

Ch. 1 (Past)

Lights flashed. The air conditioning buzzed. Machines whirred and cried amidst the silence as two figures bustled in front of a room with a bright glass screen. The figures, along with the thing residing in the glass room were the only sources of life in the large room.

Space was precious, for beyond the sterile building, the cluster of structures packed into a district, and beyond tall white walls sprawled infinite desert, hot and harsh. The sun beat down upon the sands, rendering the desolate landscape completely uninhabitable. Desperate investors and people seeking homes fought for every scrap of land. Space equated to value. It made the sight of a near-empty lab all the stranger.

"The subject is displaying expected accelerated healing. While the blood clotting is happening on par to subjects twenty, one hundred-two, and five-hundred and seven, the blood viscosity is thicker by a factor of five."

The man hurried around the lab, adjusting the temperature until their breath mists in the air. Temperature was key at the clotting stage. Not cooling the specimen in time could lead to uninhibited cell replication, and the wounds would become a site of malignant cancer. The freezing room would lower the rate of organelle growth enough to create a window of time for the next stage.

The woman placed her hands in specialized gloves, linked directly to the panel monitoring the subject's heart rate, respiration, and various other body functions. The wounded areas were bathed in a red light upon the screen, heat escaping from the bubbling mass of blood and flesh.

"Sigler, give me an estimate."

"Two minutes" the harried man responded. "You have two minutes before a statistically significant cell count travels through the bloodstream."

"I know what I'm doing." Sigler frowned, not commenting upon their long list of failures. The past was too sore to bring into this delicate environment. One mistake on either of their parts and weeks of preparation would have to be scrapped once again.

The woman moved the gloves and the surgical machines within the room copied her actions. The subject seemed to recognize the implement, breaking out of its haze. It writhed and screamed on the operating table, legs kicking out every which way. A desperate, futile endeavor. The woman's brow furrowed in annoyance at the racket, audible even beyond a glass wall.

"It's alright." A fleeting touch on her shoulder. "You can do this. You're the most dependable person in all the Citadel." The woman's answering smile resembled a snarl. Their subject's

flailing came to a rest, the short effort too much for its battered body. Finally, the machines could be lined up with precision.

"A tall claim. Now be a dear and initiate the next step, alright?"

She could feel Sigler's presence appear next to her and hear the squeaking clanks of a lever being pulled far past its ordinary settings allowed. Distinctly mechanical whirring roused test subject seven-hundred and eight, which stared at the machine in dazed horror. The machine connected to the woman's right glove glowed at its blunted tip, directed at its gaping wound.

"Now."

Bubbles expanded and popped, burnt clean away by the diode laser. Neither scientist paid any heed to the subject's howls. Anesthesia was a limited resource, and wasting it would be punished. They only watched the glowing screen in front of them, displaying the subject's circulatory system in bright blue.

Hypovolemic shock was the most severe issue and had been the highest cause of death among their experiments. They could not give the subject a blood transfusion and use the diode laser simultaneously without risking heightened blood flow. The clotting process would be interrupted, and the subject would bleed out on the operating table. Another death by exsanguination, like dozens before it.

"It's- it's working!" Sigler cried, his face a portrait of desperate hope. "All malignant cells in the area have been burnt away. Carcinogen count is rapidly decreasing as well."

"We're not out of the dunes just yet." the woman cautioned. The laser served the purpose of burning away the cancerous cells and cauterizing the wound, but simulating rapid cell growth over an open wound had never been successful. Infections often occur in the following weeks, and the long-term risks of cancerous tumors, strokes, and cell function failures ensured that none of the subjects lived for more than a couple of years.

"None of the subjects were in such good shape as this one. His survival is practically guaranteed."

The woman tilted her head in acknowledgment. Sigler was right, their test subjects had never before completed the procedure in such good health. The success was no small miracle, borne of hard work and good fortune.

The man continued to rave in happiness. "Think of the implications! We will be personally supported by the leaders of the citadel for the rest of our lives. Our faces will be displayed on every sign, everyone will know our names! Sigler and Diane, the glorious scientists who

discovered a way to increase the food supply, revitalize the job market, and created a medical procedure that saves those damned by fate itself!"

The unconscious, panting subject was lying flat on the dirtied table. Sigler placed his palm on a panel and the glass retracted. He unbuckled the man from the table, antiseptics in hand.

"Give him a moment," Diane whispered, "He's been through an ordeal."

While less outwardly unexpressive, she was no less excited. The Citadel's leaders had been personally demanding newer and more effective medical surgeries, though reasons for this were kept in the dark. Many of their fellow researchers had criticized the Patriarch in secret, complaining that their time could be much better allocated toward projects that could improve the general living conditions of the Citadel's residents. Those friends never lasted long.

But their discoveries could be used for so much more than simple surgeries. In the darkest recesses of her mind, Diane fancied herself a creator, a god; capable of breaking the laws of nature and changing them to her wishes.

She had created something from practically nothing.

Of course, all they did was simulate the subject's own body to fix his wounds. But the speed of said growth, the possibilities-

Diane watched the subject that Sigler had carried off the table. Cradled in her husband's arms, the man was breathing softly, evenly. Sigler flinched at her smile.

This changed everything.