared almost armored in places, with thick plates of hardened tissue protecting his shoulders, spine and forearms. Black veins pulsed beneath the surface like molten metal flowing through stone.
His arms hung unnaturally long, ending in broad hands tipped with curved obsidian-black claws.
Despite his enormous size, every movement was controlled.
Measured.
Efficient.

He wasted no energy.

His head retained only the faintest resemblance to the volunteer who had once entered Nelson Biotech. The lower jaw had lengthened slightly, exposing rows of powerful teeth built more for tearing than chewing. His nose had flattened almost into the face, while bony ridges rose above deep-set amber eyes that reflected the morning light with an unsettling intensity.

Those eyes were not animal.

Nor entirely human.

They belonged to something that observed.

Calculated.

Understood.

Across the valley, every infected lowered its head.

The wolves lay against the ground.

Even the massive bears slowly stepped aside, clearing a path without the slightest sign of hesitation.

Not one creature challenged him.

Not one looked directly at him.

Ross swallowed.

"My God..."

Subject Zero ignored them all.

He walked through the centre of the valley with absolute confidence, inspecting the activity around him.

He paused beside the carcass of a freshly killed stag.

One of the secondary infected immediately stepped forward, cutting away a section of meat before placing it on a flat stone.

Subject Zero neither growled nor reached for it immediately.

Instead, he examined it.

Only after several seconds did he take the offering.

He consumed it slowly.

Methodically.

Then continued walking.

There was no frenzy.

No savagery.

Only ritual.

Dr. Foster could barely believe what she was witnessing.

"They're feeding him first..."

Carter's eyes never left the creature.

"No."

He spoke almost in a whisper.

"They're acknowledging him."

Subject Zero approached the ruined entrance of Nelson Biotech.

For a moment he stopped.

His gaze rested upon the shattered laboratory.

The building where he had been created.

The place where humanity had died within him.

He remained there for several long seconds before turning toward one of the underground access tunnels.

Before disappearing into the darkness...

He stopped.

Slowly...

His head turned.

Not toward the laboratory.

Not toward the valley.

Toward the ridge.

Toward them.

More than six hundred metres separated the reconnaissance team from the valley floor.

Dense trees concealed their position.

Camouflage nets broke up their outlines.

No ordinary human could possibly have seen them.

Yet Carter felt those amber eyes settle exactly where he lay hidden.

No expression crossed the creature's face.

No threat.

No anger.

Only silent recognition.

It knew.

Ross lowered his binoculars.

"Did..."

His voice faltered.

"...did he just look at us?"

No one answered.

Because every member of the reconnaissance team knew the truth.

They had not discovered Subject Zero.

Subject Zero had discovered them.

As silently as he had appeared, he disappeared into the underground entrance beneath Nelson Biotech.

The valley came alive again.

Patrols resumed.

Hunters departed.

The wolves returned to feeding.

It was as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

Yet everything had changed.

Colonel Carter slowly lowered his binoculars.

His face had lost all colour.

"We're leaving."

No one argued.

The mission had succeeded.

They had confirmed the impossible.

Subject Zero was alive.

He commanded an organized kingdom of infected.

And he possessed an intelligence far beyond anything Dr. Stanley's research had ever predicted.

As the reconnaissance team withdrew into the forest, none of them noticed the lone raven perched high above the ridge.

It watched them disappear between the trees.

Then spread its wings.

Flying silently toward the ruins of Nelson Biotech.

Ahead of the returning soldiers.

Almost as if carrying news to its king.

CHAPTER – SIXTEEN

Into Nelson Biotech

The expedition returned to the temporary command post just before sunset. Nobody had much to say on the way back. The forest had taken something from them—not physically, at least not yet, but something less tangible. The men had entered the valley expecting to find a dangerous creature. They had found an ecosystem. They had seen infected humans moving in groups, animals travelling alongside them without attacking, hunting parties returning with carcasses, crude weapons, marked paths and territories. Most disturbing of all, everything seemed to revolve around one creature.

Zero.

By the time Colonel Carter entered the command tent, the photographs from the reconnaissance team were already being transferred to the main screen. Lieutenant Sarah Kim stood beside the projector, going through the images one by one. The first showed the forest from above. The next showed the ruined buildings of Nelson Biotech. Then came the mutants, the animals and the strange markings carved into the trees.

The room became quieter with every photograph.

Carter finally removed his gloves and placed them on the table.

"We found Nelson Biotech."

Marcus Nelson, who had been standing near the entrance, slowly turned toward him.

"My laboratory?"

Carter nodded.

Marcus stared at the screen.

For years, he had imagined the facility as a graveyard. A failed experiment. A disaster that had destroyed an investment and taken away people he had once considered useful. Seeing the photographs changed something in his expression.

The place wasn't dead.

It was being used.

"What did you find?" he asked.

Carter looked at the screen.

"Too much."

He changed the photograph.

A group of infected humans appeared.

"They've established territories."

Another photograph.

"Patrols."

Another.

"Food collection."

Another.

"Weapon construction."

Marcus's expression tightened.

"And Zero?"

Carter changed the image again.

Zero stood among the ruins of Nelson Biotech.

The photograph was grainy, but the creature was unmistakable.

Marcus stared at it.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then, quietly, he asked, "Is that really him?"

Chen answered before Carter could.

"Yes."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"You've seen him?"

"Before the transformation was complete."

She looked back at the photograph.

"He wasn't like this then."

Marcus gave a bitter laugh.

"He was an experiment."

Chen turned toward him.

"He was a person."

The room fell silent.

Marcus didn't respond.

Carter broke the tension.

"The important thing is that Zero isn't alone anymore."

Abhyuday stepped toward the screen.

"The secondary infections."

Chen nodded.

"They're spreading."

"How?"

"We already know the serum can transfer through biological material. Zero's blood, tissue, possibly secretions. The exact mechanism isn't completely understood."

Abhyuday looked at the photographs.

"And these creatures have survived long enough to reproduce?"

Chen shook her head.

"Not necessarily reproduce."

She pointed toward one image.

"They're becoming adapted."

"To the forest?"

"To each other."

Abhyuday looked at her.

Chen continued, "The mutation isn't producing identical creatures. Every host changes differently. Some retain more human characteristics. Some become heavily animalistic. But they're all connected by the same underlying process."

Carter looked at the screen.

"So the forest is becoming one organism."

Chen didn't answer.

She wasn't sure whether that description was scientifically correct.

But it was close enough.

Marcus stepped forward.

"How many?"

Carter looked at him.

"We don't know."

"Estimate."

"At least several dozen visible."

"And the rest?"

Carter shook his head.

"We don't know."

Marcus looked toward the photograph of Zero.

"Then we find out."

Chen's eyes narrowed.

"Why?"

Marcus looked at her.

"Because it's my facility."

"No," Chen said. "It was."

The two stared at each other.

Abhyuday stepped between them before the argument could grow.

"We need to understand what happened inside that laboratory."

Carter nodded.

"That's why we're going back."

They left at first light.

The second expedition was smaller than the first. Carter had learned from the previous day that taking too many men into the valley was a mistake. They would be too visible, too noisy and too difficult to move through the dense forest.

Carter led the group with Ross and Mason. Foster carried the medical kit and sample containers. Chen and Abhyuday followed behind them, while Marcus insisted on coming along.

Chen had objected.

Marcus had ignored her.

She wasn't surprised.

The forest looked different in the morning.

Mist hung between the trees, and the sunlight barely reached the ground. The trail they had used previously was still visible, though several sections had been deliberately covered with branches.

Carter stopped when he saw it.

"They know we've been here."

Ross looked at the branches.

"Could be natural."

Carter shook his head.

"Not arranged like that."

Chen crouched beside the trail.

She touched one of the branches.

"It's deliberate."

Marcus looked around.

"Then we're being watched."

Chen stood.

"We were being watched yesterday."

They continued.

The deeper they went, the more obvious the signs became.

The forest had been changed.

Not destroyed.

Changed.

There were clearings where trees had been cut down. Some areas had been flattened and packed with soil. There were places where animal bones had been arranged in piles. Others contained sharpened sticks, pieces of metal and crude tools.

Foster stopped beside one of the piles.

"These aren't random."

Carter looked at her.

She pointed to the bones.

"Some of these have been stripped clean."

"Food?"

"Yes."

She picked up a bone.

"Someone is processing carcasses."

Ross looked around.

"You're telling me they're preparing meals?"

"Not exactly."

Foster examined the bone.

"But they're using almost everything."

Chen watched silently.
This was something she had not expected.
Zero had not merely created monsters.
He had created survivors.

Two hours later, they heard the first whistle.
Everyone stopped.
It came from somewhere to their left.
A short, sharp sound.
Then another answered from behind.
Carter raised his hand.
The group spread out.
Nothing appeared.
Ross whispered, "Do we move?"
Carter shook his head.
They waited.
A minute passed.
Then another.
Nothing.
Chen finally spoke.
"They're checking where we are."
Carter looked at her.
"You think so?"
"They did the same thing yesterday."

"How do you know?"

"I've spent enough time around the serum subjects to recognize patterns."

She looked toward the trees.

"That wasn't an alarm."

"What was it?"

"A question."

Nobody spoke.

Another whistle came from the distance.

Chen looked toward it.

"And now they know the answer."

Carter gave the signal to continue.

The first carcass appeared twenty minutes later.

A deer lay beside the trail.

Its body had been opened with remarkable precision.

Foster crouched beside it.

"No defensive injuries."

Carter looked at her.

"So?"

"It wasn't killed here."

She pointed toward the blood.

"Very little."

"Meaning?"

"It was already dead when it was brought here."

Chen examined the surrounding ground.

There were footprints.

Human.

Wolf.

Something larger.

"They're transporting food."

Marcus looked toward the forest.

"For everyone?"

Chen nodded.

"Probably."

He was quiet.

Then he said, "This is organized."

"Yes."

"Who organizes them?"

Nobody answered.

They already knew.

The valley appeared just after midday.

The group stopped automatically.

Nelson Biotech stood below them.

The ruined facility looked almost beautiful from a distance.

Nature had covered most of the damage. Vines climbed the walls. Trees grew through broken windows. Moss covered concrete and steel. But movement could be seen everywhere.

Mutated humans crossed the open areas.

Some carried dead animals.

Others stood guard.

Wolves moved among them.

A huge boar passed between two buildings without being attacked.

A group of infected appeared to be repairing something near the old security gate.

Ross lowered his binoculars.

"I don't like this."

Carter didn't look at him.

"Why?"

"Because it looks normal."

Carter finally looked at him.

Ross continued.

"Not human normal. But normal for them."

That was precisely what made it disturbing.

They weren't living in chaos.

They had adapted.

They had made the forest their home.

And somewhere inside that home was the creature that had started it all.

Zero.

They waited nearly an hour before moving again.

Carter wanted to understand the pattern of movement around the facility.

Every fifteen minutes, groups moved from the western side toward the main buildings. Others left through the southern path. The wolves seemed to patrol independently, but their movements repeatedly brought them back toward the same central area.

There was a hierarchy.

Carter had spent years in the military.

He recognized hierarchy when he saw it.

"What about Zero?" he asked.

Chen pointed toward the main building.

"He'll be there."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's where he was created."

Carter looked at her.

"You think he remembers?"

Chen hesitated.

"I don't know."

That was the truth.

She remembered Zero before the transformation had destroyed his humanity. She remembered the fear in his eyes. She remembered the moment he had looked at her as though asking for help.

But the creature in the photographs looked nothing like that man.

Maybe there was nothing left.

Maybe there was.

Chen didn't know which possibility frightened her more.

They moved toward the facility.

The mutants noticed them almost immediately.

One appeared on a rooftop.

Then another.

Carter raised his weapon.

Chen put a hand on his arm.

"Don't."

"They've seen us."

"I know."

"Then why aren't they attacking?"

Chen watched the rooftop.

"Because they don't need to."

A figure emerged from the trees.

It was one of the infected humans.

It stopped perhaps fifty metres away.

It looked at them.

Then it turned and walked away.

Ross watched it disappear.

"What was that?"

Chen shook her head.

"An invitation."

Carter frowned.

"You're sure?"

"No."

She looked toward the facility.

"But if they wanted us dead, we'd already be fighting."

They followed.

The entrance to Nelson Biotech was almost completely buried beneath vegetation.

Marcus stopped before the old company emblem.

His expression changed.

Chen noticed.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

Marcus looked at the ruined building.

"I spent half my life building this place."

Chen said nothing.

Marcus continued.

"People used to come here believing they were going to change the world."

"And instead?"

He looked at the forest around them.

"We changed it."

For once, Chen didn't argue.

They entered.

The inside of the facility was colder than the forest.

The corridors were dark and smelled of damp concrete, rust and chemicals.

Their footsteps echoed.

Marcus walked slowly.

Every few metres he recognized something.

A laboratory.

A meeting room.

A storage section.

A corridor where scientists had once rushed equipment during emergencies.

The place had been full of life once.

Now it was full of silence.

Chen led them deeper.

"Main research wing is this way."

They passed several laboratories.

Some had been completely destroyed.

Others were surprisingly intact.

In one room, glass containers still stood in rows.

Most were empty.

A few contained dried biological material.

Foster examined one.

"These were samples."

"Yes," Chen said.

"How old?"

"At least eighteen years."

Abhyuday looked around.

"Somebody has been here."

Chen looked at him.

"What?"

"Look."

He pointed toward the floor.

There were footprints in the dust.

Fresh.

Everyone became still.

Carter raised his weapon.

"How fresh?"

Abhyuday crouched.

"Recent."

Marcus looked at Chen.

"Could be Zero."

Chen shook her head.

"Maybe."

They continued more carefully.

At the end of the corridor was a door that had been reinforced from the inside.

Carter examined it.

"What's behind this?"

Chen looked at the number.

"Sublevel laboratory."

Marcus frowned.

"I don't remember this section."

"Stanley had several restricted areas."

"You knew?"

Chen looked at him.

"I worked here too."

Marcus looked away.

Carter opened the door.

The corridor beyond was almost completely intact.

That was the first thing that frightened Chen.

The second was the sound.

A faint electrical hum.

The facility had power.

After eighteen years.

Abhyuday checked the control panel.

"This system shouldn't be running."

Chen walked past him.

"Then somebody kept it running."

They reached the central terminal.

Abhyuday began examining the system.

"There's still an auxiliary network."

"Can you access it?" Carter asked.

"Maybe."

He connected his equipment.

The screen flickered.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the Nelson Biotech logo appeared.

The old system loaded.

A list of projects filled the screen.

Marcus stepped forward.

"Project Zero."

Abhyuday opened it.

Most files were corrupted.

Then he found something.

PROJECT ALPHA

Chen froze.

Abhyuday noticed.

"You know this."

Chen didn't answer.

Marcus looked at her.

"What is Alpha?"

Chen stared at the screen.

"A different experiment."

"Different how?"

"Completely."

She finally looked at him.

"Zero was created through the serum."

Marcus frowned.

"Yes."

"Alpha wasn't."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"Then what was it?"

Chen took a breath.

"A synthesized organism."

Marcus looked confused.

"Meaning?"

"They didn't transform a human."

She looked toward the dark corridor.

"They built Alpha."

Nobody spoke.

Foster looked at the screen.

"Why?"

Chen remembered the old laboratory.

"They wanted to know if life could be designed rather than modified."

"And?"

Chen's eyes remained fixed on the word.

"They succeeded."

The system displayed a final record.

SUBJECT ALPHA

STATUS: PRESERVED

LOCATION: CRYOGENIC STORAGE

Abhyuday read it twice.

"Preserved."

Chen nodded slowly.

Marcus looked at her.

"Alive?"

"We don't know."

"How long has it been there?"

"Eighteen years."

Carter looked toward the corridor.

"Then we need to see it."

Chen immediately shook her head.

"No."

Carter frowned.

"Why?"

"Because we don't know what will happen."

"Neither do we know what Zero will do."

"Alpha isn't Zero."

"Then what is it?"

Chen paused.

She had spent months with Alpha.

She knew it better than anyone else in the room.

It was intelligent.

Not human intelligence exactly.

Something different.

It understood patterns.

It understood people.

It learned faster than the scientists could teach.

And it never spoke.

But somehow, that silence had never made Chen doubt that it understood her.

"It's not a monster," she finally said.

Marcus gave her a cold look.

"Neither was Zero."

Chen didn't respond.

Because he was right.

The cryogenic wing lay beneath the main laboratory.

The deeper they went, the colder it became.

The corridor lights switched on one by one as they approached.

Carter kept his weapon ready.

Foster checked the temperature.

"Minus forty."

Abhyuday looked at the readings.

"That's outside normal operating temperature."

"Why?"

"The system is warming."

Chen stopped.

"What?"

Abhyuday checked the display.

"Someone – or something – is changing the temperature."

Chen stared down the corridor.

"Alpha."

They reached the final door.

A faded warning was painted across it.

CRYOGENIC CONTAINMENT – AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL ONLY

Chen placed her hand on the scanner.

The system recognized her.

The door opened.

Cold air rushed into the corridor.

Inside was a large chamber.

Most of the cryogenic units were empty.

Some had been damaged.

One remained intact.

At the centre of the room stood a single chamber covered in frost.

Abhyuday approached the control panel.

"Life support active."

Marcus stared.

"After eighteen years?"

"Yes."

Carter asked, "Is it alive?"

Abhyuday checked the monitor.

For several seconds, there was no answer.

Then a tiny electrical spike appeared.

He stared at it.

"There's activity."

Chen moved toward the glass.

The frost began to clear.

Slowly.

Something moved inside.

Chen knew the shape immediately.

Her heart began beating faster.

She remembered the first time she had seen Alpha.

She remembered its eyes.

The way it had watched her.

The way it had learned.

The way it had once placed its hand against the glass when she left.

She stepped closer.

"Alpha."

The figure inside moved again.

Abhyuday looked at Chen.

"You've seen it before."

Chen nodded.

"Many times."

"Does it remember you?"

She looked at the chamber.

"I don't know."

The frost disappeared from the upper portion of the glass.

Two eyes opened.

They focused on Chen.

She stopped breathing.

Alpha looked at her.

It didn't speak.

It didn't need to.

Chen slowly raised her hand.

Alpha watched.

Then, after several seconds, it raised its own.

Its palm touched the glass.

Chen placed hers against the other side.

For eighteen years, Alpha had been asleep.

For eighteen years, Chen had believed she would never see those eyes again.

Now they were looking directly at her.

And she realized something that frightened her more than the creature itself.

Alpha remembered.

Abhyuday whispered, "What is it going to do?"

Chen didn't take her eyes off Alpha.

"I don't know."

A distant sound rolled through the forest above them.

A roar.

Low.

Deep.

Familiar.

Alpha's head turned.

Chen's hand remained against the glass.

She knew that sound too.

Zero.

Alpha had heard him.

And somewhere far above the underground laboratory, deep inside the forest that Zero had turned into his kingdom, the creatures began to stir.

The two experiments were still separated.

They had not met.

Not yet.

But the world that had created them was bringing them closer together.

And for Chen, standing between the frozen past and the living horror of the present, one thought became impossible to ignore.

The laboratory had never truly been abandoned.

It had been waiting.

CHAPTER – SEVENTEEN

Subject Alpha

The cryogenic chamber continued to hum. Nobody moved. For eighteen years, the room had been nothing more than a forgotten corner of Nelson Biotech, sealed away beneath layers of concrete and steel. Now every person standing inside it was watching the impossible happen in front of them.

The monitor beside the chamber showed a slow but steady heartbeat: 37 BPM, then 39, then 41. Abhyuday leaned closer to the screen. "It's alive."

Chen didn't answer. She was still looking through the glass. The frost had disappeared from most of the chamber now. The creature inside remained motionless, suspended in a pale cloud of condensed vapour. Its body was leaner than Chen remembered, almost unnaturally still after so many years of preservation. There were no visible wounds, no obvious signs of decay. The cryogenic system had done exactly what it had been designed to do. It had kept Alpha alive.

Carter looked at Chen. "How do we wake it?"

Chen finally turned toward him. "We don't."

Carter frowned. "Then what are we doing here?"

"Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

Chen looked back at the chamber. "For it to decide."

Carter didn't like the answer. Neither did Marcus. "We can't stand here indefinitely," Marcus said. "If the system is failing, we need to remove it."

Chen shook her head. "You don't understand."

Marcus gave her a hard look. "Then explain."

She hesitated. "Alpha wasn't like the other experiments."

Abhyuday looked up from the monitor. "What does that mean?"

Chen walked toward the chamber. "When Alpha was first created, the scientists expected aggression. They expected instinct. They thought that if they could build an organism with enhanced strength and intelligence, they could eventually teach it obedience."

She smiled faintly. "They were wrong."

"How?" Abhyuday asked.

"Because Alpha understood the difference between being taught and being controlled."

The room became quiet. Chen continued, "It learned incredibly quickly. Faster than any of us expected. We would introduce a new object into the chamber and it would remember it. We changed routines to test its memory, and it noticed. We tried to confuse it with repeated patterns, and it learned the trick."

She looked through the glass. "And then it started learning us."

Abhyuday frowned. "Learning us?"

"Our behaviour. Our habits. Who entered the room at what time. Which researcher was afraid of it. Who would bring food. Who would punish it. Who would talk to it." She paused. "And who wouldn't."

Abhyuday glanced at her. "You."

Chen nodded. "I talked to it."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

It was the first time Abhyuday had heard uncertainty in her voice. "Perhaps because everyone else treated it like a machine."

She looked at Alpha. "I didn't."

The heart monitor climbed to 44 BPM. Alpha's fingers moved. Carter immediately raised his weapon, and Chen turned sharply. "Lower it."

"It moved."

"I saw."

"What if it attacks?"

Chen looked directly at him. "Then shooting it in a cryogenic chamber isn't going to help anyone."

Carter hesitated before lowering the rifle.

Abhyuday moved toward the control panel. "I can gradually bring the temperature up."

Chen nodded. "Slowly."

He began adjusting the settings. The temperature rose by fractions, and the machines responded with a series of low mechanical clicks. Alpha's breathing became visible. One breath, then another.

Chen watched every movement. She remembered the first time Alpha had opened its eyes. It had been much younger then, smaller. The researchers had crowded around the observation glass, waiting for some sign of aggression. Alpha

had opened its eyes and looked directly at Chen—not at the lights, not at the instruments, but at her. She had smiled. It had stared back. She had known then that something was different. The others had taken months to understand. Chen had known in minutes.

The temperature reached minus seventy. Alpha's eyes opened.

Carter tightened his grip on the rifle, but the creature did not move. Its eyes slowly travelled across the chamber—the lights, the equipment, the ceiling, the door, then the people outside. Its gaze stopped on Carter. Carter instinctively shifted his position, and Alpha's eyes followed him. Carter froze.

Chen noticed. "Don't move."

"Why?"

"Because you're making it curious."

Carter looked at her. "That's supposed to reassure me?"

"No."

Chen stepped closer to the glass. "Alpha."

The creature looked at her. For several seconds, nothing happened. Then its head tilted slightly.

Chen's breath caught.

It remembered.

She placed her hand against the glass. Alpha watched, then slowly raised its own hand. Their palms met through the barrier.

Abhyuday stared. "You were right."

Chen smiled faintly. "It remembers."

They spent the next hour bringing Alpha out of cryogenic preservation. There were no sudden movements, no dramatic

awakening, no roar. The process was almost disappointingly ordinary. That was what made it unsettling.

Alpha simply woke.

Its breathing became stronger, its muscles gradually responded, the temperature inside the chamber returned to normal, and the monitors showed stable neurological activity.

Abhyuday ran a series of scans. "Everything is functioning."

"Everything?" Carter asked.

"Brain activity is unusually high."

Chen looked at him. "How unusual?"

Abhyuday checked the numbers again. "Very."

"Compared with a human?"

"Not comparable."

Chen nodded. She had expected that.

Abhyuday moved toward the chamber. Alpha watched him. He raised one hand. Alpha watched the movement. He lowered it, and Alpha lowered its own.

Abhyuday looked at Chen. "It copied me."

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"You're testing it."

"Yes."

"It's testing you too."

Abhyuday stopped.

Alpha remained perfectly still. Then it looked toward the control panel. The small red indicator light was blinking.

Alpha walked toward it. Carter raised his weapon again, but Chen stepped between them.

"Wait."

Alpha placed its hand against the control panel. Nothing happened. It looked at the panel again, then at Chen.

Chen understood. "You want the door."

Alpha remained still.

Chen approached the controls. "Open it."

Abhyuday looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"No."

She pressed the release.

The chamber door opened. Cold air spilled into the room.

Alpha stepped out.

Everyone instinctively moved backward. It stopped. There was no attack, no sudden movement. Alpha looked at each person individually—Carter, Abhyuday, Foster, Marcus—then returned its attention to Chen. She could see the recognition in its eyes.

"Hello," she whispered.

Alpha didn't respond. It couldn't. But it moved closer.

Chen remained still. Alpha raised its hand. For a moment she thought it was going to touch her. Instead, it stopped just short of her face. It studied her, the same way it had years ago.

Chen smiled. "You remember."

Alpha lowered its hand.

Marcus had been watching from the back of the room. "How much control do you have over it?"

Chen looked at him. "None."

"Then why isn't it attacking?"

"Because it doesn't want to."

Marcus frowned. "That's your explanation?"

"That's the truth."

He looked at Alpha. "It was designed to obey."

Chen shook her head. "It was designed to learn."

"Same thing."

"No." Her voice became harder. "Not even close."

Marcus walked toward Alpha. Chen immediately stepped in front of him.

"Don't."

"I want to see it."

"You've seen it."

"I want to examine it."

"Then ask."

Marcus looked irritated. "Ask?"

Chen nodded. "You don't walk up to Alpha like it's property."

Marcus glanced toward the creature. "It's Nelson Biotech property."

Alpha's eyes shifted toward him. Chen noticed and didn't like what she saw.

"Step back."

Marcus ignored her.

Alpha moved.

It was so fast that Carter barely had time to react. Alpha didn't attack Marcus. It simply moved between them.

Marcus stopped. Alpha stared at him. There was no growl, no threat, just a long, silent look. Marcus eventually stepped backward, and Alpha returned to Chen's side.

Abhyuday had watched the entire thing. He looked at Chen.

"It understood."

Chen nodded. "What?"

"That he was a threat."

Chen didn't answer because she had reached the same conclusion.

Later that evening, Abhyuday sat alone in the laboratory, reviewing Alpha's scans. Chen entered carrying two cups of coffee and placed one beside him.

"You haven't stopped."

"Neither have you."

She sat opposite him. Abhyuday turned the monitor toward her. "Look."

The genetic profile appeared.

"I've never seen anything like this."

Chen studied it. "What are you looking at?"

"The structure." He pointed to several sections. "This isn't like Zero."

"I told you."

"No. I mean fundamentally."

Chen leaned closer. "Explain."

"Zero's body is constantly changing because of the serum. His genome is being pushed into new configurations."

"And Alpha?"

"Alpha doesn't need to change the same way."

Chen frowned.

Abhyuday continued. "Whatever they did during synthesis, they created a biological system capable of adapting without relying on the serum."

Chen looked at him. "So Alpha can mutate?"

"Not exactly."

He searched for the right words. "It can adapt."

"What's the difference?"

"Mutation is usually a consequence. Alpha's changes appear to be responsive."

Chen understood. "You mean it changes because it needs to."

"Yes."

She looked toward the observation room.

Alpha was sitting on the floor. It had been given several objects to examine: a metal cup, a flashlight and a piece of equipment. It wasn't playing with them. It was studying them.

Abhyuday watched through the glass. "How intelligent is it?"

Chen smiled. "You keep asking me that."

"Because I still don't have an answer."

"You won't."

"Why?"

"Because intelligence isn't a number."

She looked at Alpha. "It doesn't think like us."

"Does it understand language?"

"It understands certain words."

"Can it speak?"

"No."

"Can it communicate?"

Chen thought for a moment. "Yes."

"How?"

"You'll learn."

The following morning, Alpha had learned the laboratory – not the entire facility, just the parts that mattered. It knew where the food was kept, which doors opened automatically, which members of the team approached it cautiously and which didn't. It knew that Carter carried a weapon, that Abhyuday was interested in its biology, and that Chen was different.

Chen noticed something else. Alpha had begun spending time near the windows. It kept looking toward the forest.

She eventually joined it. "What are you looking at?"

Alpha didn't move.

The forest was quiet.

Too quiet.

Chen stood beside it. "Do you remember this place?"

Alpha remained still.

"Do you remember the old laboratory?"

No response.

"Do you remember Zero?"

Alpha's head turned slightly.

Chen stopped.

She watched its eyes. There was no fear, no confusion, only attention. She looked toward the forest. "I don't know if you remember him."

Alpha continued staring outside.

Then something moved far beyond the trees. A bird suddenly flew from the canopy, and Alpha followed it with its eyes.

Chen watched. Something about its behaviour had changed.

It was listening.

That evening, Abhyuday entered the room carrying the latest results from the inhibitor experiments.

"We may have a problem."

Chen turned. "What?"

"The inhibitor is working."

"That's good."

"On Chen's samples."

Chen looked at him. "What's the problem?"

Abhyuday placed the results on the table. "The serum has changed since we collected the samples."

Chen frowned. "Changed how?"

"It is becoming more stable."

"Zero?"

"Probably."

She looked toward the forest.

Abhyuday continued. "If Zero is continuing to evolve, the inhibitor may become less effective over time."

Chen's expression hardened. "Then we need to move quickly."

Abhyuday nodded.

But neither of them noticed Alpha standing silently at the doorway.

It had been listening.

Not to every word. Perhaps not even to the science. But to the change in Chen's voice. The tension. The urgency. The fear.

Alpha looked toward the forest again.

Something was coming.

Night fell over Nelson Biotech. The lights inside the laboratory remained on, while outside the forest was dark. A group of mutated humans moved through the trees and stopped at the edge of the old facility. One of them looked toward the building, then another.

They did not enter.

They waited.

Farther behind them, hidden among the trees, stood Zero.

He looked toward the laboratory.

He had sensed something. Something old. Something unfamiliar. Something that did not belong to the world he had created.

He remained there for a long time.

Then he turned away.

Inside the facility, Alpha was standing beside the window. Chen noticed and walked toward it.

"What is it?"

Alpha did not look at her. Its eyes remained fixed on the darkness outside.

Chen followed its gaze. She couldn't see anything.

But Alpha could.

For several seconds they stood together in silence. Then Alpha slowly turned toward her. Chen looked into its eyes. She didn't know what it was trying to tell her.

But she knew one thing.

Whatever had happened to the forest after Zero's escape, Alpha had sensed it.

And for the first time since its awakening, Chen wondered whether Alpha's return was going to save them—or whether bringing it back had simply given the forest another monster.

She looked at Alpha. "No matter what happens," she whispered, "I'm not putting you back in that chamber."

Alpha watched her. Then, very slowly, it placed its hand against the glass.

Chen placed hers against the other side.

Outside, somewhere beyond the trees, a distant roar rolled across the valley.

Alpha didn't move.

But its eyes changed.

It had heard him.

Zero was coming closer.

CHAPTER – EIGHTEEN

The Old Experiment

The first thing Chen noticed the following morning was that Alpha had not slept. It sat beside the observation-room window, watching the forest. Its posture was relaxed, but its eyes followed sounds Chen couldn't hear.

"You've been there all night?" Alpha turned toward her but didn't answer. Chen placed a cup of coffee on the table. "You know, most people would consider this creepy." Alpha looked at the cup, then at her.

Chen walked to the window. "Do you remember this place?" Alpha remained silent. Chen knew it didn't communicate through words. It had other ways—a look, a movement, a pause. Sometimes that was enough. She rested her hand against the glass. "I remember. I remember the first time I saw you."

Eighteen years earlier, the room had been brighter. Behind the observation window stood scientists watching a creature that had been alive for only forty-three hours. Alpha had been smaller then, but not weak. Its body had been constructed from synthetic biological tissue and engineered cellular structures. No accident had created it. It had been designed, built and synthesized—the first successful organism of its kind.

Stanley had stood at the centre of the observation room. One of the scientists asked how long it would take before Alpha responded to conditioning. Stanley predicted three weeks, but Chen disagreed.

"Three days."

Stanley laughed. "You think it's that intelligent?"

Three days later, Alpha solved the first test, then the second and third. Every time the researchers changed the experiment, Alpha adapted. Soon they stopped testing its intelligence and began testing its obedience. They introduced rewards, punishments, repetitive commands and environmental restrictions. Alpha learned all of them, but it did not obey blindly. That frightened Stanley. An organism that could learn was useful. An organism that could choose was dangerous.

"Chen?"

She turned. Abhyuday stood in the doorway. He asked whether she had been talking to Alpha, and Chen replied that she hadn't exactly been talking to it. When he asked what she had been saying, she simply said, "Nothing important."

Abhyuday placed his tablet on the table. He had been going through the old files and had found more than he wanted. "Alpha wasn't just a prototype."

Chen looked at him as he explained that Stanley had an entire program around Alpha. Project Alpha had been designed to answer one question. The heading on the file read SYNTHETIC BIOLOGICAL ADAPTATION.

"They wanted to create an organism that could adapt to environmental threats without needing external genetic modification."

Chen nodded. "That's what they told us."

"No. That's what they told you."

He opened another file. Much of the data was corrupted, but one paragraph remained. Stanley had wanted to use Alpha as a template.

"For Zero?" Chen asked.

"Not directly. They were trying to reproduce Alpha's adaptive capacity in a human-compatible organism."

Chen stared at the screen.

"The serum."

Abhyuday nodded. "Zero wasn't the beginning."

He looked toward Alpha.

"Alpha was."

Someone had removed the records without leaving a trace. Chen looked toward Alpha and wondered whether it knew something. Abhyuday asked if it could remember that far back, but Chen didn't know. They decided to test it.

Chen placed several objects on a table: a metal cup, flashlight, broken watch, scalpel and red marker.

"Pick the one you remember."

Alpha approached the table, touching the flashlight, then the cup and finally the watch. It picked up the watch.

Chen's heart skipped.

"That was yours."

She explained that she had given the watch to Alpha years ago during the first behavioural trials. Alpha turned it over, running its fingers across the cracked surface.

"You remember."

Chen pointed to the other objects, but Alpha ignored them and returned to the watch. Abhyuday watched carefully.

"Selective memory."

"No," Chen said. "It isn't remembering the object. It's remembering what happened with it."

The second test was harder. Chen drew a series of meaningless symbols and showed them to Alpha for three seconds. When she covered the paper, Alpha reproduced the sequence perfectly.

"How long did you show it?"

"Three seconds."

"That's impossible."

Chen smiled. "You've been saying that a lot."

Abhyuday examined the drawing and asked if it had photographic memory. Chen explained that it was more like pattern memory. Alpha didn't memorize everything; it remembered what it considered important.

"So it's deciding."

"Always has."

The tests continued through the afternoon. Alpha solved some tasks immediately and deliberately ignored others. When Abhyuday gave it a complex mechanical device, it examined every component before disassembling it, while completely ignoring a basic puzzle. But whenever Chen entered the room, Alpha stopped everything.

"It likes you," Abhyuday said.

"I think it trusts me."

"Why?"

"Because I never tried to control it."

Abhyuday looked at the old files. "Maybe that's what they didn't understand."

That evening, Marcus entered the laboratory and said he wanted to know what Alpha could do. Chen told him that it could think, but Marcus wanted to know whether it could fight or kill. When he asked how strong it was, Abhyuday replied that Alpha was stronger than a human, though not strong enough to defeat Zero.

Marcus looked back at Alpha. "Then why are we keeping it?"

"Because strength isn't everything."

Marcus smiled. "That's something people say when they don't have enough strength."

Chen stared at him. "You haven't learned anything about Alpha."

"Then teach me."

Chen placed a metal object on the floor and moved it slightly. Alpha watched without moving. She moved it again and told Alpha to follow. Still, it did nothing.

"See? It's not doing anything," Marcus said.

"Exactly."

Chen moved the object again. Alpha suddenly moved—not toward the object, but toward Marcus. It stopped directly behind him. Marcus turned, having never heard it move.

"It wasn't interested in the object," Chen said quietly.

Marcus stared at Alpha.

"It was interested in you."

For the first time, Marcus looked genuinely uncomfortable.

That night, Chen found Abhyuday in the old records room. He told her that he had found the original Alpha files hidden

inside the system. He connected the storage drive, and a single folder appeared:

PROJECT ALPHA – FINAL PHASE

The first video showed Stanley in the old laboratory.

"If you're watching this, then the Alpha program has reached its final stage."

Stanley explained that Alpha had exceeded every neurological projection, demonstrating adaptive reasoning, predictive behaviour and memory retention far beyond human parameters. Then he revealed its fatal flaw.

"It refuses to obey."

The recording showed Alpha resisting conditioning and neurological suppression. Stanley admitted that those attempts had failed.

"So we decided to preserve it."

Chen stared at the screen as Stanley continued, explaining that Alpha had not been preserved because it was useless. The screen went black, and one final line appeared:

ALPHA WILL BE REQUIRED WHEN ZERO FAILS.

Chen stared at the words. Stanley's earlier warning returned to her memory: "One day you'll understand why we built the first one."

She looked at Abhyuday.

"Zero wasn't supposed to be the final experiment."

A metallic scrape came from the corridor. Chen stepped outside, but the corridor was empty. Then she saw Alpha standing near the forest-facing window. Following its gaze, Chen initially saw nothing. Then a figure appeared between the trees.

Then another.

And another.

They were watching the laboratory.

Abhyuday joined her.

"They're here."

Carter arrived moments later with his rifle, and the laboratory went on alert. But the creatures outside did not attack. They simply watched.

Then something enormous moved through the trees.

The smaller creatures stepped aside.

Chen's blood ran cold.

"Zero."

Alpha moved closer to the window. Chen instinctively reached for it.

"Don't."

Alpha stopped and looked at her, then toward the forest. Chen realized it wasn't afraid. It was studying him.

A distant roar echoed across the valley. The glass trembled. Carter raised his weapon, and Marcus appeared at the end of the corridor.

And Alpha — for the first time — smiled.

Not like a human. Not exactly. But enough for Chen to understand.

It knew who was coming.

CHAPTER – NINETEEN

The Kingdom

The forest had gone silent again. It was the kind of silence Chen had learned to distrust. There were no birds calling from the canopy, no movement among the wet leaves, and not even the distant cries that usually came from deeper in the valley. The rain had stopped, but water continued dripping from the branches, each drop sounding unnaturally loud in the stillness. Chen stood at the broken window of the old laboratory with Alpha beside her while Abhyuday held the tablet containing Stanley's final recording. Neither had spoken since the two eyes appeared between the trees. They were gone now, but Alpha continued staring toward the same place. Chen whispered that it knew where Zero was. Alpha gave no response, yet Chen had learned that its silence did not mean ignorance. Sometimes it meant the opposite; Alpha could remain motionless for minutes while processing something that would have taken a human several conversations to understand.

Abhyuday suggested returning to the main building, but Chen refused. If Zero was watching them, he already knew where they were. Before they could decide what to do, Alpha suddenly moved toward the corridor. Chen followed it into the main hall, where the expedition members had gathered. Carter checked the ammunition of the remaining rifles while two soldiers guarded the entrances, and Marcus stood beside an old map of the valley. Alpha stopped in front of it and raised a hand, touching the eastern forest before moving its finger downward toward the river and finally toward an area

marked Research Zone C. Chen immediately recognized it as the location of the secondary laboratories where the original field experiments had been conducted. Marcus admitted that the eastern sector had been abandoned because it was no longer safe, but refused to say whether Zero was responsible. When Alpha struck the map again, Chen understood what it wanted. It wanted them to go there. Carter objected, warning that they had no idea what waited in that region. Chen looked at Alpha and simply replied, "Neither does he." When Carter asked why they should follow it, Chen answered, "Because it remembers."

They left just before sunrise. Only six people entered the forest: Chen, Abhyuday, Carter, Marcus, two soldiers, and Alpha leading the way. The forest seemed different from before – not necessarily more dangerous, but more organized. Tracks covered the ground, paths were unusually clear of vegetation, and broken branches and stones appeared deliberately positioned. After nearly an hour, Abhyuday pointed out three deep scratches running vertically down a tree. Carter wondered if they belonged to an animal, but Chen knew they did not. Alpha had stopped several metres ahead, staring at the markings. When Chen asked if it had seen them before, Alpha touched the tree and then looked toward the path. The group continued, leaving behind the last signs of human civilization. Old roads disappeared beneath vegetation, concrete foundations emerged from the earth, and the remains of an abandoned research station appeared between the trees. Then Chen saw a human skeleton hanging from a tree. Carter warned everyone not to touch it, but as they looked around, they discovered dozens more scattered throughout the forest, some beneath trees and others arranged in strange piles. Marcus's lack of surprise caught Chen's attention. When confronted, he admitted that he had seen reports of

disappearing expedition teams but claimed they had never known why they were dying.

The first attack came without warning. A creature dropped from the trees and Carter fired, but another immediately followed, then another. They were not animals. They had once been human, though their bodies had been altered beyond recognition. Their limbs were elongated, their skin thickened and discoloured, and they moved with unnatural speed. They used the trees and terrain to surround the group, forcing Carter and the soldiers to fire controlled bursts while Chen pulled Abhyuday behind cover. One mutant lunged toward them, but Alpha intercepted it, striking it across the chest and sending it several metres away. When the creature recovered and attacked again, Alpha avoided the blow, caught its arm, twisted it until the bone cracked, and released it. Instead of killing the mutant, Alpha allowed it to escape. Chen realized that this was deliberate. It wanted the creature to run.

The attack lasted less than ten minutes before the remaining mutants disappeared into the forest. Carter checked his ammunition and suggested turning back, but Marcus insisted they were close. Through the trees, Chen initially thought she was looking at a mountain. Then she realized it was a massive wall built from concrete, steel, and pieces of machinery taken from the old laboratory. Vegetation covered much of it, but its purpose was unmistakable. There was an opening in the wall, and Alpha walked through it. The others followed.

Beyond the barrier, they discovered the kingdom.

Chen had expected ruins, perhaps a nest or something primitive. Instead, the forest opened into a vast clearing that had once been part of the research complex but had been transformed by the mutants. Shelters made from metal sheets, broken concrete, and branches stood among elevated platforms and narrow pathways. Fires burned in several

places while groups of mutants moved throughout the settlement. Some returned from the forest carrying hunted animals, others prepared food or repaired structures, and others stood on elevated platforms watching the perimeter. Yet the most disturbing thing was not the structures. It was their behaviour. They were not acting randomly. They were living.

There were no children, no farms, and nothing resembling an ordinary human village. This was survival organized around a single dominant force. Abhyuday watched the creatures and realized that they had developed roles and methods of communication. Their system relied on gestures, sounds, and movement: a raised arm, a warning cry, or a particular posture could communicate an instruction. Some recognized individuals, while others responded immediately to signals from larger and more dominant creatures. Their society was primitive, but it was organized. At the far end of the clearing stood an enormous structure that had once been an old laboratory. The mutants had built walls, platforms, and passageways around it, turning it into the dominant structure of the settlement. Abhyuday understood what it was. "That's where he lives." Chen looked toward the building. "Zero."

They did not see Zero immediately. That was somehow worse. Hundreds of eyes had turned toward them, yet nobody attacked. Alpha stepped forward, and Chen instinctively reached for its arm before stopping herself. A larger mutant approached carrying a crude metal weapon and stopped several metres from Alpha. The two creatures stared at each other. Without a word, the mutant lowered its weapon and stepped aside. Another followed, then another, until a path opened through the crowd. Abhyuday whispered that they were letting them through, but Chen understood differently. They were waiting.

Something moved inside the old laboratory. Every mutant became still. Alpha's posture changed, its attention narrowing toward the building. The doors opened, and Zero stepped outside. He appeared larger than Chen remembered—not only because of his physical size, but because of the reaction he commanded. Every creature turned toward him; some lowered their heads while others stepped backward. No one challenged him. Zero looked across the settlement until his eyes found Alpha. For several seconds, neither creature moved. Chen felt as though she were watching two pieces of a forgotten experiment finally recognize one another.

Zero took a step forward. Alpha did the same. Abhyuday whispered Chen's name, but she raised a hand and told him not to interfere. Zero stopped. Alpha stopped as well. Neither attacked. Zero tilted his head, and Alpha mirrored the movement, studying him as though comparing something it already knew. Then Zero looked toward Chen. A cold feeling passed through her as she realized that he recognized her—not necessarily as Chen, but as someone connected to the world that had created him. Zero turned back toward Alpha and released a low sound. Alpha answered with an unfamiliar noise of its own. For a moment, the entire kingdom seemed to hold its breath. Then Zero turned away and walked back into the old laboratory. The mutants followed, and the path closed behind them. Chen could only conclude that the two creatures had recognized each other.

They remained hidden at the edge of the clearing until darkness approached. The longer Chen observed the kingdom, the more she understood why the earlier expedition teams had disappeared. These mutants were not mindless. They hunted together, protected their territory, shared food, cared for injured members, and deliberately avoided certain areas of the forest. Yet everything revolved around Zero. He

needed no guards or soldiers; his presence was enough. When he moved, others moved. When he stopped, they stopped. When he looked toward a particular part of the forest, scouts disappeared into the trees. It had no laws, written language, or government, but it had order—and Zero was its king.

Chen finally understood what Marcus had feared. The forest was no longer simply infected. The serum had created something capable of spreading, Zero had created something capable of surviving, and the creatures born from him had created something capable of becoming permanent. Abhyuday said they had to stop it before it spread, but neither of them knew how. Chen looked at Alpha sitting quietly beneath a tree and realized that the confrontation between Alpha and Zero would not happen simply because one was stronger than the other. They were two answers to the same question: one had been deliberately created, while the other had been created by mistake, and between them stood the people responsible for creating both.

The forest darkened completely. Far inside the kingdom, Zero released a low roar, and every mutant in the clearing immediately fell silent before lowering its head. Chen watched the scene and finally understood the true meaning of the place they had discovered. This was not merely where the mutants lived. It was the world Zero had built for himself.

His kingdom.

And they had just walked into it.

CHAPTER – TWENTY

The Inhibitor

By the time they returned to the laboratory, nobody spoke about the kingdom. Each person carried a different impression of what they had witnessed. Carter had seen an organized threat capable of destroying a human settlement, Marcus had seen an opportunity, and Abhyuday had witnessed an unprecedented biological phenomenon. Chen had seen something more disturbing—a world that had begun to exist without its creators. But Alpha had seen only one thing: Zero. The journey back was slow and mostly silent. Several times they stopped after hearing movement among the trees, although the mutants never attacked. A few could be seen watching from branches or behind trunks, almost as if the forest had been instructed to let them pass.

When the ruined laboratory finally appeared, the sun was already low. The building seemed smaller than it had that morning. After seeing Zero's kingdom, Chen could no longer see the laboratory as the centre of the world. It was simply the place where the mistake had begun. Alpha entered first but stopped at the doorway and looked back toward the forest. Chen quietly told it that it did not have to stay. Alpha looked at her for a moment before entering. Abhyuday noticed the exchange and asked whether she believed Alpha had understood her. Chen simply replied that this was how Alpha worked.

Inside the old pathology laboratory, Abhyuday had created a temporary workspace using recovered equipment and portable power units. He switched on the main monitor,

revealing several graphs. Chen immediately recognized the samples as her own. Abhyuday explained that he had continued studying the blood collected after her infection. The first inhibitor had been crude and had almost failed, but it had stopped her transformation. That had provided the first proof that Zero's biological influence could be interrupted. Now Abhyuday was attempting to make the compound more stable.

When Chen asked how stable it was, Abhyuday admitted that it was not stable enough. He explained that Zero's serum did not simply alter cells once; it continued communicating with them through a complex signalling mechanism involving protein pathways and possibly viral-like vectors and synthetic growth factors. The inhibitor interfered with that signalling, causing it to drop within minutes, but in some samples the pathway eventually returned. Chen's case was different because her transformation had been caught before completion. The people in the forest had undergone varying degrees of transformation, meaning the inhibitor might stop the process without necessarily reversing changes that had already occurred. "What can it do?" Chen asked. "Stop the process," Abhyuday replied. "That's enough."

Marcus entered the laboratory and immediately asked how long it would take to make the inhibitor usable. He meant for Zero. Abhyuday told him it was not ready, but Marcus insisted that he make it ready. Chen warned him that they were discussing an experimental compound that would have to be used against perhaps the most dangerous biological entity on the planet. Marcus acknowledged the danger but pointed toward the forest. Hundreds of infected creatures were living there, organized and armed, and their numbers were growing. The real question, he argued, was how long they would remain inside the valley.

Marcus then noticed Alpha standing beyond the observation window. He asked whether Chen really believed Alpha could stop Zero. She admitted that she didn't know. When he questioned why they had brought Alpha back, Chen explained that Alpha might understand Zero better than they did. "Understanding isn't enough," Marcus replied. Chen agreed, but added that sometimes understanding was the only advantage they had. Marcus left, while Abhyuday quietly predicted that he would try something. Chen could only say that she knew.

That night, Abhyuday worked alone. He placed another sample into the analyser and waited for the results. When the same result appeared after a second test, a small smile crossed his face. The inhibitor was becoming more stable. He adjusted the concentration and formulation, and the signalling pathway weakened further. It was not a cure, but it could stop the transformation from continuing. He prepared a fresh vial of the almost colourless compound when Chen entered the room.

She asked what had changed. Abhyuday explained that the original inhibitor was being broken down too quickly, so he had altered its delivery mechanism. If injected directly into the bloodstream, the new version should remain active for several hours, possibly longer. He then revealed another problem: the inhibitor still worked against newer samples, but not as effectively as it had against older ones. The newer samples were becoming more resistant. Chen immediately understood. "Zero is changing," Abhyuday nodded. The inhibitor might work now, but there was no guarantee it would continue working indefinitely. They needed to use it before Zero adapted further.

Later that night, Chen stood outside the laboratory as rain fell through the broken roof of the courtyard. Alpha joined her

silently. She told it about the inhibitor and explained that it had stopped her transformation. She was still herself, but Zero was different. He had changed too much. When Chen cautiously suggested that if they had to fight him, she did not want Alpha to do it, the creature turned toward the forest. Chen understood immediately. Alpha would fight him even if she told it not to. There was something almost human in its expression – not obedience or submission, but a decision.

The following morning, Abhyuday conducted a full test using an older sample from Chen and a newer sample collected during the recent expedition. The older sample responded strongly while the newer one resisted, but it still responded. Abhyuday stared at the results before finally saying that it was enough. Chen reminded him that he did not know whether it was enough to stop Zero. He agreed, but now he knew the inhibitor could affect him.

Alpha entered the laboratory and walked directly toward the vial. It looked at the compound, then at Abhyuday and Chen. Abhyuday pointed toward the forest and then toward the vial. Alpha continued staring at it. Chen realized that it understood. When Alpha reached out and touched the glass, something changed in the room. It was not fear but recognition. Alpha seemed to understand what the inhibitor meant – and perhaps something even more important: Zero could be stopped.

That evening, the first warning arrived. One of the scouts returned from the forest bleeding, his clothes torn and his breathing laboured. Carter rushed toward him and asked what had happened. “They’re moving,” the scout managed to say. When Carter asked who, the answer was simple: “The mutants.” He could not give an exact number. There were too many. They were leaving the kingdom.

The room fell silent. Chen asked why, but the scout didn't know. Then his eyes settled on Alpha, and his expression changed. "They're looking for it." Chen turned toward Alpha. The creature was already staring toward the forest. It wasn't surprised or confused. It seemed to have been waiting.

Abhyuday tightened his grip around the inhibitor vial. Their plan had changed. They had believed they had time, but they didn't. Somewhere deep in the forest, Zero had begun moving his kingdom toward them. For the first time, they possessed something capable of stopping him—but it would have to be delivered directly into the creature that had become the king of the forest.

And getting close enough to do that might require Alpha.

CHAPTER – TWENTY ONE

The First Confrontation

The first sign that the kingdom was moving was not the sound of footsteps or the distant roar of the mutants. It was the birds. Hundreds of them suddenly left the forest in waves, scattering toward the western hills as though something beneath the trees had frightened them. Chen noticed them from the laboratory courtyard while speaking with Carter. For several seconds neither said anything. Then the forest became still again.

Carter lowered his binoculars. "They're coming." Chen nodded. She had known it before he said it. Behind them, Abhyuday was sealing the inhibitor into a reinforced case. He had prepared three doses during the night, though only one was ready for immediate use. The other two were still being tested. The first dose was their best chance, but Chen feared it might not work on Zero as it had on her. Her infection had been caught early, while Zero had lived with the transformation for years. Whatever remained of his original human biology had been buried beneath layer after layer of adaptation.

There was no longer any question of waiting. The scouts had reported that creatures were leaving the kingdom, moving through the eastern forest, crossing old service roads and following the river. They weren't attacking yet; they were spreading out. That frightened Chen more than an army approaching the laboratory.

"If Zero wanted us dead," Carter said, "he would have sent everything." Chen looked toward the trees. "He doesn't want us dead." Carter frowned. "You're sure?" Chen paused. "No. But I think he wants something." Carter checked his rifle. "Alpha."

Alpha stood alone in the main hall. It had been unusually quiet since the scouts returned. It hadn't eaten or slept and had spent most of the night near the western wall, staring toward the forest.

Waiting.

Chen entered the hall. Alpha turned toward her.

"I know. You know he's coming."

Alpha didn't move. Chen walked closer and showed him the inhibitor. "Abhyuday made this. This can stop him." Alpha stared at the transparent liquid. Chen took a breath. "I don't know if it will. And I don't know what happens if you fight him."

Alpha remained motionless. "You aren't like him," Chen continued. "You were made differently. You were never meant to become this." Alpha looked toward the forest. Chen understood what it wanted. "You'll go." Alpha turned toward her. She closed her eyes for a moment. "Then I'll come with you."

They reached the edge of the forest shortly after noon. The expedition had divided itself into two groups. Carter and the remaining soldiers stayed behind to protect the laboratory and keep the route open, while Chen, Abhyuday and Alpha moved forward with Marcus and two armed men. The decision had caused an argument, but Chen had refused to allow a large group to accompany them. The mutants were sensitive to movement, and she suspected that a smaller group would have a better chance of reaching Zero without triggering a full attack.

Marcus had insisted on coming. Chen hadn't wanted him there, but there were still things about him she didn't understand. She had begun to suspect that his knowledge of the old facility went far beyond what he had admitted.

The forest swallowed them within minutes. The sounds of the laboratory disappeared behind them. They walked for nearly an hour without seeing a single mutant.

Then Alpha stopped.

Chen raised her hand and everyone froze. At first she heard nothing, but then she noticed movement. A figure stood on a ridge several hundred metres away. Then another appeared, followed by another. They were watching.

Marcus whispered, "How many?" Chen counted. "At least twenty."

Abhyuday looked at Alpha. The creature had not moved. One of the mutants stepped forward and raised its arm. Another responded from the opposite ridge.

"A signal," Chen said.

She felt a chill. "They're communicating."

Marcus whispered, "Can they see us?"

"They already know we're here."

Then something moved behind them. Carter's voice came through the radio.

"Chen."

She pressed the receiver. "Go ahead."

"Movement around the laboratory."

Her stomach tightened. "How many?"

There was a pause.

"Too many."

Chen looked at Alpha. It was staring toward the same distant ridge. The radio crackled again.

"Chen, they're not attacking us."

"What are they doing?"

Carter answered quietly.

"They're surrounding the building."

They continued toward the centre of the forest. The mutants didn't attack; they simply followed. Some moved through the trees, others along the ground, while a few appeared on the ridges above them. They kept their distance from Alpha, almost as though an invisible boundary existed around it.

Abhyuday noticed. "They're afraid of it."

Chen shook her head. "Not afraid."

"What then?"

"Respect."

Marcus gave a quiet laugh. "That's ridiculous."

Chen looked at him. "You saw the kingdom."

"I saw animals."

"Animals don't build perimeter defenses."

Marcus said nothing.

They reached the edge of the old research sector just before sunset. The remains of the kingdom were visible through the trees, but something had changed. The clearing was almost empty. The shelters remained, the fires still burned, and food and tools lay abandoned across the ground. The kingdom had been deserted.

Abhyuday looked around. "Where did they go?"

Chen didn't answer. Alpha did. It began walking toward the old laboratory at the centre of the settlement.

Marcus raised his weapon. "Wait."

Alpha ignored him. Chen followed.

They entered the abandoned structure. The interior was almost completely dark. Old laboratory equipment had been pushed against the walls, broken containment chambers stood open, and the floor was covered in mud and dried blood.

Whatever had happened here, it had happened recently.

Abhyuday crouched beside one of the bloodstains. "This is fresh."

Chen looked toward the corridor.

"He's here."

A deep, slow sound came from somewhere below—a vibration rather than a roar. Alpha stopped. Chen felt every muscle in her body tighten. Marcus raised his rifle.

"Where?"

Alpha turned toward the staircase and began walking down. Chen grabbed Marcus's arm before he could follow.

"No."

He pulled away. "We're not letting it go alone."

"That's exactly what we're doing."

"Why?"

Chen looked at Alpha. "Because this isn't our fight."

Marcus stared at her.

"It has to be."

Alpha disappeared down the stairs. After a moment, Chen followed.

The underground chamber was enormous. Chen had never seen it before. The original researchers had built it beneath the old field laboratory, hidden from the main facility. Massive steel pillars supported the ceiling, while old machinery lined the walls. The room looked like a combination of a laboratory and an arena.

At the far end stood Zero.

Chen stopped breathing.

He was larger than he had appeared from the kingdom. His body had changed again, with thick layers of altered tissue covering his shoulders and chest while his arms had become longer and heavier. His face still retained traces of the man he had once been, but only enough to make the transformation more disturbing. His eyes were no longer entirely human, yet there was intelligence in them—a terrible, focused intelligence.

Zero looked at Alpha.

Alpha stepped forward.

Chen whispered, "No."

Neither creature moved. The chamber seemed to shrink around them. Zero made a low sound, and Alpha answered.

It wasn't language.

It was recognition.

Then Zero attacked.

Alpha barely had time to react. Zero crossed the chamber with terrifying speed. His first blow struck Alpha across the chest and sent it crashing into a steel pillar, shaking the entire

structure. Chen instinctively moved forward, but Abhyuday grabbed her.

"Wait."

Alpha rose and attacked. The difference between them became immediately obvious. Zero was much stronger. His movements were driven by raw physical power, but they weren't mindless. Every attack was deliberate, and he adapted as he fought. When Alpha tried to strike from the side, Zero changed position. When Alpha used the pillars for cover, Zero destroyed the nearest one.

Alpha was different. It couldn't overpower him, so it watched. The first time Zero struck, Alpha had been caught off guard. The second time, it moved. The third time, it anticipated.

Chen understood.

"Alpha is learning him."

Abhyuday watched the fight. "Can it win?"

Chen didn't answer.

Zero caught Alpha by the shoulder and threw it across the chamber. Alpha hit the ground hard and remained still for several seconds.

"Alpha!"

The creature slowly pushed itself up. Zero approached and raised his arm, but Alpha moved before he could strike. It rolled aside, grabbed his leg and pulled. Zero lost his balance and fell. Alpha immediately climbed onto him and struck repeatedly, but Zero caught its arm and forced it backward.

It was losing.

Chen looked at Abhyuday. "Now."

He opened the case.

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"We need him close."

Zero threw Alpha again, and it landed near them. Chen ran toward it.

"Alpha!"

It looked at her. Zero roared, shaking the chamber, and Alpha turned back. Then something unexpected happened. Instead of attacking immediately, Alpha stood and waited.

Zero charged.

Alpha moved at the last possible moment. Zero's momentum carried him past, allowing Alpha to catch his arm and twist it. When Zero stumbled, Alpha struck the side of his knee, dropping the massive creature. It climbed onto his back and locked its arms around his neck.

Zero struggled. The floor cracked beneath them, but Alpha held. For the first time, Zero was being overpowered – not by strength, but by technique, adaptation and understanding.

Chen stared.

"Now."

Abhyuday opened the case. The inhibitor was ready.

But Zero suddenly changed. His body convulsed, and the tissue around his shoulders expanded. He slammed backward, throwing Alpha against the wall. Chen screamed as Zero turned toward her.

Their eyes met.

For a second she saw the man he had once been.

Then it disappeared.

Zero charged.

Chen froze.

Abhyuday stepped in front of her, but before Zero could reach them, Alpha struck him from the side. Both creatures crashed into the wall, and Abhyuday dropped the inhibitor. The vial rolled across the floor.

Chen ran and reached it just before Zero. She picked it up as he turned toward her. Alpha was lying several metres away. Zero advanced.

Chen held the syringe in her hand. She knew what she had to do, but she couldn't reach him alone.

"Alpha!"

The creature moved, slowly at first and then faster. Zero turned just as Alpha attacked, striking him in the throat. He staggered. Alpha struck again and again. The blows weren't powerful enough to destroy him, but they were precise. Finally, Alpha drove him to the ground and pinned him.

Chen ran forward and climbed onto Zero's back. He twisted violently, nearly throwing her off, but Alpha held him down. Chen brought the syringe toward his neck.

Zero suddenly turned.

His eyes met hers.

There was something almost human in them.

For one terrible second, Chen hesitated. Then she remembered the forest, the bodies, the kingdom and her own infection.

She pushed the needle into his neck.

"Push it!" Abhyuday shouted.

Chen emptied the syringe. Zero screamed. His entire body convulsed. Alpha released him and moved away as Chen fell backward. The altered tissue across Zero's body contracted, then expanded, then contracted again.

Abhyuday stared at the readings on his portable monitor.

"Come on."

The numbers dropped. His biological activity was falling. Chen looked at him.

"Is it working?"

He didn't answer.

The numbers continued to fall, then stabilized. Zero lay motionless, and for several seconds nobody moved.

Chen slowly stood. "Is he dead?"

Abhyuday approached.

"No."

Zero's chest moved once, then twice. He opened his eyes, but he didn't attack. He looked at Alpha, and Alpha looked back.

Zero slowly pushed himself up. He was weaker – not human, not cured, but changed. The inhibitor had stopped the transformation from accelerating. It had interrupted the process, but it had not undone what had already happened.

Zero looked toward Chen, then toward the forest.

For the first time, Chen realized something terrifying.

The inhibitor had worked.

But only temporarily.

Abhyuday looked at the monitor, his face becoming pale.

"What?"

Chen saw the change. "What happened?"

"The activity is rising again."

She stared at him. "How fast?"

"Too fast."

Zero suddenly stood. Alpha stepped between him and Chen. Zero looked at Alpha, then turned away. He walked toward the stairs without attacking. The sound of his footsteps faded into the darkness.

Chen stared after him. "We didn't stop him."

Abhyuday shook his head.

"No. But we proved we can."

Alpha remained in the centre of the chamber, bruised and bleeding, its breathing heavy. It had won the fight, but barely. Chen walked toward it and placed a hand against its shoulder.

"You did it."

Alpha looked at her. Chen smiled faintly, then noticed that Alpha was looking past her, toward the stairs, the forest and the kingdom.

Suddenly Chen understood.

Zero had not left because he had been defeated.

He had left because he had learned something too.

The inhibitor could hurt him.

Alpha could defeat him.

And the humans had found a way to interfere with the transformation.

The first confrontation had ended.

But the war had just begun.

CHAPTER – TWENTY TWO

The Price of Control

The forest remained silent after Zero disappeared into the darkness. The underground chamber was damaged from the fight, with a bent steel pillar, fallen concrete and water leaking through a crack overhead. Chen still held the empty syringe when Abhyuday approached and examined it alongside his monitor.

"He's alive."

Chen looked toward the staircase. "I know."

"No. You don't understand. The inhibitor reached the target pathway, but only for a few minutes. His activity is rising again. Whatever is inside Zero is adapting to the inhibitor faster than I expected."

"Then we make it stronger."

"Maybe. I need more data."

Chen pointed toward the dark trail leading upstairs. "We have his blood."

"Not enough."

"Then we get more."

Abhyuday shook his head. "We barely survived that."

Chen looked at Alpha, sitting against the wall and already beginning to heal. "We survived because of Alpha."

"Even Alpha nearly lost."

"Not stronger," Chen said. "Smarter."

The journey back to the kingdom was strangely quiet. By the time they reached the settlement, the mutants had disappeared. The shelters remained, but food, tools and other belongings had been abandoned. Hundreds of tracks led toward the western side of the kingdom, mixed with larger tracks belonging to Zero.

"They didn't leave voluntarily," Chen said. "He moved them."

"Why?"

"Because he knows we're here."

They reached the laboratory at dawn, where Carter was waiting. When he saw Alpha, he immediately asked what had happened. Chen told him they had found Zero and that Alpha had defeated him, but Abhyuday explained that Zero was still alive and the inhibitor had not stopped the transformation permanently.

Carter's radio suddenly crackled.

"We have movement."

"Where?"

"North perimeter."

"How many?"

"Dozens."

"Mutants?"

"Yes."

"Are they attacking?"

"No. They're just standing there."

By sunrise, the northern perimeter was surrounded. The mutants made no attempt to attack; they simply watched the

laboratory from the trees. Chen and Abhyuday observed them from the roof.

"Why aren't they attacking?"

"Maybe they're waiting."

"For what?"

"Zero."

Chen shook her head. "He's not here. They're waiting for instructions."

Abhyuday asked how they could communicate over such a distance. Chen looked toward Alpha.

"Because Alpha can feel him."

Marcus arrived after breakfast. Chen confronted him about what he knew of Alpha and its ability to defeat Zero. Marcus admitted that he had suspected it, but insisted there had been no reason to tell them.

"You have something the old laboratory never had," he said, looking at Abhyuday.

"A functioning inhibitor."

Marcus asked how long it would take to make another dose. Abhyuday couldn't say.

"Find out."

Chen stepped between them. "Stop treating him like your employee."

Marcus looked toward the forest.

"You still don't understand. This isn't a rescue operation anymore."

"What is it?"

"It's a war."

That afternoon, Abhyuday studied the recordings from the confrontation. The data showed that the inhibitor had suppressed Zero's transformation, but the suppression itself had triggered another response. His body had compensated by activating secondary mechanisms. The serum was responding to external threats and changing accordingly.

"What did they build?" Abhyuday asked.

Chen answered, "You know."

He shook his head. "I thought I did."

She suggested that instead of attacking the transformation directly, they should interrupt the mechanism that allowed Zero to adapt.

"Can you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Try."

That night, Abhyuday created a new formulation called I-2. It wasn't stronger than the original inhibitor; it targeted the secondary response that appeared after exposure to the first inhibitor. If his theory was correct, Zero would not be able to adapt as quickly. But there was no safe way to test it.

Chen looked at the vial.

"So we're guessing."

"For the first time."

She smiled faintly. "Welcome to science."

Alpha suddenly stood and walked to the window. Outside, a mutant watched it from the edge of the clearing. Alpha looked

back until the creature lowered its head and disappeared into the forest.

"They're afraid," Chen said.

"Of Alpha?"

"No. Of what happens next."

The following morning, they discovered a dead mutant near the northern perimeter. There were no obvious wounds, but its transformation had collapsed. Abhyuday found a small puncture wound on its neck.

"Someone injected it."

"With what?"

They looked toward the forest.

Marcus arrived and immediately told them they needed to move. Chen asked why.

"This wasn't one of ours."

"What are you saying?"

"Someone else has started experimenting."

Abhyuday asked who.

Marcus looked toward the old research facilities.

"There were other laboratories."

"Abandoned?"

"Some."

He paused.

"Not all."

That evening, Alpha disappeared. Chen found the room empty and followed its tracks outside. Another set of mutant tracks followed behind it.

"He's gone back," Abhyuday said.

"To Zero?"

Chen shook her head. The tracks led north, away from the kingdom and toward the abandoned laboratories.

"Alpha isn't going to Zero."

"Then where?"

"We follow."

They entered the forest after midnight. The trail eventually led them to a buried door covered by vegetation. Above it was the faded symbol of the original Nelson research program.

"Another laboratory."

"Why didn't Marcus tell us?"

"Maybe he didn't know."

"Do you believe that?"

"No."

The lock had been broken recently – not rusted, but broken from the inside.

"Something came out," Abhyuday said.

"Or went in."

Inside, they found Alpha standing beneath a faint light, staring at a wall covered with old photographs of scientists, experiments and subjects. Chen approached and stopped at one photograph.

It showed Alpha.

But Alpha wasn't alone.

Beside it stood another organism, smaller and still developing.

The file beneath the photograph carried a single designation:

SUBJECT BETA.

Chen stared at it.

"What is Beta?"

She couldn't answer. Somewhere deeper inside the abandoned laboratory, something moved.

This time, the sound did not belong to Zero.

It was something they had never encountered before.

CHAPTER – TWENTY THREE

The Second Creation

The sound came again, deeper this time, from somewhere beyond the corridor where darkness swallowed the weak emergency light. Chen stood still with one hand on her weapon while Abhyuday stared into the passage. Alpha remained several metres ahead, motionless before the wall of photographs, its attention fixed on the image of the smaller organism marked SUBJECT BETA. Chen had seen Alpha study thousands of objects, but this was different. It wasn't curiosity. It was recognition.

Chen stepped closer to the photograph. Beta had been photographed years earlier, perhaps not long after Alpha's creation. It was still inside a glass chamber, its body incomplete and underdeveloped. Behind the chamber stood four scientists, including Stanley and Dr. Elias Voss, a brilliant but unstable researcher who had disappeared from the official records after the laboratory's collapse. Chen remembered that Alpha had been the first successful organism, so Beta must have been an attempt to reproduce it. The question was why it had been hidden.

A metallic scraping sound echoed through the corridor. Alpha turned and began moving toward the end of the passage, with Chen and Abhyuday following. The corridor opened into a large underground chamber containing rows of containment units. Most were empty or broken, but three remained intact. The third contained an organism.

It was smaller than Zero and Alpha, with pale, almost translucent skin and dark lines beneath it like veins. Several structures along its back were incomplete, but it was breathing.

"It's alive," Abhyuday said.

Chen examined the equipment and realized that the containment system was still functioning. Someone had been maintaining it. Before they could investigate further, the lights went out. When Chen's flashlight came on, Alpha was standing between them and the chamber. Something had attacked, leaving deep scratches across the floor.

Then a distorted human figure dropped from the ceiling.

Abhyuday fired, striking it in the shoulder. Alpha immediately caught the creature and slammed it down. Its body had once been human, but artificial implants had been fused into its spine, with wires disappearing beneath its skin. It had been modified by someone.

The creature stared at Alpha and smiled despite its distorted face.

"First."

Alpha froze. The creature looked at it again and whispered that it was still alive before suddenly convulsing and dying. Abhyuday checked its pulse and found none. Chen stared at the body, realizing that the creature had not been talking about itself.

They searched deeper into the facility and discovered that it had not been abandoned. Fresh batteries, recently replaced filters, medical supplies, food and handwritten notes proved that someone had continued the experiments. The final entry read:

Alpha survived. Zero evolved. Beta remains incomplete. The next stage cannot be achieved through infection. It requires synthesis.

Abhyuday found another document marked PROJECT SECOND CREATION. The researchers had concluded that Zero's transformation was unstable because it depended on transmission from one host to another, whereas Alpha had been designed as a complete organism from the beginning. Beta was intended to combine both systems—an independent organism capable of reproducing the transformation without requiring a host.

"That would make it independent," Abhyuday said.

"And permanent," Chen replied.

The project had not simply been abandoned. Someone had deliberately stopped it. Across the final report, written in red, were the words:

DO NOT COMPLETE.

The signature beneath them belonged to Dr. Stanley.

Chen realized that Stanley had stopped the project after understanding what Beta could become.

Footsteps suddenly echoed through the corridor.

A man stepped into the emergency light. He was older than in the photograph, with grey hair, a thin face and a scar running from his left ear to his jaw. Chen recognized him immediately.

"Voss."

He confirmed that he had survived and admitted that he had been maintaining Beta. When Chen asked why he hadn't destroyed it, he said that someone had to keep it alive. Abhyuday demanded to know who was behind the project, but Voss only looked toward Alpha and said they were not his

creations but the creations of the people who had funded the original experiment.

Chen realized that Marcus knew about the laboratory and that the people responsible for the first experiment were still alive and working.

Voss looked at Alpha and remembered it as the first successful creation. Beta, he explained, was supposed to be the last.

Then the organism inside the chamber opened its eyes.

Chen froze. Beta slowly raised its hand and pressed it against the glass. Alpha approached, and the two creatures faced each other through the chamber.

"Now it knows you're here," Voss said.

The containment system began to alarm. Red lights flashed as cracks spread across the glass. Chen ordered Voss to open the chamber or shut the system down, but he admitted that he couldn't.

Then the glass exploded.

Alpha shielded Chen and Abhyuday from the fragments. When Chen looked up, the chamber was empty. Beta had escaped through the ventilation shaft, leaving a trail of blood behind.

Voss stared at the empty chamber in genuine fear.

"That's not supposed to happen."

A scream came from somewhere deeper inside the facility, followed by several more. Something was moving through the ventilation system – fast.

Alpha looked toward the ceiling while Chen tightened her grip on her weapon and Abhyuday opened the case containing the inhibitor.

The old laboratory had been hiding another experiment for years.

Now it was awake.

And unlike Alpha and Zero, nobody knew what it had been designed to become.

CHAPTER – TWENTY FOUR

The Thing That Learned

The first scream came from the upper corridor, followed by the unmistakable sound of something heavy striking metal. Chen instinctively stepped backward as another impact shook dust from the ventilation ducts. Abhyuday stood beside her with the inhibitor case pressed against his chest, while Alpha remained completely still in the centre of the laboratory. Voss had stopped speaking, his earlier confidence gone as he stared at the ventilation shaft like a man watching a nightmare become real.

"How many containment chambers are there?" Chen asked.

Voss hesitated before answering. "Seven primary chambers."

"And how many were occupied?"

"Originally?"

Chen understood the implication. "How many now?"

"None."

A metallic crash came from above. Voss looked at Alpha.

"Except Beta."

Chen tightened her grip on her weapon. "Where is it going?"

"It doesn't know where it's going."

"Then why is it moving?"

Voss looked at Abhyuday. "Because it knows where we are."

The lights flickered and went out completely. Something moved above them—fast, too fast. Alpha suddenly looked upward and jumped, catching the edge of the ventilation shaft before disappearing into the darkness.

"Alpha!"

There was no answer. Abhyuday switched on his flashlight as Chen pointed toward the shaft. "We follow." Voss grabbed her arm and desperately warned her against it, explaining that Alpha was the only thing keeping Beta from becoming something worse.

"What does that mean?"

Voss looked toward the shaft. "Beta was designed to learn from other organisms."

"Learn what?" Abhyuday asked.

"Everything."

They entered the maintenance tunnels minutes later. The passage was narrow, with old cables hanging from the ceiling and water dripping from cracked pipes. Faded markings and warnings covered the walls. Chen called for Alpha but received no answer until they found a thin trail of fresh blood. Abhyuday examined it and confirmed that it wasn't human.

"Beta."

Chen stood. "Then we're close."

Voss quietly corrected her.

"No. We're too close."

A sound came from behind them. When Chen turned, nothing was there. The lights flickered again, briefly revealing a small, almost human shape at the far end of the corridor before darkness returned.

"Did you see it?" Abhyuday whispered.

Chen nodded.

Voss looked terrified. "It saw us."

They reached the central ventilation junction, a large circular chamber where several passages converged. Alpha stood in the middle, staring at the wall, blood covering its hands, though none of it appeared to be its own. Chen asked where Beta was, but Alpha only looked toward the ceiling. A movement came from above, followed by something dropping silently behind Voss.

Beta was standing there.

It was smaller than Chen had expected, but it had already changed since they saw it inside the chamber. Its pale skin was covered with dark patches, its limbs were longer and its posture was more upright. Most disturbing was its face.

It was beginning to resemble a human face — not because it had been designed that way, but because it was learning.

Beta looked at Voss, then Abhyuday and Chen, before its eyes stopped on Alpha. Alpha stepped forward and Beta did the same. Neither attacked. Instead, Beta raised its hand and Alpha mirrored the movement.

"What is it doing?" Chen asked.

Abhyuday studied them. "It's copying Alpha."

Chen shook her head. "Not copying. Studying."

Beta stepped closer and reached toward Alpha's face. Alpha allowed it. When Beta's fingers touched Alpha's cheek, the creature froze before withdrawing its hand and making a low sound. Alpha responded with the same kind of communication Chen had witnessed between Alpha and Zero.

It wasn't language or words, but a combination of movement, sound and intent.

"Can it understand?" Abhyuday asked.

"Probably."

Voss looked at Chen. "You don't understand what you're seeing."

"Then explain."

Voss revealed that Beta hadn't been designed simply to become intelligent. It had been designed to acquire intelligence from everything it encountered. Chen immediately understood why Voss had kept Alpha away from it. Alpha was the most advanced synthetic organism they had created, and Beta was supposed to learn from it. The problem was that nobody knew what Beta would become afterward.

A distant explosion interrupted them. The laboratory shook and dust fell from the ceiling. Voss listened and his face went pale.

"The main laboratory."

They ran back toward the surface. Smoke was already rising through the trees. The mutants had attacked the laboratory, surrounding it by the hundreds while Carter's soldiers fired from behind barricades. The perimeter was collapsing.

Chen contacted Carter by radio.

"We're being overrun," he replied.

"How many?"

"Too many."

"Where is Marcus?"

A pause followed.

"He's gone."

Marcus had disappeared before the attack.

The mutants surged forward, but suddenly stopped. Every creature turned toward the forest. Chen followed their gaze and saw Beta standing at the edge of the trees.

The mutants stared at it.

Beta stared back.

One mutant approached and lowered its head. Another followed, then another.

"Why are they obeying it?" Chen asked.

Voss corrected her. "They aren't. They're recognizing it."

He explained that Beta carried the same synthetic architecture as Alpha, allowing the mutants to sense it, although they didn't understand what it was.

Then Zero emerged from the forest behind the mutants.

The clearing went silent. Zero looked at Alpha, then at Beta, and for the first time Chen saw uncertainty in his posture.

"He's afraid."

"No," Abhyuday replied. "He doesn't understand it."

Beta stepped closer. Zero growled, and the surrounding mutants backed away. Alpha stepped forward until the three creations stood together: Alpha, Zero and Beta. Each had come from the same forgotten project, yet each had become something different. Alpha was synthetic, Zero transformed and Beta unfinished.

Then Beta made a sound. Zero answered, and Alpha answered too. Three voices formed a strange conversation. Chen

realized they were communicating, while Beta was listening and learning.

The moment ended when Marcus appeared from the burning laboratory. His clothes were covered in ash, but he remained calm. Several armed men stood behind him. They were not soldiers.

They were mercenaries.

Marcus raised his weapon and ordered everyone to stop. Chen confronted him about the second laboratory and Beta. Marcus admitted that he knew the facility existed and that he knew there was something inside, but denied releasing Beta.

"It released itself."

When Abhyuday asked who had been experimenting with it, Marcus explained that the people behind it had more money than they could imagine – the original sponsors.

"They never abandoned the project."

Chen realized Marcus hadn't abandoned it either. He had simply waited. He admitted that he had wanted Alpha and Zero to fight, but now he had something even better: a creature capable of learning from both.

"You don't know what you're doing," Chen said.

Marcus smiled. "That's why it's so valuable."

A gunshot suddenly cracked through the clearing. One of Marcus's men had fired, striking Alpha. Another shot followed, but this time Beta moved. It crossed the distance instantly and struck the mercenary, sending him backward. The remaining men opened fire as the mutants surged forward and Carter's soldiers returned fire. Alpha attacked the nearest mercenary, Zero released a roar that shook the trees, and Beta disappeared into the chaos.

Chen grabbed Abhyuday and asked for the inhibitor. He opened the case and confirmed that they had two doses.

"We need him alive," Chen said, looking toward Zero.

Abhyuday understood.

The mercenaries began retreating, and Marcus moved backward toward the forest. Chen shouted after him, warning that he couldn't control what he had unleashed.

Marcus smiled.

"I don't need to."

He disappeared into the forest.

Chen wanted to follow, but then she heard Alpha. Zero and Alpha were fighting again, except this time Beta stood between them. It wasn't attacking. It was watching and learning every movement, every strike and every mistake.

Chen finally understood why Voss had been afraid. Beta wasn't choosing a side. It was collecting information and becoming something new – something neither Alpha nor Zero had been designed to become. Its only original purpose had been to learn.

The battle continued around them, but Chen could no longer hear the gunfire. All she could see was Beta watching, learning and changing. For the first time, she wondered whether Zero had ever really been the greatest threat in the forest.

Maybe he had only been the beginning.

CHAPTER – TWENTY FIVE

The Kingdom without a King

The gunfire continued for less than five minutes, but when it finally stopped, it felt as though the forest had been fighting for hours. Smoke drifted between the trees, mixing with the morning mist, while broken branches and pieces of equipment littered the ground around the laboratory. Several of Marcus's mercenaries had fled into the forest. Others lay motionless where the mutants had reached them. Carter's soldiers were still holding the perimeter, but their ammunition was running low, and nobody seemed willing to step beyond the barricades. The mutants had stopped attacking as suddenly as they had begun. They stood scattered among the trees, watching the centre of the clearing. Chen barely noticed any of it. Her attention was fixed on Alpha. The synthetic organism was on one knee, one hand pressed against the wound in its shoulder. Blood ran between its fingers, darkening the ground beneath it. Across from Alpha stood Zero. He was breathing heavily, his enormous chest rising and falling with each breath, the inhibitor still affecting him but clearly losing its hold. Yet neither creature was attacking. They were both looking toward the place where Beta had disappeared.

Chen lowered her weapon.

"Where is it?"

Nobody answered. Then the trees moved. Beta emerged. It walked slowly into the clearing. There was blood on its hands, but none of it appeared to belong to Beta. Its movements had

changed again. It no longer moved like the unfinished organism they had seen inside the chamber. Its shoulders were straighter. Its head remained upright. Even the way it looked around had changed. It seemed to be taking in everything – the dead mercenaries, the damaged laboratory, Alpha, Zero, the soldiers, Chen, Abhyuday.

It was learning. Chen felt an uncomfortable realization settle inside her. It had been learning from the moment it opened its eyes.

"Don't shoot," she said.

One of the soldiers raised his rifle. Carter immediately pushed the weapon down.

"Nobody fires."

Beta stopped. Its eyes moved from Carter to Chen. Then to Alpha. Alpha slowly stood. The two synthetic organisms faced one another.

Zero remained behind them. For several seconds, there was no movement. Then Beta approached Alpha. Alpha didn't resist. Beta placed one hand against Alpha's injured shoulder.

The wound was still bleeding. Beta looked at the blood. Then it looked at its own hand. Something changed. A faint tremor passed through its fingers.

Abhyuday noticed it.

"Chen."

"What?"

"Look."

Beta's skin was changing. Not dramatically. Just a subtle shift in texture around its fingers. Chen stepped closer.

"It's adapting."

Abhyuday nodded.

"To Alpha."

Chen felt a chill.

"How?"

"I don't know."

Beta withdrew its hand. The change stopped. Abhyuday stared at it.

"That's impossible."

Chen looked at him.

"You've said that before."

He gave her a tired smile.

"Yes."

Then Zero moved. Alpha turned instantly. Beta looked toward him. Zero took one step forward. Every mutant in the forest backed away.

Chen noticed something strange. They weren't obeying Zero anymore. They were waiting. For the first time, the kingdom had no king.

Zero approached Beta slowly. There was no roar this time. No sudden attack. He simply walked toward the smaller organism until only a few metres separated them. Beta didn't move.

Zero looked at it for several seconds. Then he made the low sound Chen had heard in the underground chamber. Beta answered. The sound was almost identical. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"They're communicating again."

"Yes."

"Can you understand it?"

"No."

Chen watched them.

"I think I can."

Abhyuday looked at her. She didn't take her eyes off the creatures.

"It's not language."

"Then what?"

"Recognition."

Zero moved closer. Beta didn't retreat. Alpha stepped between them. Zero immediately stopped. The three organisms stood together.

Chen realized what she was looking at. Not a battle. Not yet. A hierarchy being decided. Alpha had always been the first.

Zero had become the dominant force in the forest. Beta had just appeared. And none of them knew where Beta belonged. Then Beta did something unexpected. It stepped backward.

Away from both. It turned toward the forest. And walked away. Zero watched it go. Alpha followed.

Chen grabbed Abhyuday's arm.

"Wait."

Alpha stopped. Chen approached.

"You can't go."

Alpha looked at her. She pointed toward the forest.

"You don't know what Beta is."

Alpha remained silent. Chen's voice softened.

"And neither do I."

Alpha looked toward Beta. The creature had stopped at the edge of the trees. It was waiting. Chen understood. It wasn't leaving because it wanted to escape.

It was leaving because it wanted them to follow.

—

They followed. Not everyone. Carter stayed behind with the soldiers to secure the laboratory. Abhyuday, Chen and Alpha entered the forest. Zero followed at a distance.

Chen noticed almost immediately. The mutants followed too. Hundreds of them. But none approached. The forest became quieter the farther they went.

The kingdom was behind them now. The paths became narrower. The trees grew thicker. After nearly an hour, Beta stopped beside a stream. Chen recognized the location.

"This is where we found the first skeletons."

Abhyuday looked around.

"You're right."

Beta walked toward the water. It knelt. Then it placed its hand into the stream. Nothing happened. Chen watched.

"Why bring us here?"

Beta looked at her. Then it pointed downstream. They followed. A few hundred metres later, the stream disappeared beneath a stone structure. An old drainage tunnel.

Abhyuday examined it.

"This was part of the original research complex."

Chen looked at the entrance.

"Another facility?"

"Probably."

They entered. The tunnel descended beneath the forest. The walls were covered in roots. After several minutes, they reached a steel door. It was sealed.

Beta touched it. The door opened. Chen stared.

"How?"

Abhyuday examined the control panel.

"Biometric recognition."

Chen looked at Beta.

"Whose?"

He didn't answer. The door opened fully. Beyond it was a laboratory. But unlike the others, this one was clean. Powered. Operational. Someone had been here recently. Very recently. Chen's heart began beating faster.

"Someone's living here."

Abhyuday looked around.

"There are no dust deposits."

"Exactly."

A monitor suddenly switched on. A video began playing. The image showed an old laboratory. A scientist sat in front of the camera. Chen recognized him.

Dr. Stanley. She froze. The recording began.

"If you're watching this, then the facility has been compromised."

Stanley's face looked exhausted.

"Alpha was never the final experiment."

Chen moved closer. Abhyuday stared at the screen.

"Alpha was the first."

Stanley continued.

"Zero was not part of our original design. He was an accident created when the serum was introduced into a human host."

Chen whispered, "We know that." But Stanley's next words made her stop.

"That accident changed everything."

He looked directly into the camera.

"Because Zero demonstrated something we had not anticipated. The serum could evolve outside the laboratory."

The recording flickered.

"After Zero escaped, the project was officially terminated."

Stanley paused.

"It wasn't."

Chen's eyes narrowed.

"Several members of the team continued their work underground."

The screen showed images of Beta.

"Beta was created to answer one question."

The image changed.

"Can an organism be designed to learn from biological evolution without becoming controlled by it?"

Abhyuday whispered, "That's what Beta is." Stanley continued.

"We failed."

The screen went dark for a moment. Then Stanley appeared again.

"This is my final warning. If Beta ever becomes capable of understanding both Alpha and Zero, it will no longer be a subject."

Chen felt cold.

"What will it be?"

Stanley's recorded face looked directly into the camera.

"An independent evolutionary system."

The screen went black. Nobody spoke. Then another monitor came alive. A new message appeared.

EVOLUTIONARY STAGE: UNKNOWN

Then another.

SUBJECT BETA: ACTIVE

And finally:

ADAPTATION RATE: INCREASING

Abhyuday stared at the numbers.

"That's impossible."

Chen looked at him.

"Stop saying that."

He didn't smile this time.

"Chen..."

"What?"

"The rate is increasing every second."

She looked at the monitor. He was right. The numbers were changing. Rapidly. Beta stood behind them.

Its eyes were fixed on the screen. Then the lights went out.

—

When the emergency lights returned, Beta was gone. Alpha immediately turned. Chen looked around.

"Where?"

No answer. The laboratory doors were open. Beta had left. But it had not gone alone. Zero was gone too.

Chen ran toward the doorway. The forest outside was empty. For the first time since entering the facility, she felt genuine fear. Not because Zero had escaped. Not because Beta had escaped.

Because they had escaped together. Abhyuday came beside her.

"What do we do?"

Chen stared into the forest.

"We go back."

"Without them?"

"No."

She looked at Alpha.

"We wait."

Alpha stared into the darkness. Chen understood.

"They'll return."

Abhyuday frowned.

"How do you know?"

Chen looked at the old laboratory behind them.

"Because Beta brought us here for a reason."

She turned toward the screen. The final message was still visible.

ADAPTATION RATE: INCREASING

Chen looked at Alpha. Then toward the forest.

"Whatever happens next, it isn't about Zero anymore."

Abhyuday nodded slowly.

"It's about Beta."

Chen shook her head.

"No."

She looked into the darkness where the two creatures had disappeared.

"It's about what Beta becomes after learning from both of them."

Outside, somewhere deep within the forest, a roar echoed. A second sound answered it. Then a third. Three different voices. Three different creations.

And for the first time, the forest did not sound like a kingdom. It sounded like the beginning of something new.

CHAPTER – TWENTY SIX

The Signal

The forest remained silent for almost an hour after Alpha, Zero and Beta disappeared. It was an unnatural silence, the kind that made every small sound seem louder than it should have been. Chen and Abhyuday waited inside the underground laboratory with the emergency lights running on backup power, neither of them willing to admit that they were afraid. Alpha had gone after Beta without hesitation, and Zero had followed them both. Whatever was happening in the forest was now beyond their control. Chen had spent years around dangerous experiments, but she had never experienced anything like this. Zero had once been the greatest threat she could imagine. Then Alpha had appeared and complicated everything. Now Beta had entered the equation, an organism that had not been merely engineered to survive but to learn. She kept thinking about Stanley's final warning. If Beta ever becomes capable of understanding both Alpha and Zero, it will no longer be a subject. The sentence had sounded almost prophetic when she first heard it. Now it felt like a countdown.

Abhyuday was standing in front of the main monitor, studying the data that continued to update even though Beta was no longer inside the facility. The numbers on the screen rose and fell in irregular patterns, occasionally stopping before accelerating again. He had been watching them for several minutes without speaking. Chen finally walked toward him. "What are you looking at?" He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he enlarged the graph. Three separate biological

signatures appeared on the screen. One belonged to Alpha. One belonged to Zero. The third was Beta's. They were moving independently at first, but something had changed. The three signals were beginning to overlap. "They're close," Abhyuday said. Chen stared at the screen. "How close?" "I can't give you a distance." He pointed to the signals. "But they're interacting." Chen frowned. "You mean they're communicating?" "Maybe." He zoomed further into the graph. "Look at the intervals." She did. The patterns were not random. Alpha's signal would rise, then Zero's would respond. A few seconds later, Beta's signal would change. It happened repeatedly. "They're responding to one another," Chen whispered. Abhyuday nodded. "That's what it looks like." Chen stepped away from the monitor. "Can you hear anything?" "No." "Then what are we detecting?" "Biological activity. Neural activity, perhaps. I don't know." He looked frustrated. "But whatever they're doing, they're doing it deliberately." Chen thought about the way Alpha had communicated with Zero. There had never been language between them, yet they had understood one another in a way humans often failed to understand each other. She had assumed it was something unique to Alpha and Zero. Now she wasn't so sure. "Beta is learning their communication system," she said. Abhyuday looked at her. "And if it learns it completely?" Chen looked at the three signals. "Then we'll have a problem."

A sudden burst of static came from the radio. Chen immediately picked it up. "Carter?" For several seconds there was nothing but interference. Then his voice emerged, weak and distorted. "Chen... do you copy?" She pressed the transmitter. "Yes. What's happening?" "We lost the northern perimeter." Chen's expression tightened. "How many casualties?" Carter hesitated. "That's not the problem." "Then what is?" "They stopped attacking." Chen frowned. "The

mutants?" "Yes." "Why?" Another pause. "They're leaving." Chen looked at Abhyuday. "Where?" Carter's voice became quieter. "All of them. They're moving west." Chen walked toward the doorway. "Toward the kingdom?" "No." Carter looked uncertain even through the radio. "They're moving away from it." Chen's stomach tightened. "Away from the kingdom?" "Yes." She looked at the dark forest beyond the laboratory. "All of them?" "As far as we can see." Then the radio went silent. Chen tried calling him again, but there was no response. She lowered the device slowly. Abhyuday was still looking at the monitor. The three biological signatures had changed again. Beta's signal had suddenly become much stronger. Alpha's was moving rapidly. Zero's was almost stationary.

"What happened?" Chen asked.

Abhyuday looked at her.

"Zero stopped."

They left the underground facility before dawn. The path through the forest was almost impossible to recognize because of the activity from the previous day. Trees had been broken, the ground had been torn apart, and several enormous footprints crossed the muddy paths. Chen followed Alpha's trail while Abhyuday carried the monitoring equipment. Neither of them spoke much. There was little point. They both knew what they were looking for.

The first sign appeared after nearly forty minutes. A tree had been split down the middle. Not cut. Not broken by weather. Split.

The wood around the fracture was crushed inward, as though something had struck it with tremendous force. Abhyuday examined it.

"Zero."

Chen nodded. A few metres farther ahead, they found another. Then another. The trail became easier to follow. Zero had been moving quickly.

But he wasn't alone. Smaller footprints appeared alongside his. Beta. And then Alpha's. Three sets of tracks.

All heading in the same direction. Chen followed them until the forest suddenly opened into a wide clearing. She stopped. The sight before her was unlike anything she had seen before. The mutants were gathered there.

Hundreds of them. They stood in complete silence around the clearing. No fighting. No hunting. No movement.

They were waiting. Abhyuday whispered, "This is the kingdom." Chen shook her head.

"No."

She looked around.

"The kingdom was somewhere else."

"This is a gathering."

She nodded. A gathering. The word felt disturbingly human. Then one of the mutants moved. It walked toward the centre of the clearing and lowered itself to the ground.

Another followed. Then another. Within minutes, the entire group had formed a wide circle. At the centre stood Beta. Alpha was behind it.

Zero stood several metres away. Chen couldn't move. Beta had brought the entire kingdom here. Not because it wanted to rule them. Because it wanted to understand them.

Or perhaps because it wanted them to understand it. Abhyuday stared.

"How did it do that?"

Chen watched Beta.

"I don't think it called them."

"Then why are they here?"

"Because they followed."

"Why?"

Chen didn't answer. Beta slowly turned toward the gathered mutants. It made a sound. The creatures responded. One after another.

A wave of low sounds passed through the clearing. Chen felt the hair rise on her arms. It wasn't speech. But it was organized. Beta waited.

Then made another sound. The mutants responded again. Abhyuday looked at the monitor.

"Neural activity is increasing."

"Whose?"

"All of them."

Chen looked at the mutants.

"All?"

He nodded.

"They're synchronized."

She stared at him.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

Then Alpha stepped forward. Beta turned toward it. Alpha made a short sound. The mutants became completely silent. Even Zero looked toward Alpha.

Chen had never seen anything like it. Alpha wasn't commanding them. It was speaking. In its own way. And Beta was listening.

—

Zero suddenly moved. He walked toward Beta. The mutants shifted nervously. Alpha stepped forward. Zero stopped.

For a moment, Chen thought they were going to fight again. Instead, Zero looked at Beta and made a sound. Beta answered. Zero moved closer. Then he lowered himself.

Not completely. Just enough. But it was unmistakable. He had accepted something. Not submission.

Recognition. Beta looked at him. Then at Alpha. Then toward the mutants. It was as though it was trying to understand the relationship between all of them.

Chen whispered, "It's learning leadership." Abhyuday looked at her.

"That's what worries me."

"Why?"

"Because leadership requires purpose."

Chen watched Beta.

"And what do you think its purpose is?"

Abhyuday shook his head.

"I don't know."

A gunshot suddenly echoed from the forest. The clearing erupted. The mutants scattered. Alpha turned. Zero roared.

Beta froze. Chen dropped behind a tree.

"Who's shooting?"

Another shot. Then another. Abhyuday looked toward the eastern ridge.

"Humans."

Chen raised her head slightly. Several figures were moving between the trees. Not Carter's soldiers. Not the mercenaries from the previous attack. These people wore dark uniforms.

They moved with discipline. And they weren't firing randomly. They were targeting Beta.

"Get down!" Chen shouted.

A bullet struck the tree beside her. Alpha moved. It crossed the clearing faster than Chen could follow. The attackers fired again. Alpha reached the first man.

The rifle flew from his hands. A second attacker fired. Zero moved. The bullet struck his shoulder. He barely reacted.

He charged into the trees. The attackers began retreating. Beta remained in the centre of the clearing. It was watching them. Watching their weapons.

Watching their movements. Watching the way they coordinated. Chen realized what was happening.

"Beta!"

It turned toward her.

"Don't!"

But it was too late. Beta disappeared into the trees.

The fighting lasted less than a minute. When Chen reached the ridge, the attackers were gone. Three lay unconscious. One was dead. The rest had escaped.

Alpha stood among the trees. Zero was nowhere to be seen. And Beta... Beta was standing over one of the unconscious soldiers. It was holding his rifle.

Not using it. Studying it. Turning it in its hands. Abhyuday approached slowly.

"Leave it."

Beta looked at him. He held out his hand.

"Give it to me."

Beta looked at the rifle again. Then at Abhyuday. For a moment Chen wasn't sure what it would do. Then Beta handed it over. Abhyuday took it.

He examined the weapon.

"This isn't military issue."

Chen looked at the unconscious soldier.

"Who are they?"

She crouched beside him and pulled back his collar. There was a symbol on his uniform. A black circle divided by three white lines. Chen had seen it before. Not recently.

Years ago. At the original laboratory. Her face changed. Abhyuday noticed.

"What?"

She stood.

"I know who they are."

"Who?"

Chen looked toward the forest.

"The people who were supposed to have died when the laboratory fell."

—

By sunset, they had recovered one of the attackers. He was still unconscious. They carried him back to the underground laboratory and secured him to one of the old examination tables. Abhyuday checked his pulse.

"He's stable."

Chen searched his clothing. No identification. No documents. Nothing. Except the symbol.

She stared at it.

"They were part of the original program."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"How many?"

"I don't know."

"But you recognize them."

"I recognize the symbol."

She paused.

"It belonged to the private division."

"The people behind the experiments?"

"Yes."

Abhyuday's expression darkened.

"Then Marcus wasn't lying."

Chen looked at him.

"What?"

"They never stopped."

She nodded.

"And now they know about Beta."

A voice came from the examination table.

"Not just Beta."

Chen froze. The soldier had opened his eyes. His gaze moved between them. Then he smiled.

"You still don't understand."

Chen stepped closer.

"Who sent you?"

The man laughed softly.

"You think we came here for the creature?"

"Then what did you come for?"

He looked directly at her.

"The signal."

Abhyuday frowned.

"What signal?"

The man's smile disappeared.

"The one you just activated."

Chen stared at him.

"What are you talking about?"

He looked toward the forest.

"Alpha."

Then toward the monitoring equipment.

"Zero."

Finally, his eyes settled on Beta's empty chamber.

"And now Beta."

He swallowed.

"When the three of them communicate, something happens."

Chen's heart began beating faster.

"What?"

The man looked frightened now.

"They become visible."

"Visible to whom?"

He whispered the answer.

"To us."

The laboratory fell silent. Chen stared at him.

"What does that mean?"

The man's eyes widened.

"Every experiment we've ever done was built around them."

He looked toward the ceiling.

"And now they know where you are."

A deep sound came from outside. Not a roar. Not a gunshot.
Something else. Something mechanical.

Abhyuday looked toward the entrance. Chen slowly raised
her weapon. The soldier began laughing.

"You thought Zero was the end."

He smiled.

"You thought Beta was the beginning."

The sound outside grew louder.

"Neither."

Chen looked toward the forest. The man whispered:

"They're coming for all of you."

And somewhere beyond the trees, hundreds of lights appeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER – TWENTY SEVEN

The Ones Who Never Left

The lights appeared one by one beyond the trees. Chen initially thought they were flashlights, but dozens soon appeared, too bright and steady to be carried by people. Vehicles were approaching the laboratory. Behind her, Abhyuday had stopped speaking, while the captured soldier stared at the entrance with obvious fear.

"Who are they?" Chen asked.

The soldier swallowed. "You don't understand. You really don't."

The first vehicle emerged from the trees. It was black, heavily armoured and unmarked. More vehicles followed, and men in dark protective clothing stepped out. Their movements showed military discipline, but Chen immediately realized they weren't ordinary soldiers. They spread around the laboratory without shouting orders, positioning themselves as though they had rehearsed the operation.

"They aren't here to fight," Chen said. "They're here to capture."

The captured soldier laughed weakly. "They finally found us. The original division."

The newcomers carried unfamiliar weapons and scanning equipment. A voice came through their radio confirming the signal and asking for biological signatures. The answer was immediate: three confirmed, with Beta identified as the

primary target. Chen realized they already knew Beta existed and exactly where it was.

The prisoner explained that the organization had been listening for years. Every time Alpha communicated with Zero, every time Zero changed or Beta adapted, the system recorded it. Chen asked what system he meant, but he only said that they had misunderstood the purpose of the laboratory. They weren't there because of the laboratory itself; they had come because of what was underneath it.

The outer door began taking heavy impacts. The prisoner warned them to let the newcomers in because otherwise they would destroy everything. When Abhyuday questioned why they would destroy their own laboratory, the soldier replied that it was no longer theirs.

The door finally broke. Three soldiers entered, and Chen fired, knocking the nearest weapon away while Abhyuday dragged the prisoner behind cover. Before the others could respond, something struck them from behind. One disappeared into darkness and another was thrown against the wall.

Zero entered the laboratory.

Blood covered one side of his body and one arm hung lower than the other, but he was still standing. The prisoner immediately panicked and begged them to keep Zero away. When Chen asked if he knew the creature, he finally admitted that Zero was the first failure.

The word seemed to affect Zero. For a moment, Chen saw something almost human in his eyes—pain and memory—before it disappeared.

Alpha then appeared behind Zero. Both creatures entered the laboratory together, focused on the prisoner. The soldier revealed that the first generation had been meant to be

destroyed. When Chen asked whether Alpha had been the first subject, he corrected her: Alpha was the first success; Zero was the first failure.

Zero suddenly roared, shaking the laboratory. Chen stepped between them and ordered him to stop. Surprisingly, he obeyed and stepped back.

The prisoner stared at her in disbelief.

"You can control him."

Chen shook her head. "No. He chooses."

Gunfire erupted outside. The remaining soldiers were retreating because mutants were attacking them. Chen initially assumed they came from the kingdom, but Abhyuday wasn't certain. When they looked outside, hundreds of unfamiliar mutants were moving through the forest. Some were larger, some walked on all fours and others upright, but unlike the previous creatures, they weren't attacking randomly. They were surrounding the soldiers.

Chen initially thought they were protecting the laboratory, but Abhyuday pointed out that they weren't looking at the building. They were looking beyond it.

Then the ground trembled.

The soldiers stopped firing, the mutants stopped moving and even Zero turned toward the forest. A deep vibration travelled beneath their feet—the same signal they had felt in the underground facility, only much stronger.

"It's back," Chen said.

Inside the laboratory, the monitors suddenly activated. Abhyuday rushed toward them and saw the three familiar biological signatures: Alpha, Zero and Beta. But a fourth

pattern had appeared. It was faint and deep, yet steadily growing.

The source was beneath them.

The prisoner finally revealed that the forest had not been chosen because it was remote. Something had already existed there. Abhyuday discovered structures beneath the facility, deeper than their sensors could reach.

"They never found the bottom," the prisoner whispered.

The monitors then displayed a symbol Chen recognized as belonging to the private division, followed by a designation she had never seen before:

PROJECT GENESIS.

The prisoner explained that Genesis was the project that came after Alpha – but also that it wasn't simply before Zero. It was the project that had created the conditions for both.

A deep metallic sound came from beneath the laboratory. The floor trembled and cracked. Zero roared while Alpha moved toward the opening. The prisoner stared at the ground in terror.

"They heard the signal."

Chen asked who he meant.

He looked beneath them.

"The ones who never left."

Something enormous moved below. Outside, every mutant suddenly turned toward the laboratory and lowered its head. Alpha and Zero did the same.

The fourth signal grew stronger until the monitor displayed:

SIGNAL ACQUIRED.

SUBJECTS LOCATED.

ALPHA – CONFIRMED.

ZERO – CONFIRMED.

BETA – CONFIRMED.

Then the final message appeared:

BEGIN RECOVERY.

The forest erupted with movement. Far beyond the trees, another set of lights appeared – dozens of them. The soldiers outside immediately began retreating, apparently more afraid of the newcomers than they had been of the mutants.

Chen asked who was coming.

Abhyuday didn't know.

The prisoner slowly smiled and told her she would find out, because they don't send soldiers anymore.

A deep, mechanical sound rolled through the forest.

And the chapter ended.

CHAPTER – TWENTY EIGHT

The Hunters

The lights beyond the trees remained still for several seconds, dozens of pale beams cutting through the darkness. Chen stood at the entrance of the underground laboratory with her weapon raised. The mutants that had attacked the soldiers had disappeared into the shadows, leaving damaged vehicles, abandoned weapons and bodies scattered among the trees. Even Zero and Alpha had stopped moving; both were staring toward the approaching lights.

The captured soldier had lost his earlier confidence. Chen reminded him that he had called them hunters. He explained that soldiers were trained to fight people, while hunters were trained to kill things that shouldn't exist. The men who had arrived earlier had been trying to recover the subjects, but these hunters had a different purpose: to make sure none of them left the forest.

A low mechanical hum spread through the trees. A large, enclosed vehicle moved to the edge of the clearing and opened. A middle-aged man stepped out wearing dark reinforced clothing but carrying no visible weapon. He calmly examined the dead soldiers, damaged vehicles and hidden mutants before looking directly at Chen.

"Dr. Chen."

She raised her weapon and ordered him not to move. He introduced himself as Marcus Vale and said he had been waiting a long time to see Alpha again. When Alpha stepped

forward, Vale recognized it immediately and said, "You survived."

Chen stood between them, but Vale told her she didn't understand what Alpha was. She replied that she knew exactly what it was. Vale corrected her: she knew what Alpha had become; he knew what it had been before that.

The captured soldier reacted when Vale's name was mentioned, confirming that he knew him. Vale told Chen that he already knew why they were there: they had found the old facility, the underground laboratory and some of the records, but not enough. When Abhyuday asked about Project Genesis, Vale simply called it "A mistake."

Vale explained why he hadn't ordered them killed. He needed Chen alive because she was the only person Alpha still trusted – and because Beta had chosen her. When Chen asked how he knew, Vale revealed that they had been watching them since they entered the forest.

He activated a device that projected a holographic record of the forest, showing the mutants, Zero, Alpha, Beta and eventually Chen herself. The forest was filled with sensors. The signal allowed Vale's people to monitor everything happening there.

"The forest is the sensor."

A sound came from behind the laboratory. Alpha and Zero immediately became tense. Mutants began emerging from the trees, first a few and then dozens. They didn't attack; instead, they gathered around Alpha and Zero, visibly frightened.

Then Beta appeared.

Chen felt relieved, but Beta immediately turned toward the forest. Something was approaching. It raised its head and produced a low sound, causing every mutant to react.

Vale stepped backward.

"That's impossible."

He explained that Beta shouldn't yet be capable of calling the mutants.

The forest suddenly erupted with movement as hundreds of mutants emerged and surrounded Alpha, Zero and Beta. Then the first hunter appeared. It wore a massive mechanical suit that functioned like a second skeleton, with weapons mounted on its shoulders. More followed until the clearing was filled with them.

Vale identified them as Containment Unit Seven. When Chen asked why he was afraid of them, he explained that they didn't distinguish between the experiment and the people who had created it.

One hunter raised its arm and released a low-frequency pulse. Every mutant dropped to its knees. Alpha staggered and Zero roared, while even Chen and Abhyuday were affected.

Then Beta stepped forward.

The pressure immediately weakened around the others. Beta had adapted again.

For the first time, the hunters appeared uncertain.

"That's what they came to see," Vale said.

"They wanted to know whether it could resist."

Beta suddenly screamed – a sharp sound unlike Zero's roar or its earlier communication. The forest answered. One sound became ten, then hundreds, until the entire kingdom responded. The hunters stopped advancing, and even their machines hesitated.

Abhyuday checked the monitor. The fourth signal was increasing exponentially because the mutants were responding to it. The signal was no longer beneath the laboratory; it was everywhere—in the forest, in the mutants, in Alpha and Zero, and strongest of all, in Beta.

Then the ground shook.

The hunters immediately retreated. The earth cracked and a section of the clearing collapsed, revealing a huge metallic structure beneath it. It wasn't another laboratory. It was something older and much larger.

Abhyuday stared at it, but Vale corrected him.

"The facility was built around it."

The exposed metal carried the same black circle and three white lines they had seen before, but beneath the symbol was a word:

GENESIS.

Abhyuday called it Project Genesis, but Vale shook his head. Genesis wasn't the name of the project.

"It was the name they gave the organism."

Chen asked what organism.

Vale answered quietly:

"The first one."

The hunters began retreating faster. Vale ordered everyone to move, but Chen demanded to know what was beneath them. He finally pointed into the darkness and revealed that it was the thing that taught Alpha to think.

Chen protested that Alpha had never been taught.

"That's what they wanted you to believe."

Another vibration travelled through the earth. Zero stepped forward, Alpha moved beside him and Beta stood between them. For the first time, all three faced the same direction.

Down.

Chen watched as something deep beneath the forest began to make a sound. It wasn't a roar or machinery. It sounded like slow, heavy breathing.

Something enormous had been asleep for a very long time.

And it had finally begun to wake.

CHAPTER – TWENTY NINE

Project Genesis

The descent continued for several minutes before anyone spoke. Chen had expected the passage beneath the forest to end quickly, perhaps at another abandoned laboratory or an old containment room, but the deeper they went, the more obvious it became that whatever had been constructed beneath the forest was far larger than the facility they had already discovered. The walls were no longer made from the same concrete used in the upper laboratory. They were smoother, reinforced with thick metallic panels that had somehow survived decades underground. Thin strips of emergency lighting ran along the floor, most of them dead, but a few flickered weakly whenever Alpha passed them. It was almost as though the passage recognized the creature. Chen noticed it too, and the realization made her uncomfortable. Alpha had never been here—or at least she had always believed it hadn't. Yet the deeper they went, the more the place seemed to respond to it.

Abhyuday walked beside her, carrying the portable monitor against his chest. The fourth signal remained on the screen, faint but unmistakable. It was coming from somewhere beneath them, but its exact source kept changing. Whenever they stopped, the signal appeared to move. Whenever Alpha moved, it changed again. Chen had initially thought it was some kind of transmission system, but the pattern was too irregular. It behaved more like a biological response than an electronic one.

"Still there?" she asked.

Abhyuday glanced at the monitor.

"Yes."

"Same signal?"

"Yes."

"Stronger?"

He hesitated.

"Not exactly."

Chen looked at him.

"What does that mean?"

"It's becoming more organized."

She frowned.

"How?"

Abhyuday turned the screen toward her. The signal was no longer a simple fluctuating line. It had begun forming repeating patterns.

"Earlier it was scattered," he said. "Now it's following a sequence."

"Like a code?"

"Maybe."

Chen looked toward Alpha. The creature continued walking without reacting to them.

"Could Alpha be causing it?"

"I don't know."

"You're supposed to be the scientist here."

Abhyuday gave her a tired look.

"And you're supposed to know Alpha."

Chen almost smiled.

"Fair."

Neither of them noticed Zero stopping until Beta moved past him. Chen turned. Zero was standing in the middle of the passage. His head was raised slightly. He was listening.

Not to them. To something beneath the floor. Alpha also stopped. Beta turned toward them. For several seconds, the three organisms remained completely still.

Then Alpha walked toward a section of wall. It placed its hand against the metal. The wall illuminated. A thin line of light travelled across its surface. Then a hidden door opened.

Chen stared. Abhyuday whispered:

"That's not an automatic door."

"No."

"Then how did Alpha open it?"

Chen looked at the creature.

"Recognition."

—

Beyond the door was a laboratory unlike anything Chen had seen before. It was enormous. The ceiling disappeared into darkness several metres above them, and rows of equipment stretched across the room. Unlike the abandoned laboratory above, this facility was not dead. Small lights blinked across the walls. Screens displayed continuously updating information. Robotic arms moved slowly inside sealed chambers. Pumps circulated clear fluid through transparent tubes.

The place had been running. For years. Perhaps decades. Chen slowly lowered her weapon.

"How?"

Abhyuday didn't answer. He was staring at the central console.

"There's power."

"Obviously."

"No." He shook his head. "I mean there's an active power system. Independent of the surface facility."

He moved closer.

"Someone designed this to operate without human intervention."

Chen looked around. There were no bodies. No abandoned equipment. No signs of a hurried evacuation. Everything had been deliberately maintained.

She suddenly felt more uneasy than she had in the ruined laboratory above.

"Someone has been here."

Abhyuday shook his head.

"Maybe."

Chen looked at him.

"Then where are they?"

He didn't answer. A monitor suddenly activated. Both turned. A line of text appeared.

PROJECT GENESIS

Chen stepped closer. The screen changed.

SYSTEM STATUS: ACTIVE

Then:

AUTONOMOUS OPERATION: 31 YEARS

Abhyuday stared.

"Thirty-one years."

Chen looked around.

"Without humans?"

"It seems so."

Another line appeared.

PRIMARY BIOLOGICAL NETWORK: STABLE

Then:

ADAPTIVE RESPONSE: CONTINUOUS

Chen felt a chill.

"Adaptive."

Abhyuday nodded slowly.

"That's what it says."

She looked toward the sealed chambers.

"How many?"

"Too many."

He began scanning them.

"Most aren't biological subjects."

"What are they?"

"Processing systems. Nutrient systems. Neural monitoring."

Chen's eyes moved toward the centre of the laboratory.

"And that?"

Abhyuday followed her gaze. A large cylindrical chamber stood behind several layers of glass. Inside was something neither of them could immediately identify. It was not a single creature. It was a mass of interconnected biological tissue surrounding a central structure.

Thin strands extended outward into dozens of smaller chambers. Some contained fluid. Others contained fragments of biological material. The entire system appeared to breathe. Slowly.

Rhythmically. Chen whispered:

"What is that?"

Abhyuday stepped closer to the glass.

"I don't know."

The monitor beside it suddenly activated. Three files appeared.

ALPHA

ZERO

BETA

Chen froze.

—

She approached the screen.

"Open Alpha."

The system responded immediately. A detailed biological profile appeared.

SUBJECT ALPHA

STATUS: STABLE

**COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: ABOVE PROJECTED
LIMITS**

ADAPTIVE CAPACITY: CONTROLLED
NEURAL INDEPENDENCE: CONFIRMED

Chen stared at the last line.

"Neural independence."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"That's what you told me."

"About Alpha?"

"That it doesn't simply react."

Chen nodded.

"It thinks."

The screen changed.

STATUS: DEVIANT
MUTATIONAL RESPONSE: UNSTABLE
ADAPTIVE CAPACITY: EXTREME
NEURAL INDEPENDENCE: PARTIAL

Chen's expression hardened.

"Deviant."

Abhyuday looked at the data.

"That explains the transformation."

"Not completely."

She pointed toward the display.

"Zero wasn't created as a serum-mutated organism."

Abhyuday nodded.

"I know."

"His instability came later."

The screen displayed another line.

**SECONDARY BIOLOGICAL TRANSMISSION:
CONFIRMED**

Chen stared.

"That's the serum."

Abhyuday's face became serious.

"Yes."

"Zero can spread it."

"Which explains the secondary mutants."

Chen looked toward the laboratory.

"And the forest."

The screen changed again.

SUBJECT BETA

Chen stopped breathing for a moment. The profile was different. There were fewer measurements. Almost as if the system itself had struggled to classify it.

STATUS: ACTIVE

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: RAPID

LANGUAGE: ABSENT

PATTERN RECOGNITION: EXTREME

ADAPTIVE RESPONSE: CONTINUOUS

Then another line appeared.

RELATIONAL RESPONSE: ALPHA / ZERO

Chen stared at it. Beta had been designed around them. Not to replace either one. To understand both. She suddenly remembered what Stanley had once said.

If Beta ever understands both of them... She didn't finish the thought. She didn't need to.

—

Abhyuday opened another file. A diagram appeared. Three biological structures were shown side by side. Alpha. Zero.

Beta. But the diagram didn't show them as separate organisms. Lines connected all three. Chen leaned closer.

"What is this?"

"I think it's a model."

"Of what?"

"Integration."

The word made her uncomfortable. Abhyuday enlarged the image. Alpha's neural architecture was highlighted. Zero's adaptive biology was highlighted. Beta sat between them.

A connecting structure. Chen stared.

"Beta was designed to combine their characteristics."

"Not physically."

"I know."

"Then biologically."

She looked at him.

"Explain."

Abhyuday pointed to Alpha.

"Alpha has the stable cognitive architecture."

Then Zero.

"Zero has uncontrolled adaptive capacity."

Then Beta.

"And Beta appears capable of understanding both systems."

Chen looked toward Beta. The creature was standing silently near the chamber. It wasn't looking at the screens. It was looking at Alpha. Then Zero.

Almost as if it understood that the laboratory was describing it. A sound came from the central biological structure. Beta turned. The system responded. Every screen in the laboratory activated simultaneously.

NETWORK RESPONSE DETECTED.

Then:

THREE SUBJECTS PRESENT.

The lights dimmed. The fourth signal appeared. Stronger than before. Abhyuday stared at the monitor.

"It's reacting to all three."

Chen looked at the central chamber.

"That's what the signal is."

"What?"

"The network."

She stepped closer.

"The signal isn't coming from one organism."

Abhyuday looked at the graph.

"It's coming from the entire biological system."

"Alpha."

She pointed.

"Zero."

Then Beta.

"And whatever this is."

The three organisms had become part of the same network. Not physically. Not consciously. But biologically.

—

A door opened at the far end of the laboratory. Neither Chen nor Abhyuday had touched the controls. A corridor appeared beyond it. At the entrance was a simple inscription:

GENESIS CORE – AUTHORIZED SUBJECTS ONLY

Chen looked at Alpha. The creature moved forward. The system recognized it.

ALPHA: AUTHORIZED

Zero followed.

ZERO: AUTHORIZED

Beta stepped forward. The system paused. For several seconds, nothing happened. Then:

BETA: AUTHORIZATION PENDING

Chen's heart began beating faster.

"What does that mean?"

Abhyuday shook his head.

"I don't know."

The screen flickered.

VERIFYING COGNITIVE STATE

Beta remained still. The system scanned it. A series of numbers appeared. Then:

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: INCOMPLETE

The door remained closed. Chen looked at Beta.

"Maybe it isn't ready."

Beta turned toward her. Chen stepped closer.

"You don't have to."

Beta stared at her. Then slowly raised one hand. It placed its palm against the door. The system scanned it again. This time the result changed.

PATTERN RECOGNITION: ACCEPTED
BEHAVIOURAL ADAPTATION: ACCEPTED
NON-LINGUISTIC COGNITION: ACCEPTED

The final line appeared.

ACCESS GRANTED.

The door opened. Chen stared at the creature. Beta hadn't spoken. It hadn't needed to. It had passed the test through understanding.

—

The corridor beyond was much older. There were no modern screens here. No automated systems. Only sealed doors and faded markings. Abhyuday walked beside Chen.

"How far do you think this goes?"

"Far."

"You sound certain."

Chen looked at the darkness ahead.

"The people who built this didn't expect anyone to find it."

"Why?"

"Because they hid it beneath a forest filled with mutants."

Abhyuday considered that.

"Maybe the mutants were part of the security system."

Chen stopped.

"Maybe."

Behind them, Zero suddenly made a low sound. Alpha responded. Beta looked toward them. The three signals on Abhyuday's monitor changed again. The fourth signal became stronger.

Then the entire corridor vibrated. A message appeared on the small screen beside the door.

GENESIS CORE APPROACHING ACTIVE STATE.

Abhyuday stared.

"What does that mean?"

Chen looked toward the sealed corridor.

"It means we're running out of time."

—

They reached the final chamber several minutes later. The door opened without resistance. Inside was a vast circular room. At its centre stood the Genesis Core. It was not a machine.

Not entirely. It was a biological system integrated into machinery, a living network surrounded by layers of steel and glass. Tubes extended from it in every direction, disappearing into the walls. Chen recognized several patterns from the screens. Alpha.

Zero. Beta. But there was something else. A fourth pattern. Much larger.

Abhyuday stared at it.

"That's the signal."

Chen nodded.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

She looked at the core.

"I don't know yet."

The system suddenly activated. A voice emerged from the speakers. Not human. Not quite artificial either.

THREE SUBJECTS DETECTED.

Alpha stepped forward.

ALPHA: STABLE.

Zero moved beside it.

ZERO: DEVIANT.

Beta stepped forward. The system paused. Then:

BETA: EVOLVING.

Chen felt a chill. The system continued.

GENESIS NETWORK: ACTIVE.

The lights across the chamber came alive. The fourth signal surged. And for a brief moment, Chen felt something that she could not explain. It was as if the entire forest above them had become connected to this chamber. Every mutant.

Every secondary organism. Every biological change caused by Zero's serum. Every adaptation. Every generation. All of it.

The system was not simply monitoring the forest. It was learning from it. Abhyuday looked at Chen.

"This isn't a laboratory."

Chen stared at the core.

"No."

"It's a system."

She nodded.

"And it's been learning for thirty-one years."

The Genesis Core pulsed. Once. Twice. Then the central chamber opened. Beta stepped forward.

Chen instinctively reached for it.

"Beta, wait."

It stopped. Alpha looked at Beta. Zero looked at Alpha. For several seconds, the three organisms stood together. Then the Genesis system displayed one final message:

INTEGRATION PROTOCOL READY.

Chen stared at the screen.

"What does that mean?"

Abhyuday looked at the three subjects.

"I think it means the system has finally found what it was waiting for."

Chen's eyes remained fixed on Beta.

"What?"

Abhyuday answered quietly.

"All three of them."

And somewhere deeper within the Genesis facility, beyond the chamber they had entered, another door began to unlock.

CHAPTER – THIRTY

The First Failure

The chamber fell silent after the system announced that the integration process was ready. Chen stood beside Abhyuday, watching Alpha, Zero and Beta as they faced the strange biological structure at the centre of the room. The three organisms had been brought together, but nothing suggested they were becoming one. Alpha remained alert, Zero breathed heavily after the fighting above and Beta quietly observed everything. Then the fourth biological signal returned to the monitor. It was unlike Alpha, Zero or Beta – slower, deeper and rhythmic. Abhyuday could not identify it, but confirmed that part of the signal came from the central structure and part travelled through the surrounding systems, suggesting that the entire facility was connected.

The lights flickered and a voice came through the speakers.

"You finally came back."

Chen immediately raised her weapon and demanded to know who was speaking. The answer was simple:

"I am what remained."

The monitors activated, displaying images of the original laboratory, containment rooms and scientists. Chen suddenly saw a younger version of Alpha inside its first chamber – and herself standing beside it. She didn't remember the room, but the voice insisted that she remembered the creature. The recordings then showed Zero, Beta, the mutants and the forest.

The voice explained that it had watched them all from beneath the facility.

The fourth signal had not been dormant.

It had been waiting.

Chen asked what the voice was. It revealed that it had been the first attempt—the beginning of Genesis's effort to create organisms capable of surviving without human control. Most early experiments failed, but the researchers learned from them and eventually created Alpha, the first successful organism.

Zero was created afterward as a correction to Alpha's weaknesses. He was stronger and more adaptable, but unstable. That instability had been the price the researchers were willing to accept.

Beta was different. It had been created to understand what Alpha and Zero could not: each other. The voice had continued watching Beta because it was learning everything.

The screens showed how Zero's serum had spread through the forest, producing secondary organisms that survived, adapted and eventually formed their own society. Chen confronted the voice about the deaths and destruction it had allowed to happen. Its answer was that it had wanted to understand.

Then Abhyuday realized the voice knew about the inhibitor.

The inhibitor could suppress Zero's transformation and partially reverse the secondary mutation, but it wasn't harmless. Because Alpha and Zero shared some biological architecture, it could affect Alpha, while Beta was connected to both. The voice warned that eventually Chen would have to choose what to do about Zero.

Chen accused the voice of wanting Zero dead. It denied this.

"Death is not the objective. Control."

A violent tremor passed through the chamber. Zero's transformation began accelerating again. His muscles tightened, his breathing became rapid and his wounds began closing. The serum was becoming active, while Abhyuday admitted they had only enough inhibitor for one full dose.

Before they could use it, the voice stopped them. It told Chen that she still didn't understand Zero. He didn't want to become what he was becoming. Chen watched him and finally noticed the truth: Zero wasn't attacking anyone. He was fighting himself. His body was changing, but he was resisting it. When Alpha approached, Zero looked at it without hatred – only exhaustion.

The voice explained that Alpha hadn't been created simply to stop Zero.

It had been created for balance.

The Genesis system suddenly shut down. The monitors went dark and the fourth signal disappeared. When the emergency lights returned, Alpha was still beside Zero and Beta had moved closer to them. For once, there was no conflict between the three organisms.

Chen looked at the inhibitor case and knew they had to leave.

Before they could reach the exit, a final message appeared:

SUBJECT ZERO – DETERIORATION ACCELERATING.

INHIBITOR WINDOW: LIMITED.

The voice returned one last time.

"Do not wait too long."

Chen understood the situation. Zero could not remain in his current state indefinitely, but using the inhibitor carelessly

could harm Alpha and Beta. Somewhere beneath the forest, the intelligence that had watched them for years was waiting to see what she would choose.

Chen closed the inhibitor case.

"Let's get back to the surface."

When Abhyuday asked about Zero, she looked toward him.

"He's coming with us."

Zero lifted his head. Alpha moved beside him and Beta followed. Together, the three began walking toward the exit.

Above them, however, the mutant kingdom was already changing. The creatures were gathering – not around Zero this time, and not even around Alpha.

They were waiting for Beta.

CHAPTER – THIRTY ONE

The Woman Behind Genesis

The forest had never been so quiet. After the events at the laboratory, Chen had expected the mutants to scatter, but instead they began moving toward the same place. They came from every direction, emerging between the trees in groups, crossing streams and ruined paths, leaving the territories they had fought to establish over the years. There was no visible command, no obvious leader directing them, yet they were all responding to something. Abhyuday was the first to notice it on the monitor. The biological readings were converging on the Genesis facility. One signal after another appeared on the screen, hundreds of them, then more. Chen stared at the display and felt a familiar uneasiness settle over her. "They're coming here." Abhyuday nodded. "All of them." She looked through the reinforced window toward the dark forest. "Why?" He studied the readings. "The signal from Genesis." Chen's expression tightened. "But the system was shut down." "Most of it." He pointed toward the monitor. "Something is still transmitting." Outside, the first mutants appeared between the trees. They stopped at the edge of the compound and simply stood there. They weren't attacking the guards. They weren't trying to enter. They were waiting.

Inside the containment chamber, Zero was beginning to understand that something was wrong. He had been unusually restless since the Genesis system had been activated. The old instinct that had driven him through the forest – the instinct to dominate, to spread, to transform – was becoming stronger again. Chen watched him from behind the glass as his breathing

became heavier. "The signal is affecting him," Abhyuday said. Chen looked at him. "Can you stop it?" "Not completely." "Then block it." "I'm trying." Zero suddenly slammed both hands against the containment barrier. The metal shook. Chen stepped back instinctively. But then something unexpected happened. Alpha moved toward the chamber. Zero stopped. The two creatures stared at each other through the glass. Alpha did not attack. Zero did not either. For several seconds they remained completely still, as though they were communicating without words. Then Zero slowly stepped away from the barrier. Chen watched in silence. "He's resisting it," she said. Abhyuday looked at the readings. "Yes." "Genesis is trying to control him." "And he's fighting it." Chen looked toward Alpha. "Because of Alpha?" Abhyuday shook his head. "Maybe. Or because he doesn't want to lose control again." For the first time, Chen wondered whether Zero's struggle had become something more complicated than simple mutation. Perhaps somewhere inside the creature was still the intelligence that had once existed before the serum had taken over.

Beta stood at the far end of the chamber, watching both of them. It had been unusually quiet since the battle. Chen had begun to notice subtle changes in its behaviour. Before, Beta had mostly copied and learned. It watched Alpha, watched Zero, watched humans, and responded according to what it observed. Now it was beginning to make decisions before anyone else acted. When Alpha moved toward Zero, Beta moved in the opposite direction. When Zero became aggressive, Beta did not retreat. It watched. It seemed to be weighing possibilities. Chen approached it slowly. "You understand more than you did before, don't you?" Beta looked at her. There was no answer, only that intense, unsettling attention that Chen had come to recognize. She lowered her voice. "But you're different from Alpha." Beta continued watching her. "You don't just learn. You choose." The creature

tilted its head slightly. Chen felt a strange certainty that it understood what she meant. She had spent years studying organisms that were designed to obey biological rules. Beta was becoming something else. It was beginning to act according to its own decisions.

Then the alarms began. Abhyuday rushed to the main console. "Movement from the east." Chen turned toward the monitor. A line of vehicles was approaching the facility.

Not one or two. Dozens. Armoured transport vehicles moved through the forest while armed personnel spread out behind them. Helicopters appeared above the trees, their lights cutting through the darkness. Chen's face tightened.

"Who are they?"

Abhyuday enlarged the image. Then Chen saw the symbol on the vehicles. The same symbol she had seen on the attackers earlier. Her expression changed.

"Marcus."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"He's back."

The vehicles stopped outside the perimeter. Soldiers surrounded the facility. Then Marcus stepped out. He was no longer trying to hide. He walked toward the entrance with the confidence of someone who believed the facility already belonged to him.

Chen watched him through the glass. Marcus looked toward the forest. Hundreds of mutants were watching him. Yet he didn't appear frightened. He smiled.

"Open the facility," his voice came through the external communication system. "We need to talk."

Chen picked up the receiver.

"You brought an army."

Marcus smiled.

"I brought enough people to make sure nobody interferes."

"What do you want?"

His expression changed.

"Genesis."

Chen stared at him.

"You already know where it is."

"Not the building."

He looked toward the laboratory.

"The system."

Chen's grip tightened around the receiver. Marcus continued.

"And Beta."

She understood. He hadn't come for the mutants. He hadn't come for Alpha. He had come for the thing that could understand them.

"You're not taking Beta," Chen said.

Marcus smiled.

"You still think you have a choice."

The line went dead. Chen lowered the receiver. Abhyuday looked at her.

"We're surrounded."

She nodded.

"Yes."

"What do we do?"

Chen looked toward the containment chamber. Zero was watching Marcus's soldiers through the glass. Alpha had moved closer to Beta. And outside, the mutants were beginning to gather. Not around Zero.

Not around Alpha. Around the Genesis facility. Chen suddenly understood the danger. Marcus had expected the creatures to attack him. He had probably planned for it.

But he had underestimated something. The mutants were no longer simply responding to Zero. They were responding to Beta. And Beta was making its own decisions. A low sound came from outside.

Then another. The entire forest answered. Marcus's soldiers raised their weapons. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"Don't let anyone fire."

"Why?"

"Because if they do, this place becomes a battlefield."

She looked toward Beta.

"And Beta will decide what happens next."

The lights suddenly flickered. The Genesis system activated again. A single message appeared across every monitor in the facility.

GENESIS: ACTIVE

Chen stared at the screen. Abhyuday whispered, "That's impossible." A second line appeared.

WELCOME BACK, DR. CHEN.

Chen felt the blood drain from her face. She hadn't heard that voice before. It was a woman's voice. Calm. Controlled.

Almost familiar. Then the speakers came alive.

"You took longer than I expected."

Chen stepped toward the console.

"Who are you?"

There was a brief pause. Then the woman answered.

"The person who built Genesis."

Chen froze. Abhyuday looked at her. The voice continued.

"And the person who has been watching Alpha, Zero and Beta from the beginning."

Chen stared at the monitor.

"Where are you?"

A faint laugh came through the speakers.

"Closer than you think."

The screen changed. A woman appeared. Older than Chen. Calm. Composed.

Standing inside another laboratory somewhere far away. Chen stared at her face. She recognized her. Not from recent years. From the old records.

From the beginning of the project. The woman looked directly into the camera.

"Hello, Chen."

Chen couldn't speak. The woman smiled.

"Welcome back to Genesis."

And for the first time, Chen realized that everything they had believed about the abandoned laboratory might have been wrong. Genesis had never been abandoned. Someone had been running it all along. And that someone had finally decided to reveal herself.

CHAPTER – THIRTY TWO

The Betrayal

The woman on the screen remained completely still, as though she had been waiting for this exact moment for years. Chen could not take her eyes away from the image. She knew that face. She had seen it in old research photographs, in archived documents and once, many years ago, across a laboratory conference room when she had still been young enough to believe that the people running the Genesis program were trying to save lives rather than create organisms that could survive without them. The woman had disappeared after the original facility was shut down. Officially, she had been listed among those presumed dead. Chen had never questioned the report because there had been too many bodies, too much destruction and too little evidence left behind. Yet here she was, alive, speaking to them through a system that should not have been functioning. "You died," Chen said at last. The woman smiled faintly. "That is what the records say." Abhyuday moved closer to the monitor. "Who are you?" The woman looked at him for the first time. "You are Dr. Abhyuday." It wasn't a question. "I've read your work." Abhyuday's expression hardened. "You've been monitoring us." "For longer than you realize." Chen stepped toward the screen. "Why?" The woman looked at her again. "Because Genesis was never designed to end with Alpha."

The words settled heavily over the room. Chen glanced toward Alpha. It had moved closer to the monitor and was watching the woman with an intensity she had never seen before. The woman noticed. "You see?" she said softly. "Even

now, Alpha remembers." Chen turned sharply. "It remembers you?" The woman shook her head. "Not me. The place." She paused. "Alpha was never simply a successful experiment. It was the first organism to demonstrate stable adaptive intelligence without losing its biological identity. That was the breakthrough. Everything after Alpha was an attempt to reproduce what had happened naturally inside it." Chen felt a knot forming in her stomach. "Zero wasn't meant to be another Alpha." "No. Zero was meant to correct Alpha's weaknesses." "And Beta?" The woman was silent for a moment. "Beta was never supposed to exist." Chen frowned. "Then why was it created?" "Because someone made a mistake." The woman looked almost amused. "A very useful mistake." Abhyuday stepped forward. "Who made it?" The woman looked directly at him. "You did."

Abhyuday froze. Chen turned toward him, but before he could respond, the woman continued. "Not deliberately. Your inhibitor research was one of the things that made Beta possible. You were studying how Zero's serum altered biological systems. Your work showed that transformation could be interrupted without completely destroying the host organism. Genesis used that research to create a third pathway." Abhyuday shook his head. "That's impossible. My research was done years after the original Genesis program." "The public version of Genesis ended years ago," she said. "The private program continued." Chen understood then. The abandoned laboratory, the hidden records, the strange equipment, the surviving personnel—it had never been a collection of remnants. Someone had kept the project alive. "You continued Genesis," she said. "Yes." "Without the others knowing." "Most of them believed the project had failed." The woman smiled without warmth. "They were allowed to believe that." Chen looked toward the screen. "You lied to everyone." "I protected the project." "You created Zero." "No."

Her answer came immediately. "Zero was created by the program before I took control of it." Chen narrowed her eyes. "Then what did you do?" The woman looked toward the containment chamber where Zero stood silently behind the glass. "I changed him."

Zero suddenly lifted his head. The woman watched him. For the first time, her expression changed. There was something almost like fear in her eyes. Chen noticed it.

"You are afraid of him."

The woman didn't answer. Chen stepped closer to the monitor.

"You've been watching Alpha, Zero and Beta all this time, but you're afraid of Zero."

"Not Zero," she said quietly. "What Zero can become."

Abhyuday looked at the monitor. "The transformation."

"The transformation is only the beginning."

The woman activated another screen. A series of old biological diagrams appeared. Chen recognized some of them immediately. Zero's serum. Secondary mutation.

Cellular adaptation. Neural restructuring. Then something she had never seen before. A model showing hundreds of possible biological pathways branching from the same original organism.

"Every time Zero infected another organism, the result was slightly different," the woman explained. "You assumed those were uncontrolled mutations. They weren't." Chen stared at the diagrams. "Then what were they?" "Experiments." The answer made her blood run cold. "Every secondary mutant became another variation. Every variation produced information. Every generation became more adaptable than

the last." Abhyuday looked toward the forest beyond the glass. "The kingdom." The woman nodded. "Exactly." Chen understood. The organized society had not simply developed because the mutants were intelligent enough to cooperate. Their entire population had become an enormous biological experiment, with every generation producing new information.

"And Beta?" Chen asked.

The woman looked toward the creature.

"Beta learned from all of them."

Beta slowly turned toward the screen. The woman smiled.

"That's why Beta is the most important organism here."

Chen stepped between them.

"You're not taking it."

"I don't intend to."

That answer surprised her.

"Then what do you want?"

The woman's expression became serious.

"I want Beta to choose."

"Choose what?"

"Whether humanity deserves to survive what Genesis created."

The room went silent. Chen stared at her.

"You built these organisms and now you're asking one of them to judge humanity?"

"I didn't build humanity."

"You're insane."

"Perhaps."

The woman leaned closer to the camera.

"But tell me, Dr. Chen—after everything you've seen, do you still believe humans are automatically entitled to control every organism they create?"

Chen had no immediate answer. The woman continued.

"Alpha never asked to exist. Zero never asked to become what he became. The mutants never asked to be infected. Yet humans continue to decide which of them should live, which should die, which should be contained and which should be studied."

Chen looked toward Alpha. The creature was watching her. She remembered their first encounter. The fear. The glass.

The way Alpha had looked at her without hatred. She looked back at the screen.

"You don't get to use that argument after everything you've done."

The woman's expression softened.

"I know."

Then she said something that Chen hadn't expected.

"That's why I need you."

Chen frowned.

"Me?"

"You are the only person Alpha trusts."

Chen looked toward Alpha again.

"And Beta trusts you."

Abhyuday stepped forward.

"What about Zero?"

The woman looked at him.

"Zero doesn't trust anyone."

Then she smiled faintly.

"Not yet."

Suddenly, the laboratory lights went out. The monitor flickered. The woman's image disappeared. Chen turned toward the containment chamber. Zero was gone.

The reinforced door stood open. Abhyuday stared at it.

"How?"

Chen looked toward Alpha. Alpha was no longer beside Beta. Beta was standing completely still. Then they heard a sound from somewhere beyond the laboratory. A deep roar.

Another answered it from the forest. The mutants had begun moving. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"She opened the chamber."

He shook his head.

"No."

"Then who did?"

Abhyuday looked at Beta. Beta was staring toward the exit. Chen understood. It had made the choice. Zero was no longer contained.

And somewhere outside, the woman behind Genesis was waiting for the consequences. A final message appeared on the dead monitor.

THE BETRAYAL HAS BEGUN.

Then the screen went black.

CHAPTER – THIRTY THREE

Beyond the Kingdom

The forest was changing again, but this time there was no single creature at its centre and no visible force directing the change. The old kingdom had begun to disappear almost as soon as Zero lost control of it. The larger settlements remained, but the creatures that had once gathered there were spreading outward, following paths that seemed to have existed long before the kingdom itself. Some travelled toward the northern hills, others toward the river, while several groups disappeared into parts of the forest that even Chen had never explored. From the observation platform above the laboratory, she watched them moving through the trees and wondered how much of their behaviour had been inherited from Zero and how much had developed independently. Abhyuday stood beside her, looking at the same scene. "They're leaving," he said. Chen nodded. "Not all of them." "No." "But enough." Abhyuday lowered the binoculars. "Maybe the kingdom was never meant to last." Chen looked at him. "Maybe it was only the first stage." Neither of them said anything after that. They both knew what the thought implied.

Inside the laboratory, Alpha had returned sometime during the night. Chen had not seen it enter. There had been no alarm, no sound from the outer perimeter and no indication on the cameras. One moment it had been absent; the next it was standing near the entrance to the old containment wing, watching the forest through the reinforced glass. Chen had found it there before dawn. She had not tried to call it. She had learned long ago that Alpha responded badly when humans

tried to force its attention. Instead, she had simply stood several metres away. After a while Alpha turned toward her. There was no aggression in its expression, but there was something different about it now. The encounter with Zero had changed the creature. It was still the same Alpha Chen knew, but it seemed more cautious, more deliberate. Its movements were no longer merely reactions. It appeared to consider them before acting. Chen had sometimes wondered where the boundary between intelligence and instinct truly lay with Alpha. After everything that had happened, she was beginning to suspect that the distinction mattered less than she had once believed.

"Where did you go?" she asked quietly.

Alpha looked at her. She smiled faintly.

"I know. You can't tell me."

Alpha turned back toward the forest. Chen followed its gaze.

"You were watching them."

Alpha remained still.

"The mutants."

No response.

"You wanted to see where they would go."

Alpha slowly lowered its head. It was such a small movement that another person might have missed it. Chen didn't. She had spent too many years observing Alpha.

"You're worried about them."

Alpha looked at her again. Chen felt something tighten inside her chest. There had never been language between them. There never would be. Alpha could understand sounds, gestures, expressions and patterns, but Chen had never

pretended that it understood human speech the way a person did. What existed between them was something much simpler and, in some ways, more honest. Recognition.

She pointed toward the forest.

"They're leaving."

Alpha watched the distant figures. Chen lowered her hand.

"Maybe that's what they need."

Alpha turned away. For a moment she thought it would leave. Instead, it remained beside her.

Zero was still inside the reinforced chamber. The inhibitor had slowed his transformation, but it had not reversed it completely. Abhyuday had spent most of the night monitoring him and adjusting the dosage. He refused to give Zero another full dose until he understood how the first one had affected the organism. The risk was too high. Zero's body had adapted to the serum that created him, and now it was beginning to adapt to the inhibitor as well.

When Chen entered the observation room, Abhyuday was staring at the latest readings.

"How is he?"

"Stable."

"That's good."

"For now."

Chen looked through the glass. Zero was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. He looked exhausted. The violence that had once seemed almost permanent in him had faded. He was still dangerous, but the constant tension had gone. His eyes were closed.

"He hasn't moved for hours," Chen said.

"He has."

She looked at Abhyuday.

"Several times. Every time his biological activity rises, he stops himself."

"Can he control it?"

"I think he's trying."

Chen looked back at Zero. There was something deeply unsettling about seeing him struggle against his own body.

"Do you think the inhibitor will hold?"

Abhyuday hesitated.

"Eventually his system will adapt."

"Then we need something better."

"Yes."

"How long?"

"I don't know."

Chen turned toward him.

"We don't have the luxury of not knowing."

"I know."

He looked tired.

"I'll keep working."

Chen nodded. Then Zero opened his eyes. He looked directly at her through the glass. She stepped closer.

"You're all right."

Zero did not move. Chen placed one hand against the glass.

"You're not alone."

For a long moment, he stared at her hand. Then, slowly, he raised his own. He placed it against the opposite side of the glass. Their hands did not touch. But Chen understood.

Whatever Zero had become, some part of him was still there.

—

The next morning, they found the first sign that the forest had changed beyond anything they had anticipated. A patrol returned from the northern boundary carrying a dead mutant. It was unlike any they had encountered before. Its body was smaller than the usual secondary mutants, but its limbs were longer and more developed. The skin showed unusual patterns, and its nervous system had adapted in a way Abhyuday could not immediately explain.

He examined it for nearly an hour. Then he looked at Chen.

"This isn't from Zero's original strain."

Chen frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"The mutation is different."

"Different how?"

"It's more efficient."

She stared at him.

"Meaning?"

"It wastes less energy. The organism doesn't need to consume as much food. Its tissue repairs faster. And look at this."

He pointed toward the nervous tissue.

"The neural structure is more organized."

Chen felt a familiar uneasiness.

"Is it intelligent?"

"Not enough to say."

She looked toward the forest.

"Where did you find it?"

"North of the old kingdom."

"How far?"

"Far."

Chen was silent. Abhyuday continued.

"That means the mutation is evolving independently."

"Because Zero is no longer controlling it?"

"Possibly."

She looked at the dead creature again.

"Or because the mutants are changing on their own."

Abhyuday nodded.

"That's the possibility I don't like."

Chen understood why. If the mutants could continue evolving without Zero, then defeating him would not end the problem. It would only remove one part of it.

By afternoon, the remaining soldiers had begun preparing to leave the forest. Carter came to Chen before departure.

"We're pulling out."

She looked at him.

"All of you?"

"Most."

"Why?"

He glanced toward the forest.

"Because there is nothing left for us to hold."

Chen almost corrected him. There had never really been anything they could hold. The forest had never belonged to them. Carter continued.

"The government wants the area quarantined."

Chen nodded.

"That makes sense."

"They're also asking for every sample we've collected."

Chen looked at him sharply.

"Every sample?"

"Yes."

"Who's asking?"

Carter hesitated.

"Central command."

Chen didn't like the answer.

"Don't send them."

Carter frowned. "Chen —"

"We don't know who is behind the original project. We don't know how much of Genesis survived. We don't know who else has access to the research."

He looked at her.

"You think someone is still running it."

"I think someone wants the research."

Carter was quiet.

"You're serious."

"Completely."

He nodded slowly.

"I'll hold the samples."

Chen relaxed slightly.

"Thank you."

Carter turned to leave. Then stopped.

"There is one more thing."

"What?"

"We found a structure."

"Where?"

"Beyond the northern boundary."

Chen waited.

"It isn't part of the old laboratory."

Her expression changed.

"What kind of structure?"

"We don't know."

"How far?"

Carter looked toward the forest.

"Two days on foot."

Chen stared at him.

"Two days?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because Alpha was seen heading in that direction."

Chen found Alpha near sunset. It was standing at the edge of the forest, looking north. She approached slowly.

"You were going there."

Alpha looked at her.

"The structure."

Alpha did not move. Chen stopped beside it.

"Is that where you came from?"

The creature remained silent. She waited. Alpha turned its head slightly. Then it started walking. Chen followed.

She didn't know whether Alpha understood that she was coming. She didn't know whether it cared. But she followed anyway. After several minutes, Abhyuday caught up with them.

"You can't go alone."

Chen glanced at him.

"I wasn't planning to."

He looked at Alpha.

"Where is it taking us?"

Chen watched the creature disappear between the trees.

"Somewhere it remembers."

The three of them moved deeper into the forest. Behind them, the old kingdom disappeared into the darkness. Ahead lay a

part of the forest that none of them had explored. The trees became older as they travelled north. The paths disappeared.

There were no signs of the mutant settlements here. No ruined buildings. No footprints. Nothing. It was as though the kingdom had never existed.

After several hours, they stopped beside a stream. Alpha was standing on the opposite bank. Chen crossed first. Abhyuday followed. Alpha looked toward a group of trees.

Chen saw nothing. Then she noticed the ground. There was a straight line beneath the leaves. Metal. They cleared away the soil.

A circular hatch appeared. Abhyuday crouched beside it.

"This is old."

"How old?"

He brushed away more dirt.

"Older than the laboratory."

Chen looked at Alpha. The creature was staring at the hatch. It knew what was beneath them. Abhyuday found a small indentation near the edge. A symbol had been carved into the metal.

Chen recognized it. The same symbol from the old records. The symbol of Genesis. Her stomach tightened.

"This is impossible."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"Why?"

Chen looked at Alpha.

"Because according to the records, Genesis began in the laboratory."

Alpha stepped forward. It placed one hand against the hatch. For several seconds nothing happened. Then the metal unlocked. A deep mechanical sound travelled through the ground.

The hatch slowly opened. Cold air rose from below. Chen looked into the darkness. There was a staircase. Leading down.

Abhyuday switched on his light. The beam disappeared into the underground passage. Chen took a breath.

"We've found it."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"Found what?"

Chen stared into the darkness.

"The place they built before Alpha."

She stepped onto the first stair. Alpha went ahead of her. Abhyuday followed. Behind them, the hatch began closing. Far away, beyond the forest and the remains of the old kingdom, Zero suddenly opened his eyes.

He had felt it. Something had awakened. And for the first time since the beginning of the Genesis experiments, the past had begun moving toward them.

CHAPTER – THIRTY FOUR

The Alliance

The staircase seemed to go on far longer than it should have. Chen counted nearly sixty steps before the passage finally levelled out, though the depth of the facility made her ears ache and the air grow noticeably colder. Alpha moved ahead of them without hesitation, its footsteps almost silent against the old metal floor. Abhyuday followed close behind Chen, carrying the portable monitor in one hand and a flashlight in the other. The walls around them were unlike anything they had seen in the abandoned laboratory above. There were no signs of decay here. The metal was old, but the corridor had been sealed from the forest for decades, perhaps longer. There was no moss, no water damage, no roots pushing through the ceiling. Whoever had built this place had designed it to remain hidden. Chen ran her fingers over the wall as she walked. A thin layer of dust came away beneath them. "Nobody has been here for a long time," Abhyuday said. Chen looked at the undisturbed floor. "Then why did Alpha know where to find it?" He didn't answer. Ahead of them, Alpha suddenly stopped.

Chen almost walked into it. The creature was standing in front of a heavy steel door. There was no visible handle, only a small panel beside it. Alpha raised one hand and touched the panel. Nothing happened at first. Then a faint light appeared beneath its fingers. A series of symbols illuminated across the door, one after another. Abhyuday immediately raised his monitor. "The system is recognizing Alpha." Chen stared at the door. "After all these years?" "It's not recognizing Alpha as a person." He

looked at the readings. "It's recognizing its biological signature." The door unlocked with a deep mechanical sound. For a few seconds neither Chen nor Abhyuday moved. Alpha stepped through. Chen followed.

The room beyond was enormous. Rows of glass chambers stretched into the darkness, most of them empty. Some had been shattered from the inside. Others still contained old equipment, cables and strange mechanical structures that Chen could not immediately identify. At the far end of the room stood a large circular chamber surrounded by thick glass. Unlike the abandoned equipment upstairs, this chamber was clean. Its lights were still working. A faint blue glow came from beneath the floor. Chen slowly walked toward it, her eyes moving across the walls. Then she saw the photographs.

There were hundreds of them. Researchers. Experiments. Organisms. Some of the photographs were dated decades before the creation of Alpha.

Abhyuday stopped beside her.

"This isn't a laboratory."

Chen looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"It's an archive."

She turned toward the rows of chambers.

"An archive of what?"

He pointed toward the photographs.

"Everything."

At the end of the wall was a single photograph that made Chen stop breathing. It showed a much younger version of the

woman they had seen on the Genesis screen. Standing beside her was another scientist. Chen recognized him immediately.

"That's impossible."

Abhyuday looked at the photograph.

"Who?"

Chen touched the glass.

"Dr. Marcus."

Abhyuday's expression changed. The photograph was dated thirty-two years earlier. Marcus looked almost unrecognizable. Younger, thinner, without the cold expression Chen had come to associate with him. Beside him stood the woman behind Genesis.

Below the photograph was a handwritten note.

PROJECT GENESIS – FOUNDING GROUP

Chen read the names beneath it. There were six. She knew three of them. Two were marked deceased. One was marked ACTIVE.

The active designation belonged to the woman. Chen stepped back.

"So she really never left."

Abhyuday looked at the photograph again.

"Neither did Marcus."

—

They spent nearly an hour searching the facility before finding the central control room. Unlike the rest of the complex, it was still powered. The room contained a circular console surrounded by six stations. Five were dark. One remained active.

Chen approached cautiously. The screen displayed a single message.

GENESIS NETWORK – PARTIAL CONNECTION

Abhyuday connected his portable system to the console.

"Don't."

Chen stopped him.

"Why?"

"We don't know what it's connected to."

"That's why I need to know."

He hesitated. Then connected the device. The screen immediately filled with data. Biological signatures. Locations.

Subject numbers. Experimental results. Chen watched the information scroll past.

"How many?"

Abhyuday stared at the numbers.

"I don't know."

"Give me an estimate."

"Thousands."

Chen looked at him.

"Subjects?"

"Samples."

She understood the distinction. Most of them had never become organisms. But the program had been far larger than she had imagined. Alpha wasn't the centre of Genesis. Alpha had only been the first success.

A warning appeared on the screen.

REMOTE ACCESS DETECTED.

Abhyuday immediately disconnected. The lights went out. Then came a voice.

"You really should stop doing that."

Chen turned. The voice came from the speakers. It was the woman.

"You've always been impatient, Dr. Chen."

Chen looked toward the ceiling.

"Where are you?"

"Not far."

"Show yourself."

A soft laugh came through the speakers.

"I think you've learned by now that showing yourself is not always wise."

Chen stepped closer to the console.

"You've been watching us."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I needed to know whether you were still capable of making the right decisions."

Chen's expression hardened.

"You created these creatures."

"No."

"You helped create them."

"That is closer."

"You created Zero."

"No."

"Then stop lying."

There was a long silence. When the woman spoke again, her voice was quieter.

"I didn't create Zero. I inherited him."

Chen frowned.

"From whom?"

"The people who came before me."

Abhyuday looked at the screen.

"Then what did you do to him?"

The woman answered without hesitation.

"I tried to make him stable."

Chen's eyes narrowed.

"You failed."

"Yes."

For the first time, there was no arrogance in her voice. Only acknowledgement.

"I failed."

She continued.

"Zero was supposed to be the answer to Alpha's greatest limitation."

Chen looked toward Alpha.

"What limitation?"

"Attachment."

Chen frowned. The woman explained.

"Alpha could adapt. It could learn. It could survive almost anything. But it developed something the researchers hadn't expected."

Chen already knew the answer.

"Empathy."

"Something close to it."

The woman paused.

"Alpha began forming bonds. It recognized individual humans. It responded to pain. It avoided unnecessary killing. The researchers considered that a weakness."

Chen looked at Alpha.

"And Zero?"

"Zero was designed to eliminate that weakness."

Abhyuday stared at the speaker.

"So they wanted an organism that could adapt without hesitation."

"Yes."

"And that's what became Zero."

"Partly."

Chen stepped closer.

"And Beta?"

The woman was silent. Then:

"Beta was created because we eventually realized that Alpha and Zero represented two opposite failures."

Chen waited.

"Alpha had intelligence but restraint. Zero had power but instability. We needed something capable of understanding both."

Chen looked toward Beta's empty place beside them.

"Beta."

"Yes."

"What exactly did you put into it?"

The woman didn't answer. Chen's voice hardened.

"What did you put into Beta?"

"Everything we had learned."

The room fell silent. Abhyuday slowly looked at Chen.

"That's why it learns so quickly."

Chen nodded. Beta wasn't simply intelligent. It had been designed to absorb knowledge from the entire Genesis program.

—

A sudden sound came from the corridor. Chen turned. Alpha was standing near the entrance. Its body had become rigid. It was looking toward the darkness.

Abhyuday raised his weapon.

"What is it?"

Chen shook her head.

"Wait."

A low sound came from beyond the door. Then another. Something was approaching. Alpha stepped forward. Chen could see its muscles tense.

Then Zero appeared. He was standing at the far end of the corridor. His breathing was heavy. The inhibitor had slowed him, but his transformation was becoming more visible again. Abhyuday immediately reached for the medical case.

"He's getting worse."

Zero looked at Alpha. Alpha looked back. Neither moved. Then Zero looked toward Chen. She stepped into the corridor.

"Easy."

Zero remained still. Abhyuday whispered, "Chen, don't." She ignored him.

"You don't have to fight."

Zero's head lowered. Then a violent tremor passed through his body. He dropped to one knee. Chen moved toward him. Alpha followed.

Zero suddenly roared. The sound shook the corridor. Alpha did not retreat. Instead, it grabbed Zero by the shoulder. Zero tried to pull away.

Alpha held him. For several seconds the two creatures struggled. Then something changed. Zero stopped fighting. Abhyuday stared at the monitor.

"His neural activity is dropping."

Chen looked at him.

"How?"

"Alpha."

He pointed toward the readings.

"Alpha is synchronizing with him again."

The woman spoke through the speakers.

"Exactly."

Chen looked toward the ceiling.

"What?"

"That's the relationship Genesis never understood."

Chen stared.

"What relationship?"

"Alpha doesn't control Zero."

The woman's voice became quieter.

"It stabilizes him."

Chen looked at the two creatures.

"And Zero?"

"He can do the same."

Chen frowned.

"Alpha doesn't need him."

"Not for survival."

The woman paused.

"But perhaps for balance."

Abhyuday looked at the readings. The two biological signatures were becoming more stable. He slowly lowered the monitor.

"They regulate one another."

"Yes," the woman said.

Chen looked toward Alpha. For years, everyone had assumed that Alpha and Zero were opposites. One controlled. One destroyed. One adapted.

One transformed. But perhaps that had never been the complete story. Perhaps they had been designed as opposing

systems because the scientists had never understood that the two organisms could compensate for one another.

Then the Genesis facility began to shake. A warning alarm erupted. The woman spoke sharply.

"Get out."

Chen looked around.

"What happened?"

"Someone has entered the facility."

"Who?"

"Marcus."

The lights turned red. Abhyuday looked at the main monitor. Multiple signals were moving through the upper levels.

"He's here."

Chen looked toward the corridor.

"How long?"

"Minutes."

The woman spoke again.

"You have two choices."

Chen stared at the speaker.

"What choices?"

"Run."

A pause.

"Or trust them."

Chen looked at Alpha. Then Zero. Two creatures who had spent most of their existence fighting one another. Then she looked toward the corridor where Beta had disappeared earlier.

"Where is Beta?"

The woman answered:

"Already ahead of you."

Chen understood. Beta had gone deeper into Genesis. And whatever it had discovered down there was important enough for it to leave without them. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"We're not running."

He nodded. She looked at Alpha and Zero.

"Then we stay together."

The two creatures stood side by side. For the first time, they did not look like enemies. They looked like allies. Not because they trusted one another. Not because their differences had disappeared.

But because they had finally understood that neither of them could face Genesis alone. Chen picked up the inhibitor case.

"Let's find Beta."

The alarm continued screaming around them. Somewhere above, Marcus's forces were entering the facility. And somewhere below, Beta was moving deeper into the heart of Genesis. The woman behind the project had spent decades preparing for this moment. But for the first time, she no longer knew exactly what would happen next.

CHAPTER – THIRTY FIVE

The Inhibitor

The underground chamber had gone quiet. Not silent—never silent. Somewhere beyond the walls, machinery continued to breathe through the buried corridors of Genesis. Pumps moved unseen fluids through ancient pipes. Cooling systems clicked on and off. Deep beneath the floor, something heavy pulsed at regular intervals, as though the facility itself possessed a failing heart.

Chen stood beside the examination table, staring at Zero. He was asleep. Or at least that was what Abhyuday had called it. There was no peacefulness in his sleep. His massive body lay rigid beneath the restraints they had improvised from Genesis equipment, every muscle occasionally tightening beneath his altered skin. Dark veins spread across his arms and disappeared beneath his shoulders. His breathing was slow, but each breath seemed to require a conscious effort.

Alpha stood several metres away. The creature had not taken its eyes off Zero since they had entered the chamber. It was strange seeing the two of them together. Once, they had been enemies. Then they had become something more complicated. Not friends. Not brothers. Survivors. Chen looked from one creature to the other.

"He's getting worse."

Abhyuday did not answer immediately. He was bent over a console, studying a sequence of genetic information projected onto a cracked screen. The symbols were partly corrupted, but

enough of the original Genesis database remained for him to understand what he was seeing.

"He's not simply getting worse," he finally said.

Chen turned toward him.

"What does that mean?"

Abhyuday enlarged the sequence.

"Genesis is trying to reactivate him."

Chen's expression hardened.

"Why?"

"Because Zero's biological systems are shutting down."

He pointed toward the monitor.

"The facility was designed to keep these organisms alive under controlled conditions. It can regulate temperature, hormones, metabolic activity—even cellular regeneration. But Zero has been outside the system for too long. His body evolved without Genesis."

"And now Genesis wants him back."

"Not exactly."

Abhyuday looked at Zero.

"It wants to complete what it started."

A low sound came from the examination table. Both of them turned. Zero's fingers curled. The restraints groaned. Alpha immediately moved forward.

"Don't," Chen whispered.

Alpha stopped. Zero's eyes opened. For a moment they were almost human. Then something passed through them. His pupils contracted.

The muscles in his neck tightened. A violent tremor moved through his entire body.

"Abhyuday."

"I know."

The scientist rushed to the table and examined the monitor. Zero's heart rate had suddenly increased. His temperature was climbing. His blood chemistry was changing faster than Abhyuday could read.

"He is entering another transformation cycle."

Chen stepped closer.

"Can you stop it?"

"I don't know."

"Then find out."

Abhyuday looked at her. There was something in his expression that Chen had learned to recognize. Fear. Not fear of Zero. Fear of failure.

He turned back toward the console.

"I may have found something."

Chen followed him.

"What?"

"The original inhibitor."

She stared at the screen.

"Genesis had one?"

"Not exactly." Abhyuday scrolled through several damaged files. "They weren't trying to cure the subjects. They were trying to control them."

"There's a difference."

"A very important one."

He opened another file. A chemical structure appeared. Abhyuday's eyes narrowed.

"This was developed during the first phase of the Genesis program."

Chen studied the diagram.

"What does it do?"

"It suppresses cellular overexpression."

"And Zero?"

"He is practically made of overexpression."

Chen looked toward the table. Zero's body had begun to shake again.

"So it could work."

"It could."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Abhyuday said quietly. "It isn't."

He enlarged the molecular structure.

"The original compound was designed for laboratory containment. It was never meant to be administered to a subject like Zero after years of uncontrolled mutation."

"Then modify it."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"You make that sound easy."

"I don't care if it's easy."

Chen pointed toward Zero.

"I care if it works."

Abhyuday remained silent. Then he nodded.

"I'll need time."

"You don't have much."

"I know."

He began collecting equipment. Chen watched him work. For the first time since they had entered Genesis, she allowed herself to believe they might actually have a chance. Then something burned inside her chest. She staggered.

Her hand went instinctively to the wall. Abhyuday noticed.

"Chen?"

"I'm fine."

"You are not fine."

She straightened.

"I said I'm fine."

Abhyuday stared at her for several seconds. Then his eyes moved toward her arm. A thin dark line had appeared beneath her skin. Chen pulled her sleeve down. Too late.

"I saw it."

"It's nothing."

"Chen."

She turned away.

"It happened before."

Abhyuday froze.

"When?"

"Before we came here."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought it was gone."

He stepped closer.

"How long?"

"Two days."

Abhyuday's expression changed.

"Two days?"

Chen looked at Zero.

"I didn't want to become another problem."

"You are not a problem."

"I am infected."

The words hung between them. Abhyuday said nothing. Chen slowly rolled up her sleeve. The veins beneath her skin were darker than they had been before. Not black.

Not yet. But no longer normal. The infection had returned. Abhyuday touched her wrist. Her skin was hot.

"You're developing systemic symptoms."

"I know."

"Your cellular markers —"

"I know."

"Chen, this isn't something we can ignore."

"I'm not ignoring it."

She pulled her arm away.

"I'm choosing what matters first."

Abhyuday looked toward Zero. Then back at her.

"You're asking me to save him while you're deteriorating."

"Yes."

"That isn't rational."

"Neither is anything we've survived so far."

A faint tremor passed through her fingers. She clenched her fist until it disappeared. Abhyuday saw it. He understood. There was no argument he could make that would change her mind.

He returned to the console.

"Then I'm working on two inhibitors."

Chen looked at him.

"Two?"

"One for Zero."

He looked at her.

"And one for you."

For several seconds neither spoke. Then Chen smiled faintly.

"You always did hate having only one problem."

Abhyuday almost smiled.

"Apparently."

Behind them, Zero suddenly roared. The sound shook dust from the ceiling. Chen spun around. The restraints snapped. Zero's body convulsed.

Alpha moved instantly. The creature threw itself against Zero, forcing him back onto the table. For a moment the two organisms struggled. Zero's claws tore into the metal. Alpha's arms locked around his shoulders.

Neither was trying to kill the other. They were trying to contain each other. Chen stared.

"Alpha understands."

Abhyuday looked at them.

"What?"

"He knows what's happening."

Zero screamed again. Alpha held him tighter. The two creatures locked eyes. Something passed between them. Recognition.

Not language. Not thought in any human sense. Something older. Biological. Alpha understood the transformation because his own body had once been trapped inside the same evolutionary storm.

Zero stopped fighting. His breathing became slower. Alpha released him. Zero remained still. Abhyuday stared at the pair.

"That's new."

Chen nodded.

"Maybe that's why Genesis was afraid of them."

Abhyuday turned back to the inhibitor formula.

"Then we'd better make sure they survive long enough to prove it."

Hours passed. The underground facility changed around them. Lights failed in distant corridors. The temperature fluctuated. Several systems began shutting down without warning.

Genesis was dying. But its death was not peaceful. Every few minutes, another section of the facility activated. Doors opened by themselves. Machines restarted.

Screens filled with corrupted images. The woman behind Genesis continued to watch. Elena Voss had not left the observation chamber. She stood behind a wall of glass, observing the monitors. Zero was still alive.

Alpha was still alive. And Chen was still infected. Everything was moving toward the conclusion she had spent years preparing for.

"Begin the secondary sequence," Elena said.

The technician beside her hesitated.

"Director, the system is already unstable."

"Begin it."

"We could lose the entire facility."

Elena turned toward him.

"Then let it fall."

He stared at her.

"What about the subjects?"

Elena's expression remained calm.

"They are the experiment."

She looked at the screen displaying Zero.

"And experiments sometimes require pressure."

In the laboratory below, Abhyuday finally found what he needed. He stared at the molecular structure for several minutes. Then he began changing it. One bond. Then another.

He removed the component responsible for permanent cellular suppression. He replaced it with a reversible inhibitor. The new compound would not destroy the mutated cells. It

would simply tell them to stop. For how long, he did not know.

Minutes. Hours. Perhaps days. But it might be enough. He prepared the first dose.

Chen stood beside him.

"Will it hurt?"

"Probably."

"Will he survive?"

Abhyuday looked at Zero.

"I don't know."

Chen nodded.

"Then do it."

Abhyuday filled the syringe. He approached Zero. Alpha watched him. The creature did not interfere. Abhyuday injected the inhibitor into Zero's neck.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Then Zero screamed. His entire body arched. His muscles contracted violently. The lights flickered.

Chen grabbed the table.

"What's happening?"

"His cells are reacting."

"Can you stop it?"

"No."

Zero's veins darkened. His skin began to change. Then, suddenly – everything stopped. The room became silent. Zero collapsed.

Chen held her breath. Abhyuday checked his pulse. One second. Two. Three.

Then — a heartbeat. Weak. But present. Abhyuday exhaled.

"It worked."

Chen looked at Zero.

"Is he cured?"

Abhyuday shook his head.

"No."

She waited.

"It suppressed him."

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

Zero opened his eyes. For the first time, there was no rage in them. No instinctive hunger. No uncontrollable transformation. Only exhaustion.

He looked at Chen. Then at Abhyuday. Then at Alpha. Alpha approached slowly. Zero did not attack.

Alpha lowered his head. Zero did the same. Two creatures born from the same nightmare stood quietly beneath the dying lights of Genesis. Chen watched them. Something inside her hurt again.

She pressed her hand against her chest. Abhyuday noticed. But this time, he said nothing. He simply began preparing another syringe.

"For me?" Chen asked.

"For you."

She looked at the dark veins beneath her wrist.

"How long?"

"Not long enough."

Chen gave a tired smile.

"Then make it long enough."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"I'll try."

Outside the chamber, something enormous moved through the darkness. The floor trembled. Genesis was still alive. And somewhere deep beneath them, another system had just awakened. Chen looked toward the sealed door.

Her infection burned beneath her skin. Zero had survived. For now. But she knew the truth. The inhibitor had not ended the transformation.

It had only bought them time. And in Genesis, time had always been the most dangerous thing of all.

CHAPTER – THIRTY SIX

The Last Protocol

The first thing Beta learned was that Genesis was afraid. It did not understand fear in the way Chen understood it. There was no pulse racing through its body, no tightening of muscles, no instinct to run. Beta had no heart in the human sense, no lungs that filled with panic. But it understood patterns.

It understood interruption. It understood that systems which were designed to control everything had begun behaving like systems trying to protect themselves. And Genesis was protecting itself. Beta stood motionless in the centre of the chamber. Its body was unlike the others.

It had never possessed the enormous strength of Zero or the physical stability of Alpha. It had been created differently, modified differently, observed differently. Genesis had wanted Beta to watch. To learn. To compare.

To understand. But Genesis had made one mistake. It had allowed Beta to learn too much. The walls around it were covered with screens. Hundreds of them.

Some displayed biological sequences. Others displayed security footage. Others contained maps of the facility. Beta stared at all of them. At first, the information seemed disconnected.

A blood sample here. A genetic sequence there. A photograph of a containment chamber. A record of a subject that had died decades earlier. Then Beta noticed something.

The same sequence appeared again and again. It was hidden beneath different layers of information. A small recurring pattern. Beta reached toward the nearest terminal. Its fingers touched the screen.

The system responded.

ACCESS DENIED.

Beta waited. Then tried again.

ACCESS DENIED.

It tilted its head. The response was familiar. Genesis had used the same command whenever it wanted to prevent a subject from understanding something. But Beta was no longer merely observing commands. It was beginning to understand why they existed.

It connected the sequence with another file. Then another. Then another. The pattern expanded. A map appeared.

Not of the laboratory. Of the world. Small points of light appeared across continents. North America. Europe.

Asia. South America. Africa. Australia. Beta stared.

The forest facility was only one point. One node. There were others. Hundreds. Some were dark.

Some had been destroyed. Others were marked inactive. But a few remained green. Active. Beta's head slowly lifted.

The system had lied. Genesis was not a place. It was a network.

—

In the laboratory, Abhyuday was still working. The modified inhibitor sat inside a small glass vial. He had already administered the first dose to Zero. The creature remained unconscious. His breathing had stabilized, but his body looked different.

The enormous muscles that had once made him almost impossible to stop had relaxed. The dark veins beneath his skin had faded. He was still monstrous. But the violence inside his body had gone quiet. For now.

Chen stood beside him. She had not slept. Neither had Abhyuday.

"He's stable," Abhyuday said.

Chen looked at the monitor.

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

"You've said that before."

"Because it's still true."

Chen smiled faintly.

"At least you're consistent."

Abhyuday looked at her. The dark veins on her wrist were spreading. He noticed immediately.

"You need to sit."

"I'm fine."

"You said that yesterday."

"And I was fine yesterday."

"Chen."

She looked away. He lowered his voice.

"Your infection is progressing."

"I know."

"I can see it."

"Then stop looking."

Abhyuday sighed. He had no answer. Behind them, Alpha suddenly turned toward the corridor. Its body became tense. Chen noticed.

"What is it?"

Alpha did not respond. It simply stared into the darkness. Then a sound came from somewhere deep within the facility. A low mechanical pulse. Once.

Twice. Three times. Beta appeared at the doorway. Chen looked at it.

"What happened?"

Beta said nothing. It walked toward the central console. Abhyuday watched carefully. Beta placed its hand against the terminal. The screens activated.

A world map appeared. Chen stepped closer.

"What is that?"

Beta pointed. Abhyuday stared.

"Facilities."

Chen's expression changed.

"How many?"

Beta enlarged the map. More points appeared.

"That's impossible."

Abhyuday shook his head.

"No."

He looked at Chen.

"It's worse than that."

"Why?"

"Because these aren't records."

He pointed toward several green points.

"They're active."

Silence filled the room. Chen stared at the map.

"How many?"

Beta displayed a number. Seventeen. Seventeen Genesis facilities were still functioning. Chen felt something cold settle in her stomach.

"Elena."

Abhyuday nodded.

"She knew."

Beta turned toward them. Then the screens changed. A single file appeared.

LAST PROTOCOL

Chen stepped forward.

"What is that?"

Abhyuday began reading. His expression slowly hardened. The protocol wasn't about destroying Genesis. It was about preserving it. If one facility failed, the network would transfer essential data to another.

If a laboratory was destroyed, its biological archives would be replicated elsewhere. If a subject died, its genetic information would remain available. Genesis had been designed to survive its creators. The network itself was the experiment. Chen whispered,

"They planned for this."

Beta nodded. Abhyuday looked at it.

"How did you find this?"

Beta pointed toward the screen. Then toward itself. Chen understood.

"You learned the system."

Beta looked at her.

"Yes."

It was the first complete word Beta had spoken in hours. Chen stared at it.

"You can understand the network."

Beta nodded.

"Not all."

"How much?"

Beta paused. Then answered.

"Enough."

—

Elena Voss watched the same data from another chamber. She saw Beta moving through the system. She saw the access points opening. She saw security barriers disappearing. For the first time in years, Elena looked genuinely surprised.

"Disconnect it."

The technician beside her began typing.

"We can't."

"Why?"

"It's no longer accessing the system."

Elena frowned.

"Then what is it doing?"

The technician swallowed.

"It's inside it."

Elena stared at him.

"Explain."

"The network is treating Beta as a legitimate node."

Elena's expression changed.

"That's impossible."

"It recognizes its biological signature."

Elena stepped toward the screen. Beta's image appeared.

"You made it."

The technician hesitated.

"What?"

"You designed its architecture."

Elena's voice became quiet.

"You taught it to communicate with the network."

The technician said nothing. Elena looked back at Beta. A strange smile appeared on her face.

"Then perhaps we finally succeeded."

The technician looked confused.

"Director?"

Elena's eyes remained fixed on the screen.

"Beta was never supposed to obey us."

—

Beta entered deeper. It saw memories. Not human memories. Genesis memories. Thousands of experiments.

Thousands of failures. Subjects created and discarded. Animals altered. Humans transformed. Cells harvested.

Embryos modified. Entire populations of organisms exposed to experimental compounds. Beta saw Alpha. Then Zero. Then itself.

The files were arranged according to purpose. Alpha had been stability. Zero had been adaptation. Beta had been understanding. But there was something else.

A fourth category. Beta stopped. The file was heavily encrypted. It contained no name. Only a designation.

SUBJECT PRIME

Beta attempted to access it. The system rejected the request. It tried again. The network began shutting down sections around it. Beta paused.

Genesis was fighting back. For the first time, it understood the meaning of resistance. The system knew that if Beta reached the deeper layer, it would discover something Genesis had hidden even from Elena. Beta continued. One barrier opened.

Then another. Then another. The network began collapsing. Lights throughout the facility turned red. Alarms sounded.

Chen looked around.

"What is happening?"

Abhyuday checked the console.

"Beta."

"Can it stop?"

"I don't think so."

"Then stop it."

Abhyuday looked at her.

"I don't think it wants to stop."

Beta turned toward them. Its eyes reflected the emergency lights.

"Genesis controls."

Chen stepped closer.

"Yes."

"Genesis creates."

"Yes."

"Genesis destroys."

Beta paused. Then:

"Genesis must end."

Chen stared at it.

"Beta, what are you doing?"

Beta looked toward the ceiling. Then the walls. Then the floor beneath them.

"I am removing Genesis."

Abhyuday's face tightened.

"How?"

Beta placed both hands against the central console. The entire facility shook. Somewhere underground, enormous machinery began shutting down. One by one. System after system.

The biological chambers went dark. The containment units opened. The archives began deleting themselves. The network began destroying its own pathways. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"If Beta destroys everything, we lose the research."

Abhyuday understood immediately.

"That's what Elena wants."

Chen turned toward the monitor.

"What?"

"If Genesis collapses completely, we lose the evidence."

"And Elena?"

Abhyuday stared at the screens.

"She loses control."

A terrible thought entered Chen's mind.

"Unless she already has another facility."

Abhyuday looked at the world map. The seventeen green points were still there.

"Then we need the data before Beta destroys it."

Chen approached Beta.

"Can you preserve the files?"

Beta looked at her.

"Some."

"Which ones?"

"Origins."

Chen's eyes narrowed.

"Origins of what?"

Beta looked toward the screen. A single file appeared.

GENESIS – ORIGIN PROTOCOL

Chen stepped forward. The file began opening. Then— the screen went black. Every light in the chamber shut off. A second later, the entire facility screamed.

Metal twisted somewhere below them. The floor shook violently. Zero woke with a roar. Alpha moved toward him. Chen grabbed the nearest railing.

Abhyuday shouted,

"Hold on!"

The lights returned. But the screen was different. The map had disappeared. Every green point was gone. Only one message remained.

PROTOCOL BREACH

Then another line appeared.

REMOTE OVERRIDE DETECTED

Beta turned toward the darkness. For the first time, it looked uncertain. Chen noticed.

"What is it?"

Beta answered quietly.

"Someone else is inside."

Abhyuday looked at the terminal.

"Elena?"

Beta shook its head.

"No."

"Then who?"

Beta stared at the screen.

"I don't know."

A distant door opened. Footsteps echoed through the corridor.
Slow. Measured. Human.

Chen raised her weapon. Alpha moved in front of Zero.
Abhyuday stood beside Chen. Beta watched the corridor.
Then the voice came.

Calm. Familiar.

"Doctor Chen."

Chen froze. Abhyuday looked at her.

"Who is that?"

She knew the voice. She had heard it before. In the laboratory.
In the forest. In the nightmares that had followed the fall of
Genesis.

Marcus Nelson stepped into the red emergency light. He
smiled.

"Looks like you found what I was looking for."

Beta turned toward him. Genesis continued to collapse around
them. And somewhere beneath their feet, the last protocol had
begun.

CHAPTER – THIRTY SEVEN

Marcus

Marcus Nelson stood at the end of the corridor as though he had been waiting for them. Smoke drifted from a ruptured ventilation shaft while sections of Genesis continued collapsing. Chen raised her weapon and ordered him not to move. Marcus calmly acknowledged her suspicion before looking toward Abhyuday and the weakened Zero, with Alpha standing beside him.

Chen demanded to know what he wanted. Marcus admitted that he had always wanted control. Abhyuday accused him of funding Genesis, and Marcus didn't deny it. His family had supported generations of research, military contracts and private laboratories. Genesis, he explained, had never been simply a scientific project; it had been a weapons program among other things.

When Chen accused him of creating the subjects, Marcus corrected her. The scientists had created the organisms, the organisms had produced the results, and people like him were supposed to decide what happened next. He admitted that he had hunted Chen after the original laboratory fell because she was one of the few surviving scientists who understood what had happened without becoming completely dependent on Genesis. He had recovered whatever information he could because, to him, information had a price.

Now he wanted Beta.

Beta stood motionless as Marcus studied it. Then it spoke, identifying him and stating that he controlled Genesis. Marcus

denied this, but Beta looked toward the collapsing facility and said that she controlled Genesis. Chen immediately understood that it meant Elena. Marcus explained that Elena didn't work with anyone and never had.

A violent tremor shook the corridor. Marcus warned them that Genesis was collapsing and that everything underground would be buried. He knew the exits and expected Chen to understand that she needed him, although he did not expect her to trust him.

A gunshot suddenly struck the wall beside Marcus's head, followed by the arrival of dozens of armed soldiers. Alpha attacked first and gunfire erupted. Abhyuday pulled Zero into cover while Beta disappeared into the darkness. Marcus simply watched.

When Chen asked whether he was with the soldiers, he replied, "They're with me."

The fighting intensified. Zero tried to stand but was weakened by the inhibitor. His strength had fallen dramatically, although his mind seemed clearer. He understood that he could still fight, but no longer possessed the unstoppable force he once had. Alpha and Zero fought together, forcing the soldiers backward, until another section of the facility collapsed.

Marcus directed them toward the western corridor. Chen reluctantly followed because the facility was becoming unstable. The corridor was older than the rest of Genesis, built from concrete and dark metal with markings beneath layers of dust.

Abhyuday noticed the markings, and Marcus revealed that they were from the original Genesis, older than the facility itself.

"Genesis didn't begin here."

They reached a massive door, which Marcus opened using a code. Beyond it was an enormous chamber filled with containment tanks. Most were empty or shattered, while others contained only dark liquid.

Chen asked how many subjects had been there and how many had survived. Marcus answered that it depended on what she meant by survived. Some remained alive, he said, and they were everywhere.

Marcus explained why he wanted Beta. He wanted the network. Whoever controlled Genesis would not need armies because they could create them.

Suddenly, Beta appeared on the other side of the chamber with its hands against a terminal. The screens flickered as it accessed the network. Marcus ordered it to stop and fired when it refused, but Alpha moved between them and took the bullet. Zero charged as Marcus's soldiers opened fire.

Chen confronted Marcus. He warned her that she didn't understand what Beta was, but she replied that she knew enough. Marcus told her that while she knew what Genesis had made, he knew what Genesis had discovered.

"Beta is the key."

"To what?"

"Everything."

Beta then spoke Marcus's full name and displayed a series of symbols. Marcus immediately recognized them as the Nelson Project. When Abhyuday demanded an explanation, Marcus revealed that his family had funded the first experiment but had not created Genesis.

They had discovered it.

Genesis had existed before them.

The chamber began shaking violently. Marcus warned that they had to leave, but Chen demanded to know what his family had discovered. He finally admitted that beneath the original laboratory was something alive.

A deep biological pulse travelled through the floor. Zero froze, Alpha turned toward the sound and even Marcus looked frightened.

"That's what Elena was protecting."

The lights went out and something screamed beneath them.

"Run!"

The chamber began collapsing. Containment tanks shattered and the soldiers disappeared beneath falling debris. Alpha grabbed Zero and moved toward the exit while Chen and Abhyuday followed. Beta remained behind long enough to rip the storage unit from the central system and save the data before running after them.

As they reached the corridor, Marcus looked back through the smoke and saw a huge silhouette.

"That's impossible."

He revealed that the creature was supposed to be dead. When the lights returned, however, the chamber was empty. Whatever had been there was gone.

They escaped through an emergency passage and reached the surface as Genesis collapsed beneath the forest. Trees fell and smoke rose through the canopy. Marcus stood at the edge of the clearing while Chen kept her weapon aimed at him.

"You aren't coming with us."

Marcus smiled.

"No."

When she asked where he was going, he answered, "Somewhere you won't find me." Chen warned him that he would come after Beta again, and Marcus admitted that he probably would. She promised to stop him.

"I believe you."

Marcus then disappeared into the forest.

Beta had managed to recover only part of the data, but considered it enough. Chen looked back at the collapsing Genesis facility and realized that something beneath it had been alive—something even Elena had feared and Marcus believed was dead.

They left the forest together: Alpha, Zero, Beta, Abhyuday and Chen. Marcus was gone, with no body and no proof that he had survived.

But Genesis was not finished.

Far beneath the collapsing facility, a faint pulse travelled through the buried network.

Once.

Twice.

Then it stopped.

Genesis was dying. But something else had awakened.

CHAPTER – THIRTY EIGHT

The Last Choice

The forest was burning behind them. Not with the wild orange flames of an ordinary fire, but with strange flashes of blue-white light that erupted from beneath the trees whenever another section of Genesis collapsed. Smoke crawled between the trunks. Birds fled in confused swarms. Animals that had survived the experiments ran blindly through the undergrowth, driven away from the place that had once been their prison.

Chen kept moving. She did not look back. Behind her came Abhyuday, Beta, Alpha and Zero. Five survivors. Five different consequences of Genesis.

And somewhere beneath the earth, the facility that had created them was dying.

"How far?" Chen asked.

Abhyuday checked the damaged scanner.

"At least two kilometres before we're clear of the underground network."

"Two kilometres?"

"The tunnels extend farther than we thought."

Chen slowed.

"Then we keep moving."

Zero stumbled. Alpha immediately turned toward him. Zero tried to straighten. He failed. The inhibitor had changed him.

Before, Zero had been almost impossible to stop. His body had been a weapon that continually rebuilt itself, growing stronger whenever it was damaged. Now he could barely walk. Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"How long?"

"I don't know."

"You said that already."

"And I still don't know."

Abhyuday knelt beside Zero.

"His metabolism is adjusting."

"Is that dangerous?"

"Everything about him is dangerous."

Abhyuday examined the veins along Zero's neck.

"But the inhibitor is holding."

Chen crouched beside them. Zero looked at her. There was no rage in his eyes. Only exhaustion. Chen placed a hand against his shoulder.

"You survived."

Zero lowered his head. Alpha watched them. Then it looked toward the forest. Something was wrong. The creature suddenly raised its head.

Beta stopped. Abhyuday looked around.

"What?"

Beta answered.

"Genesis."

Chen frowned.

"It's collapsing."

"No."

Beta looked toward the ground.

"It is moving."

A deep vibration passed through the earth. The trees trembled. Then the forest floor opened. A crack tore through the soil, running between the trees like a wound. Chen stepped backward.

"Run."

They moved. The ground collapsed behind them. An entire section of forest disappeared into darkness. Something enormous fell beneath the earth. Then came the sound of metal breaking.

The Genesis facility was destroying itself. Not collapsing. Destroying. Every surviving system was being overloaded. Every containment chamber was being opened.

Every archive was being corrupted. The network had begun its final protocol. Beta stopped. Chen grabbed its arm.

"Keep moving."

Beta looked at her.

"Data."

"What?"

"Genesis is deleting the data."

Chen froze. The storage unit was still in Beta's hand.

"Can you stop it?"

"Some."

"Then do it."

Beta looked toward the ground.

"Need access."

"Where?"

Beta pointed toward the forest.

"Core."

Abhyuday immediately understood.

"The central server."

Chen looked at him.

"If we leave it, everything disappears."

"And if we go back?"

Abhyuday didn't answer. Chen looked behind them. The forest was collapsing. They could leave. They could finally escape.

They could let Genesis disappear forever. But the thought of all those experiments being erased disturbed her. Not because she wanted the research. Because someone had to remember.

"What happens if we don't get the data?"

Beta answered.

"Genesis forgotten."

Chen looked at Zero. Then Alpha. Then Abhyuday. She knew the answer.

"We go back."

Abhyuday stared at her.

"Chen."

"We go back."

The descent into Genesis was worse than before. The tunnels were collapsing around them. Emergency doors slammed shut. Electrical cables sparked overhead. Chemical fumes filled the air.

Alpha led the way. Zero followed slowly. Chen stayed beside him. Beta walked behind them, carrying the storage unit. Abhyuday remained between Chen and Beta.

"There's something you should know," Abhyuday said.

Chen looked at him.

"What?"

"The inhibitor."

"What about it?"

"It isn't simply suppressing Zero's mutation."

Chen stopped.

"What is it doing?"

"It is forcing his cells to choose."

"Choose what?"

"Between remaining genetically unstable and returning to a stable state."

Chen stared at him.

"And which one is happening?"

Abhyuday looked toward Zero.

"Neither."

Zero stopped walking. His body trembled. Alpha moved toward him. Abhyuday examined him.

"He's changing again."

Chen's heart sank.

"Is the inhibitor failing?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Abhyuday looked confused.

"I think his body is adapting to the inhibitor."

Chen closed her eyes.

"Of course it is."

Zero suddenly dropped to one knee. Alpha grabbed him. Zero's breathing became violent. The dark veins returned. Chen stepped forward.

"Abhyuday."

"I know."

He opened the emergency medical case.

"We need to stabilize him."

"How?"

"I can increase the inhibitor."

Chen looked at the syringe.

"Will that kill him?"

"Maybe."

"And if you don't?"

"He may lose control."

Chen looked at Zero. He was shaking. Alpha held him down. The sound of Zero's breathing filled the tunnel. Chen knew there was no safe choice.

She looked at Abhyuday.

"Do it."

Abhyuday injected another dose. Zero screamed. The tunnel shook. Then his body went completely still. Chen's heart stopped.

"Zero?"

No response. Abhyuday checked his pulse. Nothing.

"He's gone."

Chen stared at him.

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"No."

She moved toward Zero. Alpha stood over the body. Chen touched his chest. Cold. Too cold.

"Zero."

Nothing. Then Alpha made a sound. Not a roar. A low, broken sound. Chen looked up.

Alpha had placed one hand against Zero's chest. The creature remained there. Waiting. As if refusing to accept what had happened. Then— a heartbeat.

Weak. Almost impossible to detect. But there. Abhyuday stared at the monitor.

"He's alive."

Chen exhaled.

"He's alive."

Zero's eyes opened. But they were different. The rage was gone. The hunger was gone. The unnatural brightness had disappeared.

He looked almost peaceful. Abhyuday whispered,

"The inhibitor worked."

Chen looked at him.

"Completely?"

"No."

He studied the monitor.

"It changed him."

They reached the central chamber. It was enormous. At its centre stood the original Genesis core. A cylindrical structure extending from the floor to the ceiling, filled with cables, fluid lines and biological material. The entire structure was shaking.

Beta approached.

"Core."

Chen looked around.

"What do we need?"

"Data."

"How long?"

"Minutes."

Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"Can you keep the system stable?"

"Maybe."

"Do it."

Abhyuday ran toward the control console. Chen remained beside Beta. Alpha stayed with Zero. The core began pulsing. Once.

Twice. The walls lit up. A voice came through the speakers. Elena.

"You should have left."

Chen looked upward.

"Where are you?"

Elena's voice echoed through the chamber.

"You still don't understand."

"Then explain."

"The inhibitor."

Chen froze. Elena laughed softly.

"You thought Abhyuday discovered it."

Abhyuday looked up.

"What?"

Elena continued.

"Genesis developed the inhibitor years ago."

Abhyuday stared at the console.

"The formula was incomplete."

"No."

Elena's voice became colder.

"It was intentionally incomplete."

Chen looked at Abhyuday.

"What does that mean?"

"It means Genesis never wanted to cure them."

Elena answered.

"It wanted to control them."

Chen looked at Zero.

"And now?"

"The inhibitor you created is different."

Elena paused.

"It gives them a choice."

Chen's expression hardened.

"What choice?"

Elena didn't answer. The connection died. Beta turned toward Chen.

"Data complete."

Chen looked at it.

"Then we're leaving."

Beta nodded. Abhyuday pulled the final storage unit from the console. Suddenly, the chamber began to collapse.

"Go!"

Everyone moved. Alpha lifted Zero. Chen ran beside them. Abhyuday carried the data. Beta followed.

The core exploded behind them. A wall of fire rushed through the chamber. They reached the exit seconds before the tunnel collapsed. Chen fell onto the forest floor. For several seconds, she could hear nothing.

Then rain began falling. Cold rain. It washed the smoke from her face. She rolled onto her back. The sky was black.

Genesis was gone. She looked toward Abhyuday. He was alive. Beta was alive. Alpha was alive.

Zero was alive. But Chen felt something burning inside her chest. She looked at her hand. The dark veins had spread farther. The infection was advancing.

Abhyuday noticed. He came toward her.

"We need to treat you."

Chen nodded.

"Yes."

He opened the medical case. Then stopped. The final syringe was almost empty. Chen looked at it.

"That's enough?"

"For a temporary suppression."

"And after that?"

Abhyuday didn't answer. Chen smiled sadly.

"You're getting very good at that."

He injected the serum. Pain spread through her body. Her vision blurred. She fell forward. Abhyuday caught her.

For a moment, she thought she was dying. Then the pain stopped. The dark veins faded. Her breathing steadied. Abhyuday looked at the monitor.

"Stable."

Chen opened her eyes.

"For how long?"

He looked at her.

"Temporarily."

She smiled.

"Good enough."

—

They stood together at the edge of the ruined forest. Behind them, Genesis had disappeared. There was no entrance anymore. No laboratory. No containment chambers.

No servers. Nothing but a crater covered by mud, smoke and fallen trees. Zero stood quietly. Alpha beside him. The two creatures looked toward the horizon.

Chen wondered what they were thinking. If they were thinking at all. Abhyuday held the recovered data.

"We should destroy this."

Chen looked at him.

"No."

He frowned.

"Why?"

"Because if we destroy it, someone else can repeat everything."

She looked toward Beta.

"We need to understand it first."

Beta nodded. Then it said something that made Chen's blood run cold.

"Genesis not destroyed."

Abhyuday turned.

"What?"

Beta looked toward the ruined forest.

"Network."

Chen stared at it.

"You said the facility was gone."

"Facility gone."

Beta paused.

"Genesis remains."

Chen looked at the storage device in Abhyuday's hand. The screen flickered. A map appeared. Seventeen points. Then more.

Hundreds. The image expanded beyond the forest. Beyond the country. Across the world. Chen stared.

"What are those?"

Beta answered.

"Genesis."

The rain became heavier. Somewhere far away, a signal appeared. A single pulse. Then another. Then another.

Abhyuday looked at Chen.

"That isn't coming from here."

"No."

Chen watched the map.

"Where is it coming from?"

Beta displayed coordinates. Chen stared at them. The coordinates disappeared before she could memorize them. Then one message appeared.

ACTIVE

The screen went black. Chen looked toward the dark forest. They had destroyed the facility. They had survived Zero. They had escaped Elena.

They had lost Marcus. They had recovered the data. But none of it felt like victory. Because Genesis had not ended. It had only lost one of its homes.

Chen looked at Zero. The creature stood beneath the rain, weaker than before, but alive. Then she looked at Alpha. Then Beta. Then Abhyuday.

For the first time, she understood what Genesis had really done. It had not created monsters. It had created survivors. And survivors had a choice. They could run.

Or they could find the truth. Chen turned toward the forest.

"We go home."

Abhyuday nodded.

"For now."

Behind them, deep beneath the ruined earth, something pulsed one final time. And somewhere thousands of kilometres away, a machine answered.

CHAPTER – THIRTY NINE

After the Fall

The forest looked different without Genesis. For years, trees had grown around its secrets, roots pushing through concrete foundations while vines covered the steel doors. Now the wilderness was swallowing Genesis itself. The underground facility had collapsed completely, leaving a wide depression in the earth. Smoke still rose from several places where underground systems continued to burn, while rain had turned the surrounding soil into black mud. Broken trees lay scattered across the clearing.

But something else had changed.

There was silence—not the unnatural silence that had once surrounded Genesis, but the natural silence of the forest. Birds had begun returning and small animals moved cautiously between the trees. The wind passed through the leaves without the distant hum of machinery. For the first time in decades, nothing beneath the forest was telling it what to become.

Chen stood at the edge of the clearing with Abhyuday, who carried the remaining medical equipment and recovered data. He asked whether she thought it was really over. Chen looked at the ruins and answered that she didn't. Abhyuday admitted he had hoped she would say yes, but Chen believed this was only a pause.

Zero emerged slowly from the forest. The inhibitor had changed him. His enormous body remained powerful, but the physical dominance he had once possessed was gone. His

movements were slower, his breathing heavier and the dark veins that had covered his body had almost disappeared. He was still a mutant and still something Genesis had never intended to exist, but he was no longer a weapon.

Alpha followed him.

More creatures appeared between the trees—dozens of mutants of different sizes and forms. They had survived the collapse, and the old kingdom had survived with them, but it was no longer a kingdom. There was no throne, central territory or single leader. The creatures simply began moving through the forest in separate groups.

Over the following days, they formed their own communities near the river, mountains and old Genesis site. They hunted, fought, reproduced and learned, but there was no central command. Alpha watched them for several days before disappearing into the forest.

Chen eventually found him sitting beneath a huge tree beside the river. She understood that he was leaving and asked whether the mutants would survive. Alpha looked toward the different groups and nodded. Chen told him he didn't have to lead them; he could simply live. Alpha lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Zero had more difficulty adjusting. He had once been the centre of the mutant kingdom, feared and followed by the others. Now neither they nor he seemed to know what his place was. The inhibitor had removed much of the aggression that had made him dominant. He remained physically dangerous, but the instinct to control everything had become distant.

One evening, Chen found him watching smaller mutants feeding beside a stream. One noticed him, froze and slowly approached. Chen expected Zero to attack, but he did nothing.

The creature eventually returned to the others. Chen realized that Zero had not simply lost his strength; he had lost the need to prove that he possessed it.

Meanwhile, Abhyuday worked from a temporary shelter constructed from an abandoned ranger station. The recovered Genesis data occupied most of his attention, and he copied it onto several drives because he refused to trust a single copy. Chen reminded him that he needed sleep, but he pointed out that she should sleep too.

He then told her that her symptoms had not returned, although the effect was temporary. Chen admitted that she was terrified but refused to surrender to that fear. Abhyuday understood that she intended to continue.

Beta had changed as well. It spent hours observing the forest, the mutants, insects, rain, birds and even silence—things Genesis had never taught it. One afternoon, Chen found it watching a butterfly resting on its hand. When she asked how it knew what the insect was, Beta explained that it had observed it.

Chen told Beta that it was learning without Genesis. Beta agreed. When she asked what that felt like, Beta answered:

"Free."

Chen asked whether it understood freedom. Beta explained that Genesis had taught it control, while freedom was the absence of control. But then it added that freedom was more than that.

"Choice."

Chen was struck by how something created in a laboratory was beginning to understand humanity better than many humans she had known.

Weeks passed and the forest slowly healed. The mutant communities became organized, learning where to hunt, shelter and find water while avoiding the ruins – not because Alpha commanded them, but because they remembered.

The old kingdom was gone. There was no throne, army or ruler, only survival.

From a hill overlooking the forest, Chen and Abhyuday watched the creatures spread through the wilderness. Abhyuday called the sight beautiful and reflected that they had entered the forest to stop a monster. Chen asked which one, and his response made them both smile.

For once, nobody was chasing the mutants, experimenting on them or trying to turn them into weapons. The forest belonged to them. Chen knew the infection remained inside her, that the inhibitor was temporary and that Genesis was still somewhere beyond the forest, but for a few minutes she allowed herself to forget.

That night, they gathered around a fire. Alpha sat beyond the flames, Zero rested nearby and Beta watched the sparks rise. The quiet was interrupted when Alpha suddenly stood and the mutants began calling to one another across the forest. One howl was answered by another, then another, until distant groups were communicating with each other.

It was a network, but not one created by Genesis.

"They're finding each other," Chen said.

"Without Genesis," Abhyuday replied.

Beta listened to the calls and simply said, "Different."

Chen agreed. She hoped it was better.

Later that night, Chen walked alone toward the old Genesis site. The ruins were almost completely buried in mud, but

memories returned—the cages, screams, Zero's first appearance, Alpha, Elena, Marcus and the experiments.

Abhyuday eventually joined her. Chen asked whether the creatures could live without them. He believed that was the only way they could ever know whether they were capable of doing so. Chen suggested that perhaps this was what Genesis had feared most: that its creations would eventually stop needing their creators.

Then Beta appeared on the hill holding the storage device. A faint symbol flashed across its screen before disappearing.

"Something remains," Beta said.

Chen asked what.

"Genesis."

When she asked where it was, Beta admitted that it didn't know.

The mutants were alive. The old kingdom was gone. Zero was alive, Alpha was free, and for a brief moment the world seemed quiet. But somewhere beyond the forest and the ruined facility, Genesis was still moving.

Chen turned toward Beta.

"Tomorrow."

Abhyuday asked what would happen tomorrow.

"We find out what survived."

The fire slowly died. The forest remained awake, and beneath its silence something distant answered—not a roar or scream, but a signal.

CHAPTER – FOURTY

The Data

Morning came quietly. The rain had stopped before dawn, leaving the forest covered in mist while the mutants began their morning hunts. For the first time since they had entered the forest, there were no alarms, gunfire, screams or machines – only birds.

Chen stood outside the shelter, feeling the pain in her chest return briefly. She knew the inhibitor was losing its effect, but there was nothing she could do yet. Abhyuday was asleep, Alpha had disappeared into the deeper forest, Zero was near the river, and Beta was missing. Chen followed the river and found Beta standing motionless on the opposite bank with its hands submerged in the water.

"What are you doing?"

"Listening."

"To what?"

"The signal."

Beta explained that it was listening to the signal from Genesis. When Chen asked where it was, Beta pointed toward the forest and said it wasn't there – it was everywhere.

Abhyuday quickly joined them at the shelter. Beta placed the recovered storage device on the table, but the computer displayed IDENTITY REQUIRED. Abhyuday realized that the device required a biological signature. Beta looked toward Zero, Alpha, Chen and finally itself.

"All."

They scanned Alpha, Zero and Beta successfully. Chen's altered biological markers initially produced only a partial match, but the system eventually unlocked.

Thousands—perhaps millions—of files appeared: medical reports, genetic sequences, experiment logs, personnel records, satellite images, transportation records and funding documents. Chen thought they had found everything, but Abhyuday warned that it was worse than that.

The files revealed the history of the forest facility, the subjects and the experiments, followed by a folder labelled GENESIS GLOBAL. Inside was the same map Beta had previously shown them, but this version contained far more information. Every facility had a designation and operational status.

Abhyuday zoomed out.

"Two hundred and twelve."

Chen stared at the map, but Beta corrected him: those were only the known facilities. There were additional missing locations. Genesis was not a single laboratory or even a small network. It was a global system that had existed for decades, perhaps longer.

They examined the facility records. Some were abandoned or destroyed, another had an unknown status, while an Asian facility was listed as ACTIVE. The location was hidden deep inside a mountainous region with no photographs, public records or official designation—only coordinates.

The metadata showed that it had been active three days earlier, after the forest facility had begun collapsing.

"So whatever is there knew."

"Network," Beta replied.

The active facility had received data from the forest, including information about the subjects. When Chen asked which subjects, Beta answered: Zero. Alpha. Beta.

Abhyuday realized they weren't simply copying the organisms. They were copying their genetic models, meaning the organisms could potentially be recreated.

The database contained thousands of genetic sequences, including organisms designed for extreme temperatures, accelerated healing, toxin resistance and survival without oxygen. There were also records of failed experiments and entire populations that had been created and destroyed.

Then they discovered an encrypted folder labelled ORIGIN. Beta couldn't open it. Abhyuday found that it used a separate security layer and suspected someone other than Elena had created it. Beta confirmed that Elena had access but had not created the encryption. Whoever had created it remained unknown.

The forest suddenly became quiet. Alpha and Zero both sensed something overhead, and Chen heard the faint sound of an aircraft. Beta identified the source as a satellite signal.

"They know we're alive."

"Who?"

The answer was obvious.

Genesis.

That evening, they returned to the shelter and copied as much data as possible. One active facility remained highlighted on the map. Chen insisted they had to go there, despite Abhyuday's warnings that she was still infected, Zero was barely stable and Beta was still learning what it was.

When Abhyuday reminded her that they might not return, Chen simply looked at Alpha, Zero and Beta.

"Because we can't pretend we didn't see it."

He agreed. They would leave the next day.

The coordinates led far beyond the forest into an isolated mountainous region with no roads, settlements or official structures. Satellite data nevertheless showed constant electricity, a heat signature beneath the ground and biological activity. It was clearly not an ordinary facility.

Beta suddenly recognized the coordinates.

"I remember."

Chen asked how, since Beta had never physically been there. Beta explained that it remembered the place through memory.

"I was created there."

The revelation stunned everyone. Beta explained that Genesis had lied: Alpha, Zero and Beta had not been created in the forest. They had all been transferred there.

The forest had not been their beginning. It had only been a testing ground—a chapter in something much older.

That night, Chen stood alone beneath the stars, aware that the infection was still inside her. Beta joined her and recognized her fear. Chen admitted that every answer they found only created another question. Beta replied that questions weren't dangerous.

"Answers can be."

The storage device suddenly activated by itself and displayed INCOMING TRANSMISSION. A corrupted video appeared.

Elena Voss.

She told them that if they were watching the message, the forest facility had failed. If Beta was with them, they had learned that Genesis could not be destroyed by destroying one location. She warned them not to come looking for her.

Then the recording distorted.

"Look beneath the beginning."

The screen went black.

Chen finally understood that they had not discovered the origin of Genesis. They had only uncovered its footprint. The forest had not created the mystery; it had revealed it.

Tomorrow they would follow the coordinates to the place where Beta claimed it had been created.

Far beneath the mountains, however, a machine continued running. A light blinked three times, and a hidden screen displayed:

SUBJECT ZERO – STATUS: ACTIVE

SUBJECT ALPHA – STATUS: ACTIVE

SUBJECT BETA – STATUS: ACTIVE

Then:

NEXT PHASE: INITIATED

The screen went dark.

CHAPTER – FOURTY ONE

Still Alive

They left the forest before sunrise. There was no ceremony. No final gathering. No farewell to the place that had changed all of their lives. The forest simply watched them go.

Chen walked at the front with Abhyuday beside her. Beta carried the recovered Genesis data. Alpha moved silently through the trees, rarely more than a few metres away. Zero followed behind them, slower than before, his altered body still adjusting to the inhibitor. They had spent weeks believing that leaving the forest meant escaping Genesis.

Now they knew better. The forest had never been the end. It had barely been the beginning. The coordinates recovered from the data led them far beyond the territory they knew. The journey took several days. They crossed abandoned roads, climbed through rocky valleys and eventually entered a region where the mountains seemed to swallow every sign of human civilization.

There were no villages. No power lines. No roads. Nothing. And yet Beta insisted they were close.

"How do you know?" Abhyuday asked.

Beta looked toward the mountains.

"I remember."

Chen looked at it.

"You said your memories were incomplete."

"They are."

"Then what do you remember?"

Beta was silent for several seconds.

"Cold."

Chen waited.

"White lights."

"Anything else?"

Beta looked toward Zero.

"Pain."

Zero stopped walking. His head lifted. Something had triggered a memory in him. Chen noticed immediately.

"Zero?"

The creature stared toward the mountains. For several seconds, he didn't move. Then he continued walking. Chen exchanged a glance with Abhyuday. Neither spoke.

They continued.

—

The entrance was hidden beneath a mountain. At first, there was nothing. Only rock. Snow. Wind.

Then Beta stopped. It placed its hand against the stone. A faint vibration travelled through the mountain. The rock shifted. A narrow line appeared.

Then another. A massive section of the mountain opened inward. Beyond it was darkness. Chen stared.

"This facility doesn't appear on the map."

Abhyuday looked at Beta.

"It was never supposed to."

They entered. The door closed behind them. The temperature dropped immediately. The walls were clean. Too clean.

Unlike the ruined Genesis facility in the forest, this place had not been abandoned. The lights were working. The ventilation system was running. Somewhere deeper inside, machinery hummed. Chen raised her weapon.

"Someone's here."

Beta nodded.

"Yes."

They moved carefully through the corridor. The walls were covered with observation windows. Behind the first was an empty laboratory. Behind the second were rows of surgical instruments. The third contained a series of enormous tanks.

All empty. Zero stopped. He stared into one. His breathing became heavier. Chen approached him.

"What is it?"

Zero placed his hand against the glass. His fingers trembled. Then he turned away. Abhyuday examined the tank.

"There's biological residue."

Chen looked at the label. A faded designation appeared beneath the glass.

G-00

She stared at it.

"Zero."

Abhyuday nodded.

"This may be where the designation came from."

Beta moved farther down the corridor. Another tank.

G-01

Then:

G-02

G-03

Hundreds. Chen felt sick.

"How many?"

Abhyuday looked down the corridor.

"Too many."

Alpha approached one of the tanks. He stared at the empty chamber. Then at Zero. The two creatures remained there silently. Neither seemed surprised.

Almost as if some part of them remembered.

—

They reached the central laboratory. Unlike the forest facility, this room contained no obvious security systems. No armed guards. No scientists. Only a single terminal.

Beta approached it. The screen activated immediately. A message appeared.

WELCOME BACK, SUBJECT BETA.

Beta stopped. Chen looked at it.

"You've been here."

Beta nodded.

"Yes."

The screen changed.

ORIGINAL DESIGNATION: B-00

Abhyuday frowned.

"B-00?"

Beta stared at the screen. Then another message appeared.

PURPOSE: OBSERVATION

Chen whispered,

"You were the first Beta."

Beta shook its head.

"No."

It looked toward the empty tanks.

"I was not the first."

The screen displayed a new sequence.

ALPHA SERIES: 27 SUBJECTS

ZERO SERIES: 19 SUBJECTS

BETA SERIES: 14 SUBJECTS

Chen stared.

"Alpha and Zero weren't unique."

Abhyuday's face hardened.

"They were iterations."

Beta nodded.

"Yes."

Chen looked toward Alpha.

"Then what happened to the others?"

The answer appeared on the screen.

STATUS: TERMINATED

Chen closed her eyes.

"All of them?"

Beta continued reading.

"Most."

"Most?"

Beta looked at the screen.

"There are survivors."

The room went silent.

"Where?"

The system displayed three locations. Two were marked:

UNKNOWN

The third:

ACTIVE

Chen stared at the word.

"That's the facility we've been tracking."

Beta nodded.

—

A sound came from behind them. Everyone turned. The door opened. A woman entered. Chen raised her weapon.

The woman stopped. She was old. Older than Chen expected. Her hair was almost completely white. She wore a simple laboratory coat.

There was no weapon in her hands. She looked at Alpha. Then Zero. Then Beta. Tears appeared in her eyes.

"You survived."

Chen didn't lower her weapon.

"Who are you?"

The woman looked at her.

"My name is Dr. Mira Vale."

Abhyuday stepped forward.

"Genesis?"

The woman nodded.

"I was one of its first scientists."

Chen's expression hardened.

"Then you know what happened here."

"More than you can imagine."

"Tell us."

Dr. Vale looked toward the empty tanks.

"Genesis was never created to make monsters."

Chen almost laughed.

"That's what everyone says."

"No."

The woman shook her head.

"Genesis was created to understand something."

"What?"

She looked at Zero.

"Evolution."

Silence.

"Humanity had reached its limits," she continued. "We believed biology could be redesigned. Improved. Directed."

Abhyuday frowned.

"And Alpha?"

"An attempt to create stability."

She looked at Zero.

"Zero was an attempt to create adaptation."

Then Beta.

"And Beta was an attempt to create understanding."

Chen looked at the three organisms.

"And did you succeed?"

Dr. Vale's expression became sad.

"We succeeded too well."

—

She walked toward the central terminal.

"Genesis discovered that biological systems could learn."

Beta watched her.

"Not merely adapt," she continued. "Learn."

She looked directly at Beta.

"That was the breakthrough."

Beta's expression remained unreadable.

"You were the first organism capable of understanding the network."

Dr. Vale continued.

"Genesis wanted to use that ability to connect every experiment."

Chen understood.

"That's why Beta could enter the system."

"Yes."

"And Elena?"

Dr. Vale's expression changed.

"Elena was not the founder."

Chen froze.

"What?"

"She inherited Genesis."

Abhyuday stared at her.

"From whom?"

Dr. Vale looked toward the ceiling.

"From the people who came before us."

Chen felt a chill.

"Who were they?"

Dr. Vale didn't answer. Instead, she activated the terminal. The screen displayed a single file.

GENESIS – ORIGINAL PURPOSE

The file opened. There was no text. Only a video. A recording from decades earlier. A group of scientists stood inside the same laboratory.

A younger Dr. Vale was among them. At the centre stood a man Chen had never seen before. He looked directly into the camera.

"Human evolution cannot be controlled from the outside."

The recording continued.

"It must be taught."

The scientist turned toward a containment chamber. Inside was a small organism. Not Alpha. Not Zero. Not Beta.

Something smaller. Something barely human. The scientist smiled.

"Subject Zero."

Chen froze. Abhyuday looked at her.

"That's impossible."

The recording continued.

"The first successful organism capable of adaptive mutation."

Chen stared at the screen.

"Zero wasn't the first."

Dr. Vale shook her head.

"No."

She looked toward the creature standing behind them.

"Your Zero is not Subject Zero."

Chen turned slowly.

"What?"

Dr. Vale looked at Zero.

"He was designated Zero because the original Subject Zero died."

The room became completely silent. Zero stared at the screen. His breathing changed. Something deep inside him recognized the recording. Dr. Vale continued.

"After the original died, Genesis began producing improved versions."

Alpha. Zero. Beta. Each generation became more stable. More intelligent.

More adaptable. More dangerous. Chen looked at Zero.

"Then why call him Subject Zero?"

Dr. Vale looked at her.

"Because Genesis never stopped searching for the original."

The screen changed. A final file appeared.

SUBJECT ZERO – ORIGINAL

Chen's blood ran cold.

"Where is it?"

Dr. Vale looked toward the deepest part of the facility.

"Alive."

No one moved. Abhyuday whispered,

"That's impossible."

Dr. Vale shook her head.

"It has been asleep for decades."

Beta looked at the screen. The network suddenly activated. Every monitor in the laboratory turned on. A single biological signal appeared. Slow.

Steady. Alive. Chen stared at the graph. The signal was enormous. Then another screen activated.

A camera feed. A massive containment chamber. Inside was a creature. It was larger than Alpha. Larger than Zero.

Its body was covered in layers of pale tissue. Its eyes were closed. Machines surrounded it. But the creature was breathing. Chen could barely speak.

"That's..."

Dr. Vale finished the sentence.

"The first."

Zero took a step toward the screen. The creature inside the chamber opened its eyes. The entire facility shook. Beta turned toward the others.

"Awake."

The lights went out. Then came a sound. Not from the speakers. Not from the machines. From somewhere deep beneath them.

A roar. The mountain itself seemed to answer. Chen raised her weapon. Abhyuday moved beside her. Alpha stepped forward.

Zero stood completely still. For the first time since Chen had known him, he looked afraid. The containment chamber on the screen cracked. Once. Twice.

Then shattered. The signal spiked. Every Genesis system in the facility activated simultaneously. Doors opened. Alarms screamed.

And somewhere in the darkness below them, something that had been sleeping for decades began to move. Dr. Vale whispered,

"We were never creating the future."

Chen looked at her.

"We were waking the past."

The screen flickered one final time. A designation appeared.

SUBJECT ZERO – ORIGINAL

Then beneath it:

STATUS: ACTIVE

The monitor went black. Chen looked at Zero. Then Alpha. Then Beta. Three survivors of Genesis.

Three generations of experiments. And somewhere beneath the mountain, the organism that had started everything was awake. But Beta was staring at another screen. A map. Not of the mountain.

Not of the forest. The entire world. Hundreds of points were glowing. Some were red. Some were green.

And one by one, the dormant facilities began activating. Chen stared at the map.

"How many?"

Beta answered.

"All of them."

Abhyuday's face went pale.

"Genesis is restarting."

Beta shook its head.

"No."

Chen looked at it. Beta turned toward the darkness.

"Genesis never stopped."

A distant biological pulse echoed through the mountain. Once. Twice. Three times. Chen understood then that everything they had believed about their journey had been wrong.

The forest had not been the beginning. The first laboratory had not been the beginning. Even Subject Zero had not been the beginning. They had only been following the trail backward. And now, at the end of that trail, they had found something far older.

Something that had been waiting. Something that had survived every attempt to destroy it. Chen looked at Zero. His eyes were fixed on the darkness. She whispered,

"What are you?"

Zero did not answer. He simply stared toward the chamber where the original creature had awakened. And for the first time, Chen wondered whether the question had ever been

about what Zero was. Perhaps the real question was what Genesis had been trying to become. Outside, dawn broke over the mountains.

Inside, the first alarm of the new Genesis network began to sound. And somewhere beneath the earth, the original Subject Zero opened its eyes. The forest had never been the beginning. It had only been the place where they first learned that Genesis was still alive.