THE SEED OF MEMORY

MARIUSZ TRYNKA

THE SEED OF MEMORY

THE FIRST NOVELLA
FROM THE UNIVERSE OF
GENETIC MEMORY

KRAKÓW 2025

MT

Copyright © Mariusz Trynka, 2025

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be copied, stored in information retrieval systems, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, microfilming, digitizing, storing on electronic media, or by any other technique, without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations in reviews, critical articles, or scholarly works in accordance with applicable law.

First edition, Kraków 2025

Self-published by the author
ISBN: 978-83-977902-7-8

You can find more books by the author at:
www.mariusztrynka.com

For my readers —

I dedicate this book to all those who are fascinated by the mysteries of memory and the traces of this fictional human history. Your curiosity and amazement are the real motivation for telling stories like this.

To fully appreciate the depth of this adventure, I recommend that you first read ***GENETIC MEMORY – BOOK 1 – OMNIS****. That is where the great adventure begins, the echoes of which continue to resonate throughout these pages. May this spin-off captivate you as much as your first step into the world of* **GENETIC MEMORY.**

PROLOGUE

The humming of the navigation systems stopped abruptly. Saon awoke from his half-sleep, his hand still on the console of the communication module. Three thousand kilometers below them, a blue world rotated, innocent and beautiful in the blackness of space.

"Entering the final descent phase," Commander Velen announced over the ship's internal system. "All expedition members prepare for landing."

Five hundred souls aboard the Astral'thyss. Scientists, technicians, security personnel—the best of their species, selected for this historic mission. First contact with their old world, which, according to their sensor readings, was home to two intelligent, parallel-evolving species.

Saon checked his communications equipment one last time. The SACM-Lite version on his arm hummed reassuringly. The full SACMs were forbidden to them outside the ship. Their inexhaustible Aeternis energy source could provide decades of field research, but it could also fall into the hands of the aliens.

"This world will teach us to understand," Yelari, the leader of the away mission, had said a few hours earlier, her eyes shining with scientific anticipation. "Two species that have evolved in parallel. Imagine the insights we will gain."

The landing went perfectly. The ship touched down gently on an elevated plateau surrounded by dense forest. The air was breathable, the gravity pleasant. Paradisiacal conditions for a long-term study.

Saon remembered the first few hours—the orderly unloading of the equipment, the methodical positioning of the observation posts, the first sighting of the locals at the edge of the forest. Small, stocky figures with thick body hair, who looked at the strange ship curiously but cautiously.

"The First ones," Korvain had called them. "Ruggedly built, obviously adapted to a hard life. Primitive tools, but undoubtedly intelligent."

The first approach had been a triumph. The First ones came out of the forest, put down their crude spears, even knelt reverently before the strangers. Chants rang out—primitive but moving melodies that sounded like worship.

"They think we're gods," Varek had grumbled, his hand on his weapon belt. "I don't like that. Reverence can quickly turn into fear."

But Commander Velen had insisted on continuing the peaceful contact. Gifts were exchanged—shiny crystals for crudely carved figures. The First ones touched the smooth walls of the ship in awe, marveling at the softly glowing holograms.

For three days, everything seemed to go perfectly.

Then something changed.

Saon still didn't know what had triggered the change. Perhaps a misunderstanding. Perhaps fear of the unknown. Perhaps the primitive instinct to destroy the unknown before it destroys you.

The attack came without warning.

They came storming out of the forest—no longer the awe-struck creatures of yesterday, but a screaming horde with spears and stone clubs raised. The gentle humming of the holograms was drowned out by wild war cries and the clatter of incoming stones.

Bones splintered. Blood splattered on the immaculate walls of the ship. The first members of the expedition fell, taken by surprise by the sudden brutality. Korvain screamed as a stone axe cleaved his skull.

"Back to the ship!" roared Varek, his weapon finally in his hand. Energy bolts whizzed through the air, hitting the attackers, but there were too many of them. For every one that fell, two more came out of the thicket.

Saon ran. His SACM screamed warnings, registered vital signs of the dying, recorded the carnage for an archive that perhaps no one would ever see. His legs carried him across the bloody earth, past the torn bodies of his colleagues.

The ship. He had to reach the ship.

The airlock was still open. Survivors were entering—twenty, thirty, no more. Out of five hundred souls. The First ones followed them, their spears red with the blood of the first humanity.

"Seal the airlocks!" someone shouted. But it was too late. They had already invaded, these primitive beasts, and turned the sterile corridors into a slaughterhouse.

Saon reached the emergency bridge, his fingers flying over the controls. Other survivors—Yelari, Theron, a few security guards—crowded around him. Outside, the battle raged, the dying, the destruction of everything they had come for.

"Commander Velen?" Yelari asked with a trembling voice.

"Dead," Varek replied curtly. Blood ran from a wound on his temple. "They mauled him like a wild animal."

A thud against the bridge door. Then another. The First ones had arrived here too, hammering against the seal with their primitive weapons.

Konastin's voice over the intercom, distorted with pain: "The self-destruct... I can... the codes..."

"No!" Yelari screamed. "Konastin, the ship is our only way home!"

But Konastin was already dying; he could hear the screams of the First ones near his console. His last words were barely intelligible: "Forgive me... it's... the only way..."

The warning came over all systems simultaneously. Five minutes until the irrevocable core implosion. Saon saw Yelari's horrified face, felt Varek's iron hand on his shoulder, while he could already hear the energy building up in the core.

"Get out!" the security officer yelled. "Everyone out! Emergency exit, sector 7!"

They ran through the bursting corridors, jumping through maintenance shafts as the ship began to die around them. Twenty meters from the emergency exit, a power conduit exploded, hurling Saon against a wall.

Dazed. Consciousness faded. Strong hands dragged him forward—Varek's hands. The bright light of the exit. Then a free fall into the bushes.

The sky exploded.

That had been fourteen hours ago. Now Saon sat in the improvised camp, staring at the smoldering remains of what had once been their hope for the stars. Out of five hundred expedition members, fifty were still alive.

His SACM-Lite—a pathetic shadow of the original technology—flickered weakly on his arm. The Aeternis cores had exploded with the ship. What they had left would perhaps last a few sub-cycles. No more.

"The First ones will come back," Varek said into the silence. His voice sounded hollow, empty. "They'll come after us. Kill us all."

Yelari nodded slowly, her eyes still fixed on the smoking scar in the earth. "Then we need to get out of here. To the south. Away from them."

"Where to?" asked Theron, his voice breaking. "Where should we go? We are stranded on a world full of beasts, without a ship, without hope of rescue."

Saon looked at the others who remained. Men and women who had represented the future of their species just a few hours ago. Now they were just refugees in a strange world.

"We're going south," he said with a calmness he didn't feel. "We'll survive. And maybe... maybe we can find a place where we can live."

"If such a place exists," muttered Varek.

"It exists," Saon insisted. "The sensors have made recordings. Somewhere in the south. And maybe the inhabitants there are different..."

He took one last look at the spot where the proudest ship of his species had once stood. Then he turned away and began to pack his few belongings. Behind him, the others did the same—silently, methodically, like people who had learned that the past was dead and only the future mattered.

The sun was low on the horizon. Night would soon come, and with it the darkness of a world that no longer welcomed them as visitors, but as prisoners.

But they were still alive. Fifty out of five hundred.

It was a start.

CHAPTER 1

The faint, bluish glow of the lite version of the semi-autonomous communication module flickered like dying stars in the ash-covered darkness. Yelari knelt beside the improvised camp of camouflage material and undergrowth. Her slender fingers glided over the mobile medical unit, which seemed to function only sporadically. The familiar hum of her home's technology had fallen silent—replaced by the agonized moans of the wounded and the distant crackling and snapping of burning trees. The sky above the rocky plateau was a gloomy curtain of soot and ash. Where their proud research vessel had once stood, there was now only a smoking scar in the earth. Fifty survivors. Out of five hundred.

"The nano-patches will fail soon without sufficient power," Yelari muttered to herself as she tended to the burns of a young geologist named Koren. His SACM lite blinked faintly on his upper arm mount—a dull shadow of what their technology had once been capable of. The power cells would last a few more sub-cycles, but it was decided to conserve them for more important moments.

Not far from the improvised encampment, she examined the tracks in the churned-up ground after the worst cases had been taken care of. Barefoot prints, broad and coarse, cut through the mud like scars. Remnants of blood stained the earth dark. She closed her eyes and saw the scenes before her again: these barbaric creatures had stormed out of the thicket like wild beasts. Clubs and sharp stones against analysis devices and peaceful intentions.

"They worshipped us first as a divine apparition from the sky," she whispered into the night, her voice tinged with restraint. "Then they struck us down like vermin."

Varek sat apart on the edge of the rocky plateau, his muscular body a dark silhouette against the smoky sky. His right shoulder was marked by burns, which he methodically treated with nano-patches. As a security guard, he had been conditioned to eliminate threats—but the Code had forbidden it. Now he bore the consequences of civilized restraint on his battered skin.

"They were nothing more than animals," he uttered without turning around, his voice low and laced with coldness. "We should have neutralized them instead of watching them like curiosities."

Between the two of them, Saon, the communications specialist, squatted on the ground and drew lines in the earth with a stick. His movements were mechanical, repetitive—a trauma that was released in meaningless patterns. "Our mission was for scientific exploration, not territorial dominance," he murmured, not looking up from his compulsive drawings. "Now we have come to the bitter realization that this world no longer desires our presence."

A cold wind swept across the plateau, carrying with it the smell of smoke and decay. Yelari looked at the last representatives of her mission—scientists of exquisite spirit, technicians of utmost precision, a few security forces of unwavering discipline. All of them now wore the same forlorn look in their eyes. Their advanced civilization, their genetic memories thousands of cycles long, their cultural perfection—none of this had saved them from the brute force of a primitive species.

"The energy cores will remain functional for a few more sub-cycles," Yelari announced with the calmness of an experienced scientist. "But we should use them sparingly. We may need them later for more important tasks."

Varek stood up, his movements characterized by military elegance despite the pain. "Then we will learn the art of survival. Just like these primitives."

In the distance, something howled in the darkness—whether predator or primitive man was indistinguishable. The night stretched endlessly, and the coming day would bring decisions that would determine the fate of the last heirs of this doomed expedition.

Dawn crept lazily over the wooded hills of the Nízký Jeseník Mountains, twenty-five kilometers south of what would one day be the town of Moravice thousands of cycles later. Before them, majestic rock formations rose out of the mist. On the highest ledge, the survivors gathered around the weakening remains of their holographic projector.

Varek activated the precious device using one of their remaining energy cells. The faint hologram materialized over the cold stone—fragments of a

topographical analysis showed areas where their sensors had registered increased biological activity.

"Look at these indicators," Yelari said, pointing to a pulsing marker. "Exceptional biodiversity, stable freshwater systems, direct access to marine resources. Should we seek survival, this represents our optimal opportunity."

An elderly geologist named Theron shook his head slowly. "That's far too far. We should stay in this place. Locate suitable caves. Wait until a rescue expedition is dispatched."

"There will be no rescue expedition," Varek replied with icy determination, causing the hologram to disintegrate into flickering fragments. "Do you seriously think the High Council would risk more members of our species falling victim to these barbarians? They probably don't even know there were survivors." His burnt shoulder ached with every movement, but his gaze remained unwavering. "Anyone who lingers in this place will find death. These primitive creatures roam all the territories here."

Saon, who had hardly spoken a word of meaning since the previous evening, looked down into the mist-shrouded valley. "The southern elevations revealed something of a different nature," he said cautiously. "An alternative grouping. Their appearance is similar to ours. As if they were ... fragments of a distant memory."

Yelari stepped closer. "Elaborate on that observation."

"Upright gait, but of slimmer stature than the First ones. Reduced jaw muscles and expanded cranial capacity. They practice harmonious coexistence, gathering food in collective endeavors." Saon's voice gained vibrancy. "They could be the solution to our dilemma."

"Or at least a promising possibility," Yelari added thoughtfully.

Varek snorted contemptuously. "I don't base my decisions on vague possibilities. Only on strategic movement and tactical superiority."

The wind whipped over the rocks and tugged at their damaged, once noble uniforms. The unknown land stretched out below them—green, untamed and full of hidden dangers. But it also held unexpected promise.

"The decision is in your esteemed hands," Yelari announced, acknowledging everyone present with her gaze. "Remain in hopeful anticipation or move forward into life itself."

A young biologist named Ilari stepped forward. "I will follow you, honorable Yelari. Your understanding of the forces of life surpasses ours by eons."

One by one, the survivors bowed their heads in agreement. Theron was the last to do so, hesitantly and with obvious reluctance. Varek straightened up to his imposing full height. "Then we will begin the march. The command will be mine. Anyone who is too weak for this expedition can stay here."

"No one will be left behind," Yelari contradicted sharply. "We are the last representatives of our species on this primitive world. Every memory, every precious life is invaluable."

Saon carefully collected the last functioning data modules. "Access to home is irretrievably lost," he murmured. "But perhaps we can establish a new one."

As the sun rose higher, dispelling the mist in elegant swathes, the fifty survivors of the first humanity left their lofty vantage point. Their steps led them southwards, towards an uncertain destiny—away from the smoking ruins of their glorious past, towards a future they had to shape with their own hands.

The river, which would later be called March, meandered lazily through the dense undergrowth south of the future Olomouc. Its dark waters reflected the gloomy clouds like a mirror of melancholy. Several days had passed since their departure, and the expedition had turned into a silent procession, laboriously fighting its way through the relentless thicket.

Yelari knelt beside the improvised camp of woven branches and soft moss where Ilari lay in her final throes. The young biologist was breathing shallowly, her once pretty face gray with fever. A seemingly trivial cut on her leg, sustained while crossing a treacherous thicket of thorns, had developed into a fatal infection. Without the medical modules of their advanced technology, she was doomed to inexorable decay.

"The nano-bots have lost their effectiveness," Yelari whispered with the gentle melancholy of a doctor recognizing the inevitable, stroking Ilari's sweaty hair from her feverish forehead. "The nano-patches' energy sources are completely depleted."

Ilari's SACM flickered one last, melancholy time and then went out in final darkness. With it vanished the faint bluish light that had guided her through many a dangerous night.

"Honorable Yelari," Ilari breathed, her voice barely audible, like a dying breath of wind. "Never forget ... the Symbiosis Protocols ... should you find them, the Peaceful Ones ... they could be compatible ... "

Her eyes closed with the grace of a wilting flower and her breathing died away like an extinguished melody.

Deep silence fell over the makeshift camp. The other survivors formed a reverent circle around the deceased; their faces etched with grief and burgeoning fear. This was the first loss since the catastrophe in which so many had died—the first of many to come. They all felt it with the clarity of a dark premonition.

Yelari rose gracefully. "We will give her a burial according to the venerable traditions of our ancestors."

"What traditions?" asked Theron, his voice breaking with barely restrained exasperation. "We have no means for a ceremony, as is proper."

"Then we will create new traditions," Yelari replied with unwavering determination. She picked up a flat stone, polished by time, and began to carve elaborate symbols into it with a crystalline shard—Ilari's name in the ancient script of her homeland, framed by the sacred signs of eternal remembrance.

The others followed her example with serious deliberation. Each carved a meaningful mark into the stone, an immortal reminder of Ilari's precious life. Saon drew the symbol of scientific knowledge, Varek that of courage in the face of inevitable death.

They dug a dignified resting place in the soft earth on the curving riverbank and laid Ilari's body in it, covered with fragrant leaves and woven branches. They placed the artistically engraved stone over it as an eternal marker.

"May her unique memories live on in all of us," Yelari spoke the ritual words with solemnity. "May her invaluable knowledge guide our uncertain steps until we ourselves become eternal memories."

Varek stood apart at a respectful distance, his eyes fixed on the dark, menacing woods. He took no part in the ceremony—for him, death was a tactical reality of strategic importance, not a spiritual event of a sentimental nature.

Saon, on the other hand, lingered for a long time at the modest grave in silent contemplation. "We are losing more than just mortal bodies," he said to Yelari with deep melancholy. "We are losing their irreplaceable memories, their precious knowledge."

"That is precisely why we must survive at all costs," she replied with determination. "Each of us carries such knowledge within us."

When the improvised but dignified burial was complete, they continued their arduous march. But something fundamental had changed. The group had not only been reduced by one valued person—they had also lost a precious piece of their innocence and invulnerability. They were no longer the invincible heirs of a superior civilization. They had become ordinary mortals, wanderers between life and death, and between hope and despair.

The River March murmured its ancient, timeless melody as the survivors of the first humanity took their next, uncertain steps into an uncertain future. Behind them lay a stone with strange, elaborate markings—the first meaningful evidence of their presence on this wild, beautiful and deadly world.

⟝

The vast pine forest near the future Břeclav stretched endlessly in all directions, a majestic green ocean of fragrant needles and deep shadows. A hundred kilometers now lay between the survivors and their annihilated past. Raindrops fell steadily through the dense canopy, turning the forest floor into a slippery, treacherous quagmire.

Varek crouched at the edge of a small clearing dappled with sunlight, inserting the last crystalline shards into the split shaft of his improvised spear with the precision of a master. His large hands, once accustomed to the elegant controls of the most advanced weapons, now fashioned primitive hunting tools from rough wood and sharp stone.

"Our protein reserves are completely depleted," Yelari reported with the calm matter-of-factness of an experienced expedition leader. She knelt next to the pitiful remains of their once magnificent equipment and divided up the last, precious nutrient capsules with mathematical justice. "Two more days, then we'll have to rely solely on what our hunting skills are capable of obtaining."

Theron shook his head in obvious dismay. "We are scholars of exquisite learning, not primitive hunters. Our genetic configuration is not geared for such barbaric activities."

"Then we will learn the necessary skills," Varek growled with the determination of a warrior, testing the perfect balance of his crafted spear. "Or we will die a dishonorable death of starvation."

A telltale rustling in the dense undergrowth made them all freeze in tense attention. A slender deer moved through the mighty trees with graceful elegance, carefully grazing, completely unaware of the strange observers. Varek rose with the lithe slowness of a predator on the hunt, every trained muscle taut as a deadly spring.

"Grant me a moment," Yelari whispered with the authority of a scientist. "I will instruct you, where to strike without contaminating the precious flesh."

The security officer bowed his head curtly and respectfully. His eyes narrowed to concentrated slits as he took careful measure. The ancient genes of his hunting ancestors, refined and cultivated over thousands of cycles, awoke to new, savage life in this primitive moment. He swung out with elegant power and hurled the spear with deadly, almost supernatural precision.

The deer collapsed with a muffled thud, struck between neck and shoulder in a perfect, instant death. Varek sprinted over with the speed of a warrior and knelt beside the still-warm animal. "I can't remember the last time the warm blood of a slain animal wet the hands of my ancestors," he murmured with a mixture of awe and wonder as he felt the pulsing red life between his fingers.

"Perhaps your genes remember times that your consciousness has long forgotten," Yelari replied with the wisdom of a biologist, stepping up beside him with scientific curiosity. She pulled out a small, sharp crystal knife and began to dissect the animal with scientific precision. "The first generations of our species were hunters too, before the blessings of technology freed us from such necessities."

As they worked with methodical calm, Saon moved along the wooded edge, his attention completely captivated by a group of creatures gathering berries at a respectful distance. They walked almost upright, almost like civilized beings, but their movements were more fluid, natural and harmonious than those of the brutish First ones.

"They communicate with each other through sounds," he called over to the others with suppressed excitement. "Sounds with no recognizable linguistic structure."

Yelari looked up with heightened interest. "Could it be the Peaceful Ones?"

"Most likely not. They demonstrate cooperative behavior of remarkable quality, sharing the collected food without aggression or dominance behav-

ior. No signs of territorial violence, but they are still animals. Peaceful Ones, but animals."

The laboriously lit fire crackled in the gathering dusk as they roasted the meat over the glowing coals. The tantalizing smell of roasting protein mingled with the earthy, damp scent of rain. For a precious moment, a kind of primitive but deep satisfaction returned—the primal satisfaction of successful hunting that was deeply rooted in the genes of all intelligent species.

"We are undergoing a fundamental transformation," Yelari remarked with philosophical calm as she equitably distributed the simple but nourishing meal. "Every day we become a little more like the creatures of this planet."

"Is such a change a bad thing?" asked Saon with thoughtful concern.

Varek bit into the roasted meat with primal satisfaction. "As long as it ensures our survival, any adaptation is beneficial."

In the distant darkness, the enigmatic sounds of the animals rang out again—not a structured language as they knew it from their civilization, but something far more primal. Nevertheless, it was an expression of community and solidarity that needed no complex words.

Night fell over the ancient forest with a velvety blackness, and the survivors of the first humanity slept with well-filled stomachs for the first time since their traumatic arrival. But in their dreams, the precious memories of their advanced civilization mingled with the primitive but powerful instincts that had been reawakened in this wild, untamed world.

The vast Mura meadows near Ptuj stretched like an endless green carpet to the distant horizon. One hundred and fifty kilometers south of their landing site, the refugees had set up their last, well-ordered camp before the great unknown. Swampy, life-filled grassland stretched out before them, crisscrossed by shining silver veins of water that sparkled like liquid jewels in the rising morning sun.

Saon carefully activated a half-defective projection cube—one of the last precious, functioning relics of their superior technology. The faint but moving hologram materialized over the damp earth: their unreachable home as it had been before they left. Majestic green towers stretching gracefully into the flawless sky, floating gardens between pearly clouds, the crystal-clear seas of their distant, blessed world.

"Merely memory," he whispered with the melancholy of a poet. "Only precious, painful memories."

The others gathered in reverent silence around the flickering, fragile projection. Theron wept openly, his shoulders shaking with each labored breath. Varek stared stony-faced at the images of their unreachable homeland, but his hands clenched into trembling fists of suppressed grief.

"It is distant for all eternity," Yelari proclaimed with the calm clarity of a philosopher, but her noble voice carried her words to all present. "What was is irrevocably history. What will become is entirely in our own uncertain hands."

Dark, menacing figures moved on the far horizon—too far away to identify them precisely, but their squat, primitive silhouettes did not bode well. More barbaric First ones, stubbornly following their trail like bloodhounds.

"They are approaching steadily," Varek remarked with the vigilance of a warrior, rising to his imposing stature. "Our time is running out."

Yelari stepped into the center of the circle and spoke words that sounded like a sacred incantation: "We carry the precious memory. We must become living memory."

The others repeated the solemn words with devotion, their voices merging into a quiet but powerful chorus. It was not a humble prayer to past gods, but a sacred oath for an uncertain but hopeful future.

"Whatever may lie ahead," Yelari continued with the dignity of a leader, "we carry within us the most precious of our species. Not the ephemeral technology, not the worldly power—but the priceless knowledge, the memories and the immortal dreams of generations."

Saon let the hologram fade into fragments and stowed the precious cube in his torn robe. "And should we be forced to create entirely new memories?"

"Then we will create new ones with the art of our people," Varek replied surprisingly softly, an unexpected poetry in his raspy voice. He took the lead command as he had announced with military honor, but there was something other than sheer will to survive in his battle-hardened eyes now. "The mysterious south awaits our arrival."

The group gathered their few belongings. The last SACM-Lites were switched off to save the remaining energy for future emergencies. The survivors formed a dignified procession, ready for the decisive march to their uncertain fate.

As the golden sun reached its brilliant zenith, the forty-nine remaining left their final, elevated vantage point of the familiar land of their traumatic arrival on this world behind them. Before them lay the completely unknown south—an endless expanse of rolling hills and dense forests stretching to the distant horizon.

The landscape was already changing. The barren heights gave way to more fertile valleys, the climate became milder with every step southward. Wildflowers they had never seen before bloomed in colors they had not seen since landing—deep purple, bright yellow, a brilliant red that glowed like liquid fire among the green leaves.

Yelari walked at the head of the column and let her gaze wander over the alien beauty. "This world is so ... untamed," she murmured to Saon, who was walking beside her. "And yet there is order in this apparent wildness."

"Nature here follows its own laws," Saon replied thoughtfully. "Not ours. Here we must learn to adapt rather than tame."

Varek, who was bringing up the rear, took one last look back at the mountains, which were already lost in the haze. Somewhere up there lay the ashes of their ship, the graves of their companions. Part of him wanted to turn back, to fight, to die on the ground that had already drunk their blood. But a larger part drove him forward, into this uncertain future.

The group moved through the changing landscape like a single organism. They had learned to stick together, to look out for each other. The weaker ones were supported, the wounded carried. No one was left behind—that was the unspoken law that had formed between them.

As evening approached, they set up camp on the bank of a small stream. The water was clear and sweet, full of life. Small fish danced among the stones, and dragonflies hovered above the surface like living jewels.

Theron fetched water in an improvised container and looked at the tiny creatures in it with fascination. "Everything here is so ... immediate," he said. "So directly connected to life."

The night brought new sounds—the howling of distant wolves, the rustling of unknown nocturnal animals and the calls of owls. But for the first time since their arrival, they listened to these sounds not only out of fear. There was also curiosity, even a kind of respect.

Yelari lay awake and gazed up at the stars. Somewhere up there, infinitely far away, was their true home. Would they ever find contact with their civilization again? Would other rescue ships come? Or were they really destined to stay here, on this wild, beautiful and dangerous world?

"So began our descent," she whispered into the night, the words spoken more to herself than to the others. "Not just through the land—but through time itself."

Saon stirred beside her. "Maybe it's not a descent," he said quietly. "Maybe it's a ... transformation."

Yelari thought of the symbols they had carved into the stone for Ilari. Of the new tradition they had created. Of the changes that could already be felt in all of them. The way their language had become simpler, their thoughts more direct, their connection to the immediate world stronger.

"Whatever it is," she finally said, "we'll get through it together."

The fire crackled softly, the stars completed their eternal migration, and the forty-nine last children of the first humanity on this planet fell asleep. Behind them lay a civilization with a history of millions of cycles. Before them lay ... everything.