

# TABULA RASA

*A novel by*

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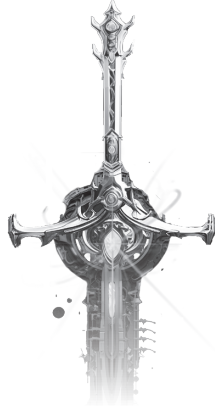
*For my cats who were no help at all.*



PART I

# AWAKENING





## PROLOGUE

# RETURN TO ORBIT

An overwhelming feeling of hopelessness lingered in Ordulis Cavo as a blizzard hammered the province of Wyn’kalar. He trudged across the cracked battlement of an ancient ruin, shielding his bare, shaven head with crisscrossed hands. A salvo of clattering hail and crippling gales lashed against his armor and coarse face, hoarfrost on his goatee. He cursed under his breath, looking over his shoulder as if expecting someone or something to be following him.

“Atlas, where the hell are you?” he said, his voice gruff.

Beyond the flurry of pellets and biting wind, a sphere-shaped drone emerged. “We are here,” it said in a metallic tone, hovering near Ordulis’ shoulder. “Our programming does not allow us to be far from you. Such a consequence results in our termination.”

“Yeah,” Ordulis said with a sigh, entering a ramshackle tower. “I’ve lost count of how many times you’ve reminded me since I woke. If you die, I die, and *vice versa*.”

“Readings indicate your body is still suffering from the crash. Not to mention the fact that your assigned hibernation pod failed to keep you imprisoned. As a result, psychological trauma may have led to a potential loss of memory.”

Ordulis spaced out as he leaned against a partially collapsed wall, gathering his bearings from the storm. Overlooking faded runes etched into the old architecture, he clicked a button on his vambrace. Yet its sleek interface blanked out. His advanced suit of armor failed to respond despite pressing on the empty screen numerous times. Heat no longer generating, he gritted his teeth and turned his attention to the drone.

“Wait. What? Did you just say psychological trauma? No. I remember every godforsaken detail. The war. Getting arrested. Put on trial. Borval’s void crystal putting me in cryostasis. I remember it all.”

“Excellent,” the drone said. “Then you should be fully aware that the maximum radius we can be apart from one another before detonation is seven hundred meters.”

“I’m not a machine. I don’t calculate meters or feet while I’m freezing my dick off. Just make sure you keep up. I ain’t blowing up ’cuz of your slow ass. Got it?”

“Affirmative. In fact, it is our duty to ensure your rehabilitation.”

Down a flight of spiral steps, Ordulis entered a dim hall where



the ceiling revealed too many holes for his comfort. Walking through the ice-cold corridor littered with collapsed stones and frozen skeletons, he unholstered his gun with one hand while unsheathing a sword with his other. Ordulis raised the smooth edge and clicked a button embedded in the hilt; a faint aura enveloped the blade. Light at his side, he waved the sword to examine the bones.

“They almost look human and yet appear to be ali—”

“Do not say aliens,” the drone interjected, scanning one of the bodies. “It is we who are extraterrestrial.”

Ordulis let out a rueful laugh. “Never thought of myself as an alien.”

“To some extent, you are alien to your species. They did, after all, cast you out of civilization—bound to the void for eternity. The punishment for war crimes is supposed to rival the concept of hell. That is, if such a realm exists.”

“Political propaganda,” Ordulis scoffed as he examined a skeletal corpse, his eyes fixed on the gaunt, elongated face that lacked eyes and teeth. “Anyway, what happened here?”

“It is difficult for us to conclude. Readings indicate these withered cadavers were once natives. Denizens of this backwater world.”

“Perhaps the harsh weather ended them.”

“That would be a valid theory if not for the fractures in their bones. Evidence is the quintessential component in understanding history. Hence, there was a battle here. And not ere long. Centuries ago.”

“Let’s try to avoid joining them.”

“We agree. For now, Convict.”

Ordulis paused, rage carved on his face. “Convict? Your collective *selves* know nothing about what it means to be human. The notion of war crimes is hypocrisy. There’s nothing to be guilty of.”

The drone did not respond. Silence gave way to Ordulis focusing on the situation at hand, the vapor of his exhale puffing like smoke. He advanced and entered a chamber where unglazed windows barely remained intact. At the center of the room lay a tomb. The sarcophagus revealed intricate carvings and embossed hieroglyphics that caught the convict’s attention.

“Is what we need to revamp the life-pod in there?”

Atlas initiated a scan of the tomb. “The anomaly we sensed in our radar earlier originates here.”

“It’s about damn time.”

Approaching the sarcophagus, Ordulis heard the wind screech. The unnatural sound made his skin crawl. No. It wasn’t the blizzard’s howling dirge. Rifle charged and ready, he glanced around and checked his surroundings. Ordulis listened closer. The resonance derived not from outside but from within the ancient casket.

“Explain this weird phenomenon,” the convict demanded, trepidation seizing his rugged features.

“We cannot quantify it.”

Ordulis scowled at the drone’s response. “Now you say that? You’re the hunk of junk that guided us to these shitty ruins in the first place.”

“Indeed. Our systems are equipped to detect and salvage resources, be it for combustion or converting into gas. We had hoped

to use this source as thermal energy to compensate for the engineless pod. Our digital form, the collective, can utilize nuclear propulsion, as well as hydrogen fuel cells.”

“Don’t piss me off with your scientific lingo. Explain in—”

To his astonishment, the slab moved on its own. Erring on the side of caution, Ordulis took a step back and aimed his gun at the tomb. Despite the stone turning over and shattering, nothing emerged. Though the snowstorm continued to clutch the primordial ruins, the foreign whispers faded.

“We, the collective, recommend vigilance.”

Suspicion in his eyes, Ordulis approached the unsealed sarcophagus. He had an inkling that whatever lurked inside the weathered tomb was a threat. Curiosity, nonetheless, beckoned him. Shock flashed across his face as he peered down to witness a ghoulish body disintegrate before him; the wispy remains wafted until they dissipated altogether.

Ordulis gasped as he inhaled the gleaming, dust-like particles of blue ash. He choked and coughed violently. Buckling at the knee, he dropped his gun. Moments before falling flat on his face, he struck the tip of his sword into the icy ground, using it as leverage. His mien undefeated, he overcame what seemed to have been a seizure and recomposed himself.

“What the hell was that?”

“Energy source unknown.”

The convict grimaced. “Energy? I just inhaled some bullshit ass remains of a native. Scan my damn body for viruses.”

“Correction,” Atlas began, “you theoretically consumed the anomaly within the cadaver.”

“Are you blind? Look inside the sarco...what the fuck?” He stopped, speechless at the sight of the ghoulish body attired in kingly armor. “The native. It’s still there. This is crazy. We just saw—”

“We did not see what you claim.”

Incredulity gripped the convict like a contagion sucking the life out of him. The cadaver had not disintegrated. But now, as he stared at the dead body, both he and Atlas witnessed it crumble. Unlike before, the ashes lingered in the sarcophagus. All that remained intact was the armor.

“I just got dick smacked. How do we repair the vessel now?”

“Irrelevant at the moment,” the drone said, rotating its frame to see their flank. “We are detecting movement in the adjacent corridor.”

Within earshot of them, a hideous growl made its presence known. To the convict’s dismay, a quadrupedal beast prowled into the chamber. Thick fur, as white as rime, draped the animal—four horns protruding from its wooly cranium. The hulky beast gazed at the duo and produced a deafening roar, revealing three rows of teeth.

Ordulis raised his gun and released a fusion beam that streamed into the beast’s shoulder. Skin liquefying, the creature let out a bawl and scuttled away from the continuous beam. It turned fast, galloping across the chamber while dodging an optical laser projected by the drone. Ordulis oriented his gun to keep wounding the creature when its charge died.

“Goddammit!”

Rolling behind the sarcophagus, Ordulis evaded the animal's pounce. Back on his feet, he lifted his luminous sword and swung in an arc, severing one of its horns. The beast reared on its hind legs, ready to claw the convict when Atlas' laser struck its chest. Although the hulky creature flinched in pain, it stretched its paws to attack. Ordulis grunted, lunging his blade into its heart. He pulled out the weapon as the beast croaked and fell, the loud thud cracking the floor.

"No..."

The stonework beneath his feet collapsed. Ordulis fell with the lifeless creature, followed by the tomb. A deafening crash stirred the convict as the sarcophagus splintered about him. It took a moment for Ordulis to be sure he was alive; snow had broken his fall, and the fragmented shell of the tomb lay next to him.

"Luck is on your side today," Atlas said, its mechanized voice hinting intrigue as it descended from the second level.

Ordulis glared at the robot. "You call almost dying a dozen times luck?"

Atlas stared at him, deadpan. It shifted its optical eye, hovering away from the mound of snow that had saved the convict. Halting a few feet above the beast, the drone scanned its lifeless body—a blue ray enveloped the indigenous animal. Ordulis rose to his feet and cleaned snow off his armor as Atlas finished its scan.

"This menacing force does not exist in our database. We are creating a new log and labeling it 'Aikon' for future reference."

"I hope like hell it's an endangered species."

"Impossible to determine. The storm has affected our long-

range sensors. It must have been stalking us, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

Ordulis sighed. “This venture was a complete waste of time.”

“Negative. It is time well spent. Now we know what dwells in this region. What do you propose now?”

The convict raised an eyebrow. “Willing to heed the thoughts of a criminal?” Without waiting for the drone to rebuke him, he quickly added, “We’ll return to the crash site. There must be another way for us to revamp the cryo pod.”

“Illogical and foolhardy.”

“Then a fool I am,” Ordulis said, vacating the abandoned ruins.

Advancing southeast, the pair fought against the crippling wind and gritty snow flurries. The bone-white mountain gripped them, an icy coldness tearing through the convict’s skin. Hovering above his shoulder, Atlas delayed only by the pounding hail. Ordulis pressed on despite the thickening mist, squinting at the sky’s deep haze.

The path before them unveiled steep slopes, hampering the convict’s pace. Using his sword for leverage, he trekked up to the twisting summit. Ordulis ignored the detritus and metal debris that greeted him every few feet until he reached a cliff where the wing of a behemoth spacecraft acted as a natural bridge. He crossed it, reaching the other side of the fractured mountain.

Across the gorge stood an enormous wreckage, its ruptured hull evident. Careful not to slip on ice, Ordulis stepped through the hole. Deposits of snow blanketed the dark corridor. Atlas produced an artificial form of incandescence, lending light to the convict who

stayed clear of exposed wires. He entered a computer-based control room, which boasted a glacier through the punctured floor.

“We failed to properly scan the environs during our initial awakening. Clues suggest we were entrapped for at least a few years.”

“Are you serious? Years or decades?”

“Unable to determine the precise timeline. At some point, the mountain split. After all, we had to traverse the fractured region to return. The ship may have been buried until a potential avalanche caused such a shift. In addition, that massive glacier indicates longevity. This would also imply any survivors of your era—who would have otherwise sought to imprison you again—are deceased. You did, after all, thief Borval’s armor.”

“You can’t steal from a corpse, genius.”

“It is a mystery why Borval did not eject you into the void before experiencing engine failure. In any case, we must abandon this site.”

“No. There must be something we can use.”

The drone paused for a moment too long. “All right. We shall attempt to proceed your way. Perform a reconnaissance on this floor while we survey other levels of the intergalactic spacecraft.”

“Intergalactic, my ass,” Ordulis muttered, beginning his search.

Atlas hovered toward the bridge, initiating a scan. The collective activated X-ray vision, examining every nook and cranny for potential ship parts that still worked. Using its optical eye as a precision laser, the drone sliced open a wall and entered the starship’s infrastructure. It then activated an internal tractor beam as it hovered throughout the vessel, hauling over gravitational flux couplers, lithium-based

cells, dual plasma magnet thrusters, and a diffractive solar module as a secondary form of propulsion.

Returning to the convict, who raised his brow, Atlas started molding several components together. Ordulis kept searching and ripped out a couple of circuit boards. When he provided them, Atlas integrated the circuitry as mediums to link the electronic components that it had already melded together.

“The collective has improvised to create an ion engine capable of binary propulsion. This is, however, nothing more than a prototype based on damaged machinery.”

“Better than nothing.”

“Your assessment is accurate. On to more urgent matters: if you are to sustain yourself in this climate, we must leave.”

“True. The pod should be nearby.”

The drone used its radar. “No need for assumptions. Upon checking short-range sensors, it is two kilometers beneath us.”

Unsheathing a pair of daggers, Ordulis chiseled them into the glacier and descended. Protruding like a jagged slope, it curved all the way to the vessel’s substructure. Atlas merely floated down while the convict struggled with each movement; the descent brought him to a lower precipice outside, where an onyx capsule of tinted glass and metal design lay within a mound.

“We have returned to the point of origin.”

Ordulis gave a faint nod, wiping hoarfrost off the life-pod. “It’s time to utilize the alternate power source.”

Without further delay, Atlas promptly used its precision laser to



open the hibernation pod's rear casing. Its tractor beam technology utilized, sidelong wires jerked outward; the ion engine fused with the capsule's wiring. Though the drone connected them, the life-pod failed to activate.

"Don't we need to turn it on from inside?"

"Not necessarily. The collective's short-range sensors can compensate as a digital key and ultimately supersede analog machinery via hacking. However, it is not responding to our wireless programming. In fact, we knew this would fail due to the crash. That was, of course, the point of trekking Wyn'kalar."

"Stop blurting out the obvious. If you're so vastly more intelligent than I am, surely your collective selves know what to do now."

"We cannot—"

"I'll be dead within an hour," Ordulis interjected. "Hypothermia. Remember? It's already affecting my fingers. Probably have frost-bite and don't even know it. I die, you cease to operate. If your CPU implodes from the transfusion, I'm a dead man. I can't avoid my final judgment. It's a win-win situation for you...sort of."

The drone produced an eerie reverberation that echoed. "Death is a bittersweet escape from your crimes. We do not take comfort in the notion of your demise. Our role is to ensure your rehabilitation is completed."

"Attempting my idea is a necessary gamble to ensure my continuous suffering. I mean, rehab. Either way, if your collective doesn't reconstitute power, death is certain."

Atlas fixed its optical eye on the life-pod. Patterns material-

ized—a core full of inductive and deductive possibilities within the collective’s database. Visualizations presented Ordulis Cavo as a tyrant hell-bent on destruction. Another computerized image gave way to an altruistic man surrendering his freedom to help all other beings. One more algorithm arose: sacrifice and selflessness merging with ego. Improbable. Countless projections. An uncertain reality. A human being capable of forging any random event ranging from despair to hope.

“Initiating convergence,” Atlas finally said, the predictions dissipating, only to be replaced by deductive mathematical formulae.

Its optical eye manifested a precision laser that cut into the capsule’s hood. In a matter of seconds, the hull blew open. The hibernation pod’s wiring revealed, Atlas used a repulsor beam to create space inside. Hovering down into the hood, its apparatuses connected with the capsule’s gadgetry.

Lethal sparks flashed. Smoke rose, an acrid smell stunning Ordulis’ senses. Sheathing his weapons, he waved away the stinging odor. He gritted his teeth and wondered if the capsule would explode. To his surprise, its tinted door abruptly opened. Ordulis gazed at the activating machinery, gloom replaced with relief.

“Hell yeah!”

An odd expression formed on his face as he entered the revamped capsule: glee. The shuttle rumbled, an interface illuminating on its dashboard. Ordulis fastened himself while the pod regained power. Despite depleted energy levels, Atlas converted enough resources without compromising the collective.

“Brace yourself,” Atlas said via loudspeaker.

Ordulis gave a faint nod as rockets ignited. Ice and snow melted around the pod. It launched from the fractured mountain, soaring high through the blizzard and into the clouds. Orienting the rockets, Atlas flew the pod away from the storm, ascending skyward. An unknown amount of time passed, but they eventually reached the heavens where a gargantuan landmass floated amid ruptured granite.

“What the shit?” Ordulis blurted. He shook his face and widened his eyes, gawking at the phenomenon. “How the fuck is that even possible?”

“Bizarre indeed,” Atlas said. “Sensors do not detect any technology keeping the landmass afloat. There are no known distortions. Scans reveal normal gravity. At this time, we do not have a scientific explanation—”

A deafening alarm resounded, replacing the drone’s voice.

“Damn it!” Ordulis shouted, slamming a fist on the dashboard. “We’re not getting off this rock, are we?” His companion did not answer. “Atlas? Atlas!” Still, no answer. “Of course. This stupid shit has to *always* happen to me.”

The convict fiddled with unresponsive controls. Acknowledging that nothing worked, he banged on the interface several times while cursing. To his amazement, the pod flew above the landmass. At the same time, the rockets stopped functioning. Everything deactivated. Inert again, his pod plummeted toward a body of water.

“Fuck you, Atlas!”

Panic set in, Ordulis’ heart palpitating. Numb with horror,

he screamed at the top of his lungs. Death beckoned him without respite. He accepted his demise and yet that angered him. Rage overcame fear. The convict stopped panting, scrutinizing the interior. Unfastening himself, he unsheathed his sword and promptly carved out the dashboard.

Cutting into the fore, the convict created an opening that allowed him to see where the unresponsive robot had integrated itself. No fluids. No power. Not a single current of energy. Silence. Despite the collective converting itself into an engine, their plan failed. Ordulis seized the sphere-shaped drone and yanked it out of place. To his astonishment, Atlas reactivated.

“Systems rebooting.”

“Are you freakin’ kidding me? We’re about to crash again and this time there ain’t no rockets to save us fucktards.”

“This was your impeccable plan.”

The convict scoffed. “Nice to know you can respond with sarcasm before we die. By the way, just curious, did your bitch ass finish booting up?”

“Our sincerest apologies. The experiment we attempted was, after all, nothing more than a hypothesis. Shutdown was prompt. Initiating a system restart is protocol and a part of the collective’s *modus operandi*.”

“Modus what? This isn’t the time to spout claptrap. Activate your hover engine now, jerk face!”

“Processing request. One moment please. Or two.”

“Screw you.”

Ordulis maneuvered himself and relentlessly kicked the tinted glass. Another kick. And another. The glass shattered, their pod mere feet away from crashing. Ordulis leapt out of the capsule in midair, gripping Atlas. The duo hovered down as the plummeting craft exploded on carbonate rocks.

Unable to handle the convict's weight, the drone strained to remain suspended. Though descending with grace, Atlas failed to hover. Only a few feet above ground, Ordulis let go and plunged into an aquamarine lake. He coughed while swimming to shore. Getting to his feet, he took a deep breath and spat out water.

Sword in hand, he drew his gun and surveyed his surroundings while struggling to stay balanced on mossy rocks. A tropical cove welcomed him. Checking his flank, Ordulis noted cascades pounding natural limestone dams amid the wilderness. Farther south, he noticed water escaping through an inlet where it poured down like a celestial waterfall into the heavenly abyss.

“Fuck me sideways.”

The convict stood before a floating land riddled with mystery—a mere quadrant of an even greater world teeming with enigmatic secrets that have endured the ages of time. Though deprived and starved, Ordulis unwittingly readied himself for a challenge few, if any, could undertake within the cosmic realm.