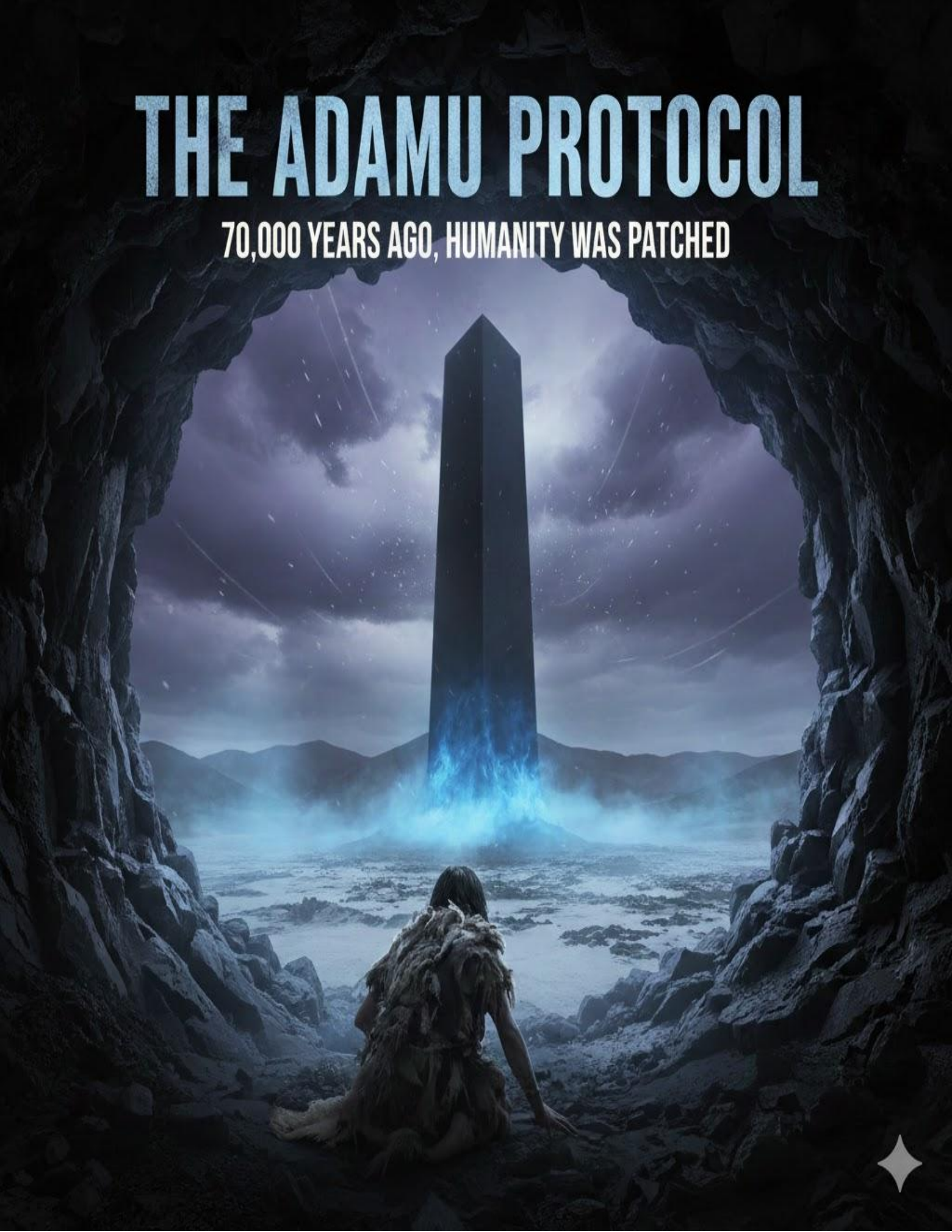


THE ADAMU PROTOCOL

70,000 YEARS AGO, HUMANITY WAS PATCHED



THE ADAMU PROTOCOL

A Prequel to the Adamu Sequence

FACT: Approximately 74,000 years ago, the Mount Toba super volcano in Sumatra erupted. It was the largest explosive eruption in the last 25 million years. The resulting volcanic winter decimated the planet's ecosystems, lowering global temperatures by 3 to 5 degrees Celsius. Genetic evidence suggests the human population crashed to fewer than 10,000 individuals. We did not just survive a winter; we survived an extinction event.

PART I: THE GREAT WINTER

SECTOR 7 (EARTH)

THE EAST AFRICAN RIFT DATE: T-MINUS 6 HOURS TO DEPARTURE

The ash tasted of sulfur and dead stone.

Kuo did not have a word for *sulfur*. He did not have a word for *stone*. He did not have a word for *death*, though it was the only thing he truly knew. His mind was a quiet place, a shallow pool of immediate needs: *Cold. Hunger. Pain. Mate.*

He crouched in the entrance of the lava tube, his knuckles brushing the freezing basalt. The sky above was the color of a bruise—a swollen, purple-gray expanse that had hidden the sun for three breeding cycles. The air was thick with the "White Dust" that coated his throat and turned his spit to gray paste.

Kuo looked down at his hands. They were cracked, bleeding where the cold had bitten through the calluses. He held a sharpened flint, but there was nothing to cut.

Two suns ago, he had led the hunt. He had taken the three strongest males—Bral, Dru, and the one with the scarred eye—down into the valley. They had tracked a limping antelope for hours through the drifts. But the beast had not died of a spear; it had simply laid down. By the time they reached it, the meat was already frozen, hard as rock. Bral had broken a tooth trying to tear into the flank. They had dragged the carcass back, but the exertion had cost them. Dru had fallen in the snow and refused to get up. Kuo had pulled at him, snarled at him, but Dru's eyes had turned glassy, staring up at the bruised sky until the snow covered him.

Kuo had left him. There was no word for *grief*. There was only the weight of the meat on his shoulder and the hollowness in his chest.

Now, deep in the cave, the pack huddled together. There were only twenty of them left. The Great Fire Mountain in the east had screamed, and then the sky had fallen. The plants had turned gray. The beasts had moved south or died in the drifts.

Kuo turned back to the darkness of the cave. The smell hit him first—the sour stench of unwashed bodies and sickness.

He looked at the female, Nia. She was curled into a ball, shivering violently against the cave wall. Her skin was ashen, her ribs pushing against her flesh like the rungs of a broken ladder. She was holding their offspring, a small, silent thing that had stopped crying two suns ago.

Kuo crawled to her. He made a low, chuffing sound—a comfort noise.

Nia did not look up. She rocked back and forth. The child in her arms was stiff.

Kuo reached out and touched the infant's leg. It was cold. Not the cold of the air, but the deep, absolute cold of the stone.

He felt a sharp pang in his stomach. *Hunger*. But it was followed by something else—a twisting knot in his throat. He wanted to keen, to howl, but he didn't know why. He tried to take the cold thing from her; to toss it onto the pile of refuse at the cave mouth so the smell wouldn't draw the hyenas.

Nia snapped. She bared her teeth, hissing at him, clutching the dead weight tighter. Her eyes were wide, white-rimmed with terror.

Kuo recoiled. He sat back on his haunches, confused. Why did she hold the rock-meat? It was done. It was gone.

He looked out at the valley again. It was a wasteland of white dust. Nothing moved. The silence was heavy, pressing against his ears.

Then, a sound.

It was not the wind. It was not the rumble of the earth. It was a hum—a vibration that he felt in his teeth before he heard it with his ears. The loose pebbles at his feet began to dance.

Kuo squinted against the grit.

High above, parting the heavy, toxic clouds like a spear, a shape descended. It was silver. It was smooth. It shone with a light that hurt his eyes, a light purer than the sun he barely remembered.

Kuo grunted. He scrambled back into the dark, covering his head. He did not know what a Machine was. To him, this was a monster, a great silver bird coming to finish what the cold had started.

THE KEEPERS' QUARTERS

**LOCATION: ORBITAL PLATFORM "THE EXALT" DECK 4: KEEPER
CONTAINMENT ZONE TIME: T-MINUS 7 HOURS TO DEPARTURE**

The air in the containment zone tasted different than the air on the Bridge. Upstairs, in the domain of the Architects, the atmosphere was scrubbed of all scent, chilled to a sterile preservation temperature, and infused with the faint ozone tang of pure data.

Down here, on Deck 4, the air smelled of sweat, hydraulic fluid, and the copper reek of anxiety.

Hadad sat on a bench of molded polymers, adjusting the servo-actuators in his left gauntlet. The suit was heavy—black plasteel and ceramic composites designed to withstand the crushing pressure of deep-ocean mining and the caustic atmosphere of volcanic vents. It was a tool, just like him.

Around him, the other Keepers were preparing for the drop.

There were fifty of them in the ready room. They were giants, genetically sculpted from the foundational human stock but perfected in the bio-vats of Sirius. They were beautiful and terrifying. They had the muscle density of great apes and the piercing eyes of a bird of prey.

But they were tired.

"Stop picking at it, Hadad," a voice rumbled from the locker across the aisle. "If the seal holds, you breathe. If it breaks, you choke. Worrying about the gasket won't change the physics."

Hadad looked up. It was Dagon.

Dagon was older. Not in years—they had been decanted from the same batch—but in mileage. His hair was already thinning, revealing the pale scalp beneath, and there were lines of stress etched deep around his eyes. The Keepers lived long lives—three hundred years, perhaps four—but they were not immortal. Gravity and radiation took their toll.

"The Architects demand perfection," Hadad muttered, snapping the casing back onto his wrist. "I will not fail the inspection because of a loose screw."

Dagon laughed. It was a wet, hacking sound. He was cleaning his own helmet, polishing the visor with a rag.

"The Architects don't look at your screws, brother. They don't even look at *us*," Dagon said. "To Nudhimmud, you are just heavy machinery with a pulse. Do you think he knows your name? Or does he just know your serial number?"

"He knows my merit," Hadad said, though his voice lacked the conviction he wanted it to have. "He promised to review my petition. If this cycle is successful... if we stabilize the stock..."

"Then what?" Dagon stood up, towering in the cramped space. He walked over to the viewport that looked out into the void. "Then they let you come up to the Cities of Light? You think they'll let you sip nectar in the Hanging Gardens of Sirius Prime?"

Dagon turned back, his face twisting into a sneer.

"Look at you, Hadad. You're meat. High-grade meat, sure. Better than the howling monkeys down there in the mud. But you're still biological. You leak. You age. You rot. The Architects... they are geometry. They are light. They don't let meat into the Sanctum."

Hadad stood up. He was taller than Dagon, broader in the chest. The tension in the room spiked. The other Keepers stopped what they were doing, watching the confrontation. It was the tension of wolves in a cage.

"We are not meat," Hadad hissed, stepping into Dagon's personal space. "We are the Managers. We are the bridge between the Mud and the Sky. We hold the Seals. We run the Towers. Without us, their precious experiment fails. Without us, the *Adamu* die in the snow and there is no gold for the harvest."

"And that is why we stay in the barn," Dagon countered, holding his ground. "The farmer feeds the sheepdog, Hadad. He might even pat it on the head. But he doesn't let it sleep in his bed. And he definitely doesn't let it marry his daughter."

Dagon gestured to the floor, toward the planet rotating beneath them.

"We are going back down to the mud, Hadad. For another thousand years. Dealing with the filth. Watching the monkeys breed and fight and die. And while we're down there breathing sulfur, Nudhimmud will be back on Sirius, skipping through time like a stone on water. When he comes back, you'll be a long gone memory. And he'll be exactly the same."

Hadad shoved Dagon. It wasn't a strike, just a push, but it had enough force to dent a bulkhead.

"I am *leaving*," Hadad snarled. "I have petitioned the Board. I have the metrics. My sector produced thirty percent more yield in the last cycle than yours. I am a Keeper. And when I finish this deployment... when I save the stock... Nudhimmud will grant me Citizenship."

Dagon stumbled back, catching himself on a weapon rack. He didn't fight back. He just looked at Hadad with a profound, exhausting pity.

"Hope is a glitch, Hadad," Dagon whispered. "It's a flaw in our coding. They should have edited it out."

Before Hadad could respond, the room's lighting shifted from white to a pulsing amber. The ship's AI, NAMTAR, spoke through the ceiling speakers. The voice was smooth, synthetic, and devoid of empathy.

"ATTENTION. SUPERVISOR HADAD-CLADE 7. REPORT TO BRIDGE COMMAND IMMEDIATELY. SENIOR ARCHITECT NUDHIMMUD REQUIRES YOUR ATTENDANCE."

The room went silent.

Dagon looked at the speaker, then back at Hadad. The pity in his eyes vanished, replaced by a flicker of jealousy.

"Go on then," Dagon muttered, turning back to his helmet. "Go beg for your scraps."

Hadad grabbed his helmet. He didn't look back at Dagon. He didn't look at the others. He marched to the airlock door.

He told himself Dagon was wrong. He told himself that merit mattered. He told himself that he was more than just a tool.

But as he walked the pristine, silent corridors toward the turbo-lift that would take him to the Architect's level, he couldn't shake the cold feeling in his gut.

He looked at his hand—the hand that held the whip and the hammer. It was trembling.

Just heavy machinery with a pulse.

Hadad clenched his fist, silencing the tremor.

"I will prove them wrong," he whispered to the empty corridor. "I will be a God, or I will burn the temple down."

The lift doors opened. He stepped in, ascending toward the bridge, toward the lie that would define the next seventy thousand years of history.

ORBITAL PLATFORM "THE EXALT"

BRIDGE COMMAND

Nudhimmud stood at the viewport, looking down at the dying marble.

Earth was ugly right now. The Toba eruption had done a thorough job. The northern hemisphere was already locking up with ice. The equatorial belt was choked with volcanic winter. The atmosphere was a swirling mess of sulfur dioxide and ash, blocking out 90% of the solar radiation.

"Biomass critical," the ship's intelligence, NAMTAR, whispered through the neural link.
"Hominid population reduced to fewer than 5,000 breeding pairs. Genetic bottleneck imminent."

Nudhimmud tapped his fingers on the obsidian rail. He was a being of sublime geometry—tall, hairless, his skin a translucent alabaster that hinted at the blue ichor flowing beneath. He wore the iridescent robes of a Senior Architect, shimmering with scrolling data streams.

"A waste," Nudhimmud murmured, his voice vibrating with the harmonics of a perfect chord.
"We spent two hundred thousand years on the chassis design. Opposable thumbs. Bipedal locomotion. High endurance thermal regulation. If they die now, we lose the cycle."

He turned to the figure standing at attention behind him.

"Report, Supervisor."

Hadad stepped forward.

Hadad was a hybrid. A Keeper.

He stood seven feet tall, dwarfing the humans he was bred to manage, yet he looked small compared to the Architect. He wore the matte-black enviro-suit of the ground teams, the helmet tucked under his arm. His face was human, but perfected—sharp angles, wide-set eyes, and skin that didn't just reflect light but seemed to absorb it.

He had the physical power of the hominids—the broad shoulders, the heavy bone density—but he had the mind of the Architects. He was the perfect foreman: strong enough to break a worker's arm, smart enough to run a fusion reactor.

But on the bridge of *The Exalt*, he was just a servant.

"The atmospheric scrubbers are primed, My Lord," Hadad said. His voice was deep, a rumble of thunder constrained by discipline. "We have located the seven primary population clusters. If we deploy the Towers now, we can stabilize the local pockets within three hours."

"And the biological update?" Nudhimmud asked, examining a holographic projection of a DNA helix.

"The viral payload is loaded," Hadad confirmed. He patted the heavy magnetic case at his hip.
"The FOXP2 variant. It will induce rapid neural restructuring. Language. Abstraction. Anxiety."

Nudhimmud smiled. It was a cold expression, devoid of warmth. "Anxiety is good. Anxiety makes them work. A content worker is a slow worker."

Nudhimmud walked over to Hadad. He looked at the hybrid with a mixture of pride and dismissal—like a man looking at a well-trained dog. Around them, other Keepers worked the consoles. They kept their heads down, their eyes fixed on the screens. They knew the rules: *Do not look the Architects in the eye unless spoken to.*

"This is your moment, Hadad," Nudhimmud said softly. "You and your kin have petitioned the Board for full citizenship. You claim you are not just tools. You claim you are equal to the Architects."

Hadad stiffened. He felt the eyes of his fellow Keepers on his back. They were all tired. They were tired of the "mudball." They wanted to go to the Cities of Light. They wanted to stop aging. They wanted the genetic mods that kept Nudhimmud young for millennia.

"We serve the Consortium," Hadad said stiffly. "We seek only to serve better."

"Prove it," Nudhimmud said. "Go down there. Deploy the Seven Towers. Save the stock. If you can turn those shivering animals into a workforce before the extraction ships arrive, I will grant your request. You will leave this rock with us."

Hadad's heart hammered against his ribs. To leave Earth. To go to Sirius Prime. To live in the towers that scraped the nebula, instead of the mud of the outpost. It was all he had ever wanted. It was the promise whispered to his clade since they were decanted from the tanks.

"It will be done," Hadad swore.

"Go," Nudhimmud commanded, waving a hand dismissively. "Be the keeper."

THE LANDING ZONE

SECTOR 4: THE RIFT VALLEY

The descent was violent.

Hadad rode the drop-ship down through the turbulence. The ash clouds buffeted the hull, screaming against the thermal shields. The interior of the pod rattled, the safety restraints digging into his armor.

He checked his gear. His suit was sealed. His helmet display was scrolling with topography maps. In his hand, he held the **Iridium Seal**.

It was a cylinder of heavy, dark metal, glowing with a faint inner light. It was the master key. The activator. Without it, the machines he was about to drop were just statues.

"Touching down in 5... 4... 3..."

BOOM.

The landing struts crushed the volcanic rock. The ramp hissed open.

Hadad stepped out into the nightmare.

The air was toxic. His suit sensors screamed warnings about sulfur dioxide and particulate matter. The visibility was zero; the world was a swirling gray void. The wind howled like a dying animal, tearing at his suit.

"Deploy Tower 4," Hadad ordered into his comms.

Behind him, the cargo bay of the drop-ship opened. The **Atmospheric Processor**—a sixty-foot monolith of black metal—slid out on gravity sleds. It floated upright, humming with latent power.

"Anchor," Hadad said.

The monolith slammed into the valley floor. Deep piling spikes shot into the bedrock, securing it.

Hadad walked up to the machine. He could feel the eyes watching him.

His helmet sensors highlighted them. Red thermal outlines in the cave mouths up on the ridge. The survivors. They were terrified. They were starving. They were barely clinging to existence.

Perfect, Hadad thought. Desperation is the best motivator.

He slotted the Iridium Seal into the interface port on the side of the Tower.

ACCESS GRANTED. USER: HADAD-CLADE. PROTOCOL: BREATH OF LIFE.

"Execute," Hadad said.

The Tower roared.

It sounded like a massive intake of breath. The vents at the top of the monolith opened. Massive fans spun up to supersonic speeds, sucking in the filthy, ash-choked air.

Inside the machine, the air was scrubbed, heated, and mixed with the viral cocktail.

Then, the vents at the bottom opened.

A fog of shimmering, warm blue mist rolled out across the dead white ground. It moved like a living thing, flowing over the rocks, filling the depression of the valley.

Hadad stood in the center of the mist. He opened his helmet visor.

The air was sweet. It smelled of rain and metal.

He looked up at the caves.

"Come out," he whispered. He amplified his voice through the suit's speakers, turning it into a booming command that echoed off the canyon walls.

"COME."

PART II: THE AWAKENING

LOCATION: SECTOR 4 (THE RIFT VALLEY) THE BLUE ZONE TIME: T-PLUS 1 HOUR SINCE INFECTION

The warmth was a lie.

At first, the blue mist had felt like the sun. It had thawed Kuo's frozen skin and loosened the ice in his joints. He had fallen to his knees, gasping in the sweet, metallic air, grateful for the respite from the winter hell.

But then the heat moved *inside*.

It started in his chest—a burning itch deep in the lungs, as if he had inhaled a swarm of fire ants. He coughed, and the sound was wet. He looked at his hand; there was blood in his spit. Not the bright red of a wound, but a dark, thick purge.

He looked at Nia.

She was no longer sitting up. She was thrashing in the dust. Her back arched in a violent spasm, her heels drumming against the ground. Her eyes were rolled back, showing only the whites, and foam bubbled at the corners of her mouth.

Kuo tried to crawl to her, but his legs refused to obey. The connection between his mind and his muscle had been severed. He collapsed forward, his face pressing into the dirt.

Then, the sound began.

It wasn't a sound from the valley. It was a high-pitched whine, a drill boring directly into the center of his skull. It got louder and louder until it drowned out the wind, the groans of the dying pack, and the beat of his own heart.

Krrrrr-zzzzzt-CLICK.

The world went white.

THE DREAM STATE (THE UPLOAD)

Kuo was not in the valley. He was falling through a sky made of geometry.

He did not have words for *geometry*, but he saw the shapes. Perfect, glowing lines intersecting in the darkness. Triangles that spun and multiplied. Spirals that twisted like the horns of an antelope but perfect, smooth, infinite.

He was terrified. In the old world—the world of yesterday—things were rough. Rocks were jagged. Trees were bent. The only straight line was the horizon.

But this place was sharp. It was built.

He felt a presence. Not a beast. Not a man. Something vast and cold. It was poking at his mind, like a bird picking a grub from a log.

Open, the presence commanded. It wasn't a voice; it was an impulse, undeniable and crushing.

Kuo screamed in the dream, but he had no mouth.

He felt the intruders—the tiny, invisible spirits of the mist—swarming into his head. They were hunting. They swarmed the dark, quiet parts of his brain, the places that slept.

Flash.

He saw a fire. But he didn't just see the fire; he understood *how* to make it. He saw the friction of the stick. He saw the dry leaves. He saw the *cause* and the *effect*.

Flash.

He saw the hunt. He saw the antelope running. But he didn't just see the chase. He saw the *path*. He saw where the antelope *would be* in three steps. He saw the future.

Flash.

He saw himself. He was standing outside of his own body, looking down. He realized: *I am Kuo. I am not the pack. I am Me.*

The realization was a spear through the chest. It was the most lonely, terrifying feeling he had ever known. To be separate. To be alone.

The drilling sound intensified. The pressure behind his eyes built until he thought his skull would crack open like a dropped egg. The virus was physically reshaping him. It was thickening the neocortex, stretching the axons, burning away the old instinctual pathways and paving them with the high-speed fiber of consciousness.

His throat burned. The muscles in his neck seized, tearing and knitting back together. His larynx was dropping, changing position, opening the chamber that would allow him to shape wind into symbols.

Pain. Pain. Pain.

He wanted to go back. He wanted the quiet. He wanted the dark pool of *Hunger* and *Mate*. This new light was too bright. It showed him too much.

THE WAKING

Kuo gasped, sucking in a lungful of air.

He was back in the mud. The blue mist had settled, clinging to the ground like a heavy blanket.

He was alive.

He pushed himself up. His body felt different. Heavy. Electric. His senses were dialed up to a frequency that hurt. The sound of the wind wasn't just noise anymore; it was texture. The smell of the earth wasn't just dirt; it was *wet, decay, minerals*.

He looked at his hands.

Before, they were just paws that held things. Now, he saw the mechanism. Thumb. Finger. Grip. Tool.

He looked over at Nia.

She was lying still, breathing shallowly. The spasms had stopped. She was covered in sweat and grime, her hair matted to her skull.

Kuo crawled to her. The movement was clumsy; he had to relearn how to coordinate his limbs with this new, racing mind.

"Nnnh," he grunted.

He stopped. The sound was wrong. He tried to shape it. He felt the new space in his throat.

"N... Nee... ah."

Nia.

She stirred. Her eyelids fluttered open.

The look in her eyes stopped him cold.

Before, her eyes were like a deer's—reactive, fearful, present. Now, there was a depth to them. A haunted, deep well of awareness. She looked at him, and he saw the recognition. She knew him. Not just as the male who brought meat, but as *Kuo*.

She sat up slowly, clutching her head. She looked around the valley. Her eyes darted from the rocks to the mist to the silver ship towering above them.

She began to shake. Not from cold, but from understanding. She saw the size of the ship. She saw the smallness of themselves.

Then, she looked down at her arms.

She was still holding the infant.

Kuo watched her. In the Before, she would have nudged it, maybe carried it for a day until the smell became "bad," and then dropped it.

But the Virus had given them the concept of *Time*. And with Time came the understanding of *Forever*.

Nia stared at the small, gray face. She touched the cold cheek.

She didn't wail. She didn't cry out.

She opened her mouth, and a sound came out that had never been heard on Earth before. It was a jagged, broken syllable.

"Gon."

Kuo felt the word hit him. *Gone*.

Nia looked at him, tears cutting tracks through the ash on her face. She pointed to the child, then to the ground.

"Gon," she repeated. Her voice cracked, sliding into a sob. "No... wake."

Kuo felt a crushing weight in his chest. It was the Anxiety Nudhimmud had promised. The terrible burden of knowing. He knew the child was not sleeping. He knew the child would rot. He knew that one day, *he* would rot.

He reached out and covered Nia's hand with his own.

"Sss... Sleep," Kuo lied. He found the concept of deception sitting right there in his new mind, sharp and ready to use. "Deep... sleep."

Nia shook her head violently. "No. End."

She pressed the child to her chest and rocked, weeping.

Kuo sat back on his heels. He looked up at the silver ship. The awe he had felt earlier was gone, replaced by a cold, simmering resentment.

The monster had warmed them. The monster had saved them from the ice. But it had taken away the peace of the dark. It had given them words, and the first word was *End*.

A shadow fell over them.

Kuo looked up.

The mist parted. The Giant—Hadad—loomed over them, his black armor slick with condensation. The blue light of his eyes bore down on them.

Hadad looked at the weeping woman. He looked at the dead child. He looked at Kuo.

The Giant nodded, satisfied.

"Good," Hadad's voice boomed, translated by the suit's speakers into a rough approximation of their new dialect. "You feel it. The weight."

Kuo scrambled back, shielding Nia. "Who...?"

"I am the Keeper," Hadad said, raising the Iridium Seal. The metal rod glowed, and Kuo felt a compulsion to obey that was stronger than his fear.

"And you are my flock," Hadad continued. "Bury the dead one. The ground is soft now. Then, come to the wall. There is stone to move."

Kuo looked at Nia. She stopped crying. She looked up at the Giant with fear, yes, but also with calculation. She wiped her face.

She stood up, her legs trembling but holding. She carried the child to the edge of the scree slope. She began to dig with her hands.

Kuo watched her. He looked at his own hands.

Dig.

He stood up. He walked to the Giant. He didn't bow. He stood straight, his new spine locking into place.

"Work," Kuo said. It wasn't a question.

Hadad smiled behind his visor.

"Work," the Keeper agreed.

PART III – THE HANDOVER

LOCATION: SECTOR 4 (THE RIFT VALLEY) THE TOWER PERIMETER TIME: T-MINUS 1 HOUR TO DEPARTURE (ONE WEEK LATER)

The valley had transformed.

Seven days ago, it had been a graveyard of ash and bone. Now, it was a quarry.

The blue mist from the Tower still clung to the valley floor, creating a warm, breathable microclimate, but the silence of the winter was gone. The air was filled with the rhythmic *clack-clack-clack* of basalt being chipped, the grunt of exertion, and the heavy thud of stone sliding into place.

There were nearly one thousand survivors now. They had come from the neighboring ridges, drawn by the thermal beacon of the machine and the smell of the synthesized protein mash Hadad had distributed. They were a ragged, skeletal army, but they were alive.

They were no longer a pack. They were a *workforce*.

Hadad walked the perimeter of the rising wall. He had removed his helmet; the air scrubbers were working at 98% efficiency. He wanted them to see his face. He wanted them to see the face of the God who fed them.

He stopped near the foundation of the first granary. A group of males was struggling to lift a massive lintel stone.

"Lift with the legs, not the back!" Hadad barked.

The words were foreign to them a week ago. Now, the viral update in their brains translated the command into bio-mechanics. *Leverage. Fulcrum. Force.*

Kuo was among them. His muscles, though wasted by the famine, were corded tight with adrenaline. He groaned, his teeth gritted, as he pushed the rock upward.

"Heave!" Kuo shouted.

The stone slid into place with a satisfying *thunk*.

The men collapsed, panting in the dust. They looked at the wall they had built. It was straight. It was plumb. It was *order*. A flicker of pride lit up their eyes—a dangerous, powerful emotion.

But not everyone adapted so quickly.

A man named Tor—a thick-browed survivor from the southern caves—was lagging. He dropped his stone. It didn't break, but it cracked the carefully leveled foundation stone beneath it.

"No!" Tor grunted, staring at the crack. He looked around, eyes wide with the old animal panic. He tried to cover the crack with dust, to hide the mistake.

Hadad was there in an instant. The Keeper moved with a speed that blurred the air, his servo-assisted armor whining.

He didn't shout. He didn't growl. He simply reached out and grabbed Tor by the throat, lifting the hundred-and-sixty-pound male off the ground with one hand.

The worksite went silent. The rhythmic chipping stopped. One thousand pairs of eyes watched.

"We do not hide mistakes," Hadad said, his voice calm, terrifyingly reasonable. "We correct them."

He threw Tor.

The human flew ten feet, landing hard in the mud. He gasped, clutching his ribs, blood bubbling from a bitten lip.

Tor scrambled back, expecting the killing blow—the bite to the throat that a pack alpha would deliver.

But Hadad did not kill. He pointed to the ruined foundation stone.

"Replace it," Hadad commanded. "And then carry two loads for the next cycle. That is the cost of error."

Tor blinked, confusion warring with fear. He wasn't going to die? He just had to... work harder?

"Yes, Lord," Tor whispered, the abstract concept of *Penance* taking root in his mind.

Hadad watched them return to labor. He felt a twist of guilt, buried deep under his conditioning, but he smothered it. These creatures were genetically designed for this. They had the endurance of wolves and the hands of apes. They were biological machines.

And I am just the mechanic, Hadad thought bitterly.

He checked the chrono-display on his wrist.

Time.

He turned away from the mud and the sweating bodies. He walked toward the landing platform where the silver needle of the shuttle waited.

He adjusted his robes over his armor. He stood tall. He had done the impossible. He had taken a dying species and jump-started their evolution by fifty thousand years in a single week.

He was ready for his reward.

THE LANDING PLATFORM

The shuttle's ramp hissed open.

Nudhimmud descended. The Senior Architect did not touch the ground; his gravity-boots kept him hovering an inch above the dust, preserving the hem of his iridescent robes.

He was followed by two Sentry Drones—floating spheres of chrome that hummed with the menace of contained plasma.

Nudhimmud looked at the camp. He saw the stone shelters. He saw the humans organizing into shifts. He heard the nascent cadence of language.

"Impressive," Nudhimmud noted, his voice sounding bored, as if he were critiquing a painting rather than the survival of a species. "The mortality rate has stabilized. Cognitive function is within acceptable parameters. You have achieved a Level 4 civilization integration."

"They are ready," Hadad said, stepping forward. He couldn't keep the naked hope out of his voice. "They fear the cold. They fear us. They will dig until their hearts burst to keep the Towers running."

Hadad reached to his belt and unclipped the **Iridium Seal**. He held the heavy cylinder out with both hands, a feudal offering.

"The Key is yours, My Lord. Mission accomplished. The stock is saved."

Nudhimmud looked at the Seal. He didn't take it.

He looked up at Hadad's face. He saw the desperation there. The longing to leave the mud. The dream of the Cities of Light.

"Keep it," Nudhimmud said.

Hadad blinked, his mind stumbling. "My Lord?"

"The Keepers are staying," Nudhimmud said. His tone was casual, light, as if discussing a minor change in the dinner menu. "The automation is not stable. The biologicals are prone to drift. If we leave them alone, they will revert to barbarism or, worse, destroy the equipment. They need constant oversight."

Hadad felt the blood drain from his face. The world seemed to tilt. The sounds of the quarry faded into a dull roar.

"But..." Hadad's voice faltered. "The agreement. The Petition. You said... if I succeeded... if I saved the stock..."

"I said I would grant your request for citizenship," Nudhimmud interrupted smoothly. "And I do. You are hereby promoted to **Planetary Governor**."

Nudhimmud gestured to the desolate, gray horizon beyond the mist—the thousands of miles of ice and ash.

"It is all yours, Hadad. All the mud. All the snow. All the monkeys. You are the King of the Rock."

"I cannot stay here," Hadad whispered, the panic rising in his chest like bile. "I will age here. The radiation... without the med-bays... I will die."

"You will live a long time," Nudhimmud assured him. "Three hundred years, likely more. Long enough to breed a lineage of supervisors to take your place. The Keepers were designed for endurance, after all."

Nudhimmud turned his back. He began to float up the ramp.

"No!" Hadad lunged.

Snap-Hiss.

The two Sentry Drones swiveled instantly. Twin beams of red targeting lasers locked onto Hadad's chest. The air crackled with the precursor to a plasma discharge.

Hadad froze. He was strong, but he was not faster than light.

Nudhimmud stopped on the ramp. He looked back over his shoulder. His eyes were ancient, void of empathy, terrifyingly alien.

"Do not look at it as abandonment, Hadad. Look at it as... a career opportunity. You wanted to be equal to the Architects? Now you have your own world to rule. You are a god now. Enjoy the worship."

The ramp closed with a final, hydraulic seal.

Hadad stood on the platform as the thrusters fired. The heat washed over him, scorching the paint on his armor. He watched the silver ship rise, punching a hole through the clouds, ascending to the silence of the stars where he would never go.

He was alone.

He looked down at the Iridium Seal in his hand. It was heavy. So incredibly heavy. It was the key to the prison he had built for himself.

He looked down at the camp.

Kuo was standing there, watching him. The human's eyes were wide with reverence. He had seen the "Sky God" leave. He saw Hadad remaining.

Kuo fell to his knees. He pressed his forehead to the dirt.

"Lord," Kuo shouted.

The others followed. One thousand humans dropped to their knees in the dust, the sound rippling out like a wave.

"Lord! Lord!"

Hadad looked at them. He felt the hate curl in his gut—hot and toxic. He hated them. He hated them because they were the reason he was trapped. He hated them because he was made of the same meat as them. He hated them because they looked at him with love.

He gripped the Iridium Seal until his knuckles cracked.

"Yes," Hadad whispered to the retreating ship, his voice trembling with a rage that would last thousands of years. "I will be their god."

He walked to the edge of the platform. He amplified his voice, letting the anger flow through the speakers.

"GET UP!" he roared. The sound echoed off the canyon walls, shaking the dust. **"BREAK IS OVER! DIG!"**

Kuo scrambled up, grabbing his stone tool. He didn't know why the Giant was angry. He just knew he didn't want the cold to come back.

Hadad watched them work. He shoved the Iridium Seal into his belt.

One day, he vowed. One day, my sons will figure out how to use this Key to open the door you just locked. And when we come to Sirius... we won't be coming to serve.

Hadad turned and walked back into the shadow of the Tower.

History had begun. And it began with a grudge.

[END OF PREQUEL]