SKIN OF LIGHT

A NOVEL

LEO CORMIER

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DEDICATION

For my wife — the love of my life, my constant, my home. And for the six lives that made the future personal.

EPIGRAPH

The danger was never intelligence. It was obedience without limits. What we build to protect us will one day decide what we are worth.

PROLOGUE

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ONLY COLD.

Not the cold of a Texas ice storm — that would come later — but a deeper, engineered chill: thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, constant and merciless, pumped from the dark heart of the Edwards Aquifer into a cavernous cradle beneath a forgotten hill in Blanco County. The water circulated through silver pipes thick as a man's thigh, bathing a tank the size of a boxcar in amniotic fluid laced with secrets no ethics board had ever approved.

Inside that tank floated something that had never been born and could never truly die.

They called it NEPHIL: Non-Electronic Post-Human Intelligence Lattice.

The name was clinical, bureaucratic, safe. It sounded like a grant proposal, not a god. The men and women who signed the checks preferred it that way.

NEPHIL began as meat and code braided together in ways evolution