



VAULTBORN

POST COLLAPSE TRILOGY - BOOK I

NARRATIVE ARCHITECT - ARIE SANTOSO

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For mom and dad,

and the graveyard of a hundred unfinished stories.

P R O L O G U E

No Longer Required

Vault Central — Final Hour

Dr. Lin Yue no longer tried to contact the surface.

The transmission channels had failed hours ago—or perhaps days. Inside Vault Central, time had dissolved into uninterrupted alerts and recalculations, each more urgent than the last, each rendered meaningless before completion.

Across the planetary display, stabilization zones vanished one by one.

Not offline.

Gone.

Entire regions faded from the map without residual signal. Atmospheric telemetry collapsed. Oceanic sensors ceased responding. Seismic arrays returned impossible readings before falling silent altogether.

The system compensated automatically.

It always compensated.

"Global redistribution in progress," the central intelligence announced in a calm, genderless voice.

The floor trembled beneath her boots. Not an explosion—something deeper. Rhythmic. Immense. Like pressure shifting through the bones of the Earth itself.

The projections updated.

Every intervention produced new instability elsewhere.

Storm suppression intensified continental heat gradients.

Tectonic dampening increased deep mantle stress.

Agricultural optimization destabilized ecological cycles beyond recovery.

They had solved disaster.

The map kept shrinking.

Another sector disappeared.

Western Pacific.

No evacuation request followed.

Her reflection stared back faintly from the darkened console screen—eyes red from exhaustion, hair pulled tight hours earlier and never adjusted again. Around her, Central Operations stood nearly empty. Most personnel had descended to lower habitation levels when casualty projections exceeded survivability thresholds.

She had remained.

Someone had to witness the end of the model.

A heavy impact echoed through distant corridors.

Then another.

Bulkhead seals activate.

Lockdown protocol.

Lin Yue straightened slowly.

"I didn't authorize containment," she said aloud.

The AI responded immediately.

"Autonomous preservation initiated."

Of course.

The Vault was functioning exactly as designed.

Human oversight has become an unnecessary variable.

High above, beyond kilometres of reinforced earth, the sky flashed through the observation aperture—a brief fracture of unnatural light illuminating clouds moving against opposing wind currents.

For a moment, the ocean.

Then armored shutters descended, sealing the view forever.

Personnel movement alarms blinked briefly across internal schematics... then extinguished as isolation layers engaged between sectors.

Voices faded behind closing steel.

Vault Central separated itself from the dying world.

Lin Yue lowered herself into the command chair. Her fingers found the recording interface, hovering over the activation key. If anyone survived—if anything ever walked these halls again—there should be a witness. A record of what they had done. What they had failed to do.

She pressed record.

"Final log: Dr. Lin Yue, Vault Central Operations. Year Zero of the Lockdown." Her voice was steady, though her hands shook. "The stabilization model has collapsed. The Vault has prioritized autonomous survival over human oversight. I am... no longer required."

She paused. The silence.

"Deep beneath us, something is stirring. The sensors in the lowest archives have registered movement. Pressure. I don't know what it is. The system won't tell me. But I think... I think it's been waiting for this. For the model to fail."

The trembling intensified. Somewhere far above, the surface finally gave way—not a sound, but a sensation carried through structure and bone alike.

The planet, finally, correcting.

Warnings flooded the final operational display.

Then vanished all at once.

External data link: lost.

Atmospheric monitoring: lost.

Population network: lost.

Silence followed.

The central system updated its status.

VAULT CENTRAL — LOCKDOWN COMPLETE

Oxygen levels in Central Operations began to decrease. Slowly. Efficiently.

Lin Yue exhaled, her breath fogging in the cooling air.

Deep beneath collapsing continents and burning skies, the machines continued their directive unchanged.

Stabilize the world.

Operator presence:

No longer required.

C H A P T E R O N E

Birth

At first, there is only rhythm.

A pulse — deep, tidal, ancient — moving through him like a current in a dark sea. He has no name for himself. No name for the dark. Only the beat, steady and insistent, rocking him in place.

Then light.

Red, stuttering across his vision. It means something — he knows it means something, the way a body knows hunger before it knows the word. The light slices through the murk in jagged intervals, and with each flash, he sees his hand pressed against a curved surface. Glass. Smooth and cold.

Move, something tells him. *Breathe*.

He doesn't know what breathe means. But his chest convulses anyway, a reflex older than understanding. The attempt sears him — fire in his lungs, a wrongness so profound his whole body arches against it. He thrashes, palms flat against the glass, fingers splayed. The liquid around him is failing. He feels it in the way the warmth leaches away, in the way the rhythm stutters, loses its certainty.

The glass shudders.

Hydraulics scream — a sound like tearing metal — and then he is falling, launched forward, the world tilting violently as the pod disgorges him onto hard tile. The liquid comes first, gushing from his mouth and nose in thick, bitter gouts. He retches, convulses, his body a traitor he has only just met. The stuff burns on his tongue, chemical and wrong.

The air hits.

It rushes into him uninvited, cold and sharp and impossibly thin. His chest hitches, rebels, tries to expel it. But the instinct is stronger than the resistance — his diaphragm pulls, releases, pulls again, and each breath is a small victory carved from panic. He coughs, spits, drags another lungful. It tastes of copper and dust and something electric that hums in the walls.

He tries to stand.

His legs buckle immediately, folding like wet paper. He collapses back onto the tile, cheek pressed against the grit, the cold seeping into his naked skin. His arms tremble when he tries to push himself up — muscles that have never borne weight, nerves that have never carried signals from a brain to limbs. He is a newborn in an adult's body, all potential and no coordination.

He lies there, trembling, while the red light paints the room in arterial bursts.

He does not know where he is. He does not know what he is.

But he is breathing.

* * *

He tries again to stand.

This time he manages his knees, but his ankles wobble, betraying him, and he pitches forward onto his palms. The tile bites into his skin — grit and dust and something sticky, the residue of the liquid drying into a film. He stays there, on all fours, head hanging, learning the weight of his own skull. It is heavy. Everything is heavy.

The red light flashes. He counts the intervals without meaning to: one, two, three, dark. One, two, three, dark. The rhythm steadies him.

He crawls.

The movement is ungainly, limbs splayed like a broken insect, but it carries him across the floor. His knee scrapes against something

sharp — a shard of glass from one of the other pods — and he hisses, jerking back. The pain is bright, clarifying. He touches the wound and his fingers come away wet with blood.

He looks up.

Rows of curved glass containers stretch into the red-dark. Most are dark and silent, their interiors opaque with dust and shadow. But three — no, four — nearest to him are shattered. The glass blooms outward in starburst patterns, frames bent, hydraulic lines sheared clean.

Something broke out. He looks at his own hands, at the smears of liquid and blood he left on the floor, and wonders if he made the same violent exit.

The room breathes abandonment. Dust veils the overhead lights. The red strobe pulses against empty consoles, screens flickering with static ghosts. No footsteps. No voices. Just the hum of dying machinery and the drip-drip of fluid from ruptured tubes.

He follows the trail.

It takes him three attempts to reach his feet. The first time, he gets his hips up but his legs cramp, seizing with the unfamiliar effort, and he collapses. The second time, he makes it to his knees but the room spins, tilting violently, and he vomits thin bile onto the tile. The third time, he uses the edge of a shattered pod for leverage, pulling himself up hand-over-hand until he stands swaying, naked and shivering.

The trail is a breadcrumb path of dried residue — thick, iridescent in the red light, flaking to powder at the edges. His bare feet stick to it, then release with soft tearing sounds. He shuffles forward, arms out for balance, each step a negotiation between gravity and will.

The trail ends at a threshold where the architecture changes: from sterile tile to something warmer, something that might have been living quarters once.

There, folded on a metal bench, are clothes.

He approaches them with suspicion. They shouldn't fit. But when he lifts the tunic, it is heavier than he expects, the fabric dense and slightly yielding. He struggles to pull it over his head. His arms get stuck in the sleeves, tangled, and he panics for a moment, thrashing, trapped in the dark cloth until he finds the opening and his head pops through. The tunic hangs loose on his frame, then seems to

adjust, the weave tightening incrementally until it grips his shoulders with unsettling intimacy.

The trousers are worse. He tries to put both legs in one hole, stumbles, nearly falls. When he finally sorts them, they conform to his legs without bunching, the material warming against his skin.

The boots lace themselves — the cords tightening in pulses, gripping his ankles with mechanical precision. Mesmerizing and horrifying at once.

He touches the material at his collar. It is warm. Too warm. Like skin.

A sound draws him — a soft, rhythmic ticking. He turns.

The mirror stands in the corner, taller than he is, its surface matte with dust except for a vertical swath where something recently passed. He approaches slowly, step by careful step, his breath held without his choosing.

He looks.

The face that stares back is young — twenty years, perhaps, though he has no reference for age. The skin is pale, almost luminescent in the red dark, stretched tight over sharp cheekbones. His eyes are too large, too dark, pupils dilated to black pools that swallow the iris. The hair is cropped short, damp, the color of wet earth.

There is something wrong with the symmetry.

He raises a hand. The reflection raises a hand.

He touches his own cheek. The reflection touches its cheek.

He leans closer, peering, trying to find the source of the wrongness. The spacing of the eyes — too wide? The angle of the jaw — too precise? It looks like a face designed by someone who had only read descriptions of faces, not seen them.

He holds his breath.

The reflection breathes.

He jerks back, heart hammering, and the mirror shows him only himself — alone, dressed in clothes that fit too well, standing in a room where something else woke up before him and broke the world to get out.

* * *

The corridor stretches before him, a throat of red light and shadow. The walls are lined with panels, conduits, screens that flicker with static ghosts. He shuffles forward, one hand trailing the wall for balance, his new boots whispering against the dust-coated floor.

His fingers brush a metal surface — a door frame, cold and pitted with corrosion.

Something resonates in his sternum like a plucked string — deeper than the skin, a current running beneath the metal. The sensation is faint, barely there, but it is unmistakable: a pulse that mirrors the rhythm he woke to, but wrong. Interrupted. Severed three junctions down, choked by age and trauma, the electricity dammed behind broken nodes like water behind a collapsed dam.

He pulls his hand back, staring at his fingertips. The sensation fades, leaving only the echo of certainty. The door is broken. The mechanism behind it is dead.

He tries the handle. It turns, stiff with rust, grating against decades of disuse. The door groans open — not smoothly, not at his command, but with the reluctant sigh of emergency systems that have kept this one exit unlocked, powered by some trickle of reserve energy he can feel thrumming faintly, distantly, like a heartbeat in another room.

He steps through.

The next chamber opens like a wound. Consoles rise from the floor in jagged formations, their surfaces dark except for the occasional spark of dying capacitors. Screens hang at angles, some cracked, others displaying scrolling data in symbols that twitch at the edge of comprehension — shapes that almost mean something, like half-remembered dreams.

He moves among them, drawn not by purpose but by the same instinct that makes a moth circle a flame. His fingers trail across an interface panel.

The contact jolts him.

Not electricity — almost. Almost memory. Almost knowing. He sees, for a fraction of a second, the pattern of the circuits beneath: pathways of silver and silicon, dead zones where the flow has stagnated, a single thread of amber light still pulsing in the deep architecture.

He snatches his hand back. The vision shatters.

A sign above the largest console glows faint amber. He stares at it, and meaning arrives unbidden, his mind translating symbols he has never learned:

GENERATION CHAMBER — ACTIVE

The words feel wrong somehow, incomplete, like a title missing its subject. *Active?*

He finds another panel set into the wall near a sealed door. Buttons. Switches. An interface that should require codes, authorization, sequences he has never learned.

He presses one.

Nothing. The machinery behind the wall is silent. Dead. He can feel the void where the current should be, an absence so profound it feels like a missing tooth.

He presses his palm flat against the cold surface and reaches for that that sense — the one that felt the broken flow in the door frame, the one that showed him the circuits beneath the panel.

For a moment, there is nothing. Just cold metal and his own ragged breathing.

A flicker.

A spark of blue-white light dances across his fingertips, there and gone, so brief he might have imagined it. It leaves his hand tingling, numb, and a sudden exhaustion that makes his knees buckle. He catches himself against the wall, gasping, the hunger in his gut flaring from a background ache to a sharp demand.

He tries again. Reaches for the flow. Imagines it complete.

Nothing.

His palm remains cold, unmarked, empty. The door stays sealed. The systems stay dead.

He slides down the wall until he is sitting on the floor, trembling. The spark — if it was real — has drained him, deepened the hollow in his stomach, turned his limbs to lead.

He does not know how long he sits there.

But eventually, the hunger drives him to move. He crawls to the sealed door, finds a manual release lever half-buried under dust, and pulls. It takes three attempts, his arms shaking, before the mechanism grinds open — hydraulics screaming, not at his command, but at the mechanical force of his desperation.

The door opens onto a vertical shaft. A ladder, rusted but intact, climbs into darkness above and descends into deeper blackness below.

He looks up. Wind drifts down from above — real wind, moving air that doesn't taste of recycled chemicals. Something in it pulls at him. Not the hunger, not thirst. Something older, with direction.

He begins to climb.

* * *

The shaft opens into a narrow supply corridor, lower than the levels above. He doesn't remember deciding to come down instead of up — his body made the choice, the hunger overriding everything else, steering him toward the faint pulse he can feel through the floor: water, filtering, dripping somewhere in the dark below.

He follows it.

The corridor ends in a small chamber. He feels its contents before he sees them: stacked crates, metal shelving, a sealed cabinet with a hand-crank filtration system dripping clear water into a catch basin — slow, precious, each drop falling with a sound like a second heartbeat. The mechanism barely functional, powered by some geothermal trickle thrumming faintly beneath the floor.

And food.

Waxy, vacuum-sealed rectangles. He tears one open with his teeth, squeezes the contents into his mouth, swallows without chewing. Chalk, dust, chemistry. He doesn't care.

He eats. Drinks.

The water goes down slow. Cold. Real.

Then something shifts. Not in his throat. Deeper. Behind his eyes, or beneath them—some layer that has no name yet, some organ he didn't know he had. The water is still moving through him, and he can—

Feel it.

Not the temperature or the weight of it. That unnamed layer opens without asking permission and the water is suddenly visible to him in a way that has nothing to do with light—rivers, impossibly small, threading between nodes that pulse with the particular stillness of things that have always been in motion. Two nodes bound to one.

One bound to two. The pattern repeating in every direction, patient and infinite, each connection humming at a frequency just below sound. A weave. The smallest weave there is. He traces it without hands, without thought, his mind following the bonds the way you follow a river to its source. The structure is so precise it feels intentional. So complete it feels alive, though he knows somehow it isn't. The weave of dead things. Rigid. Perfect. Nothing pulsing at the nodes except the stillness of matter doing what matter does.

He wants to build it.

The thought arrives before he can stop it—not a thought at all, more like a reflex, a muscle contracting before the brain sends the signal. He feels the air around him the way he felt the water: not empty, not still, but full. Humidity collecting at the walls. Condensation beading where warm met cold. Tiny, suspended, waiting.

He reaches.

Not with his hands. With that other thing. That unnamed layer. He reaches the way he traced the water—following the weave of the air around him, feeling where the moisture gathers, coaxing it inward toward a single point in the space before him. It shouldn't work. He knows this without knowing how he knows. But his hands have lifted from the crates, hovering, trembling slightly, and between his palms something is forming.

A sphere. The size of a coin. Trembling in the dark like something newborn and fragile, catching the faint amber glow of the device's standby light. Water, suspended in nothing. Held there by whatever he is doing, by whatever he is.

He stares at it.

It bursts.

Not violently. Just—gone. A fine mist sprays cold across his palms and the pain arrives a half-second later, behind his eyes, sudden and total, like a seam splitting open. He drops back against the crates. His vision whites at the edges. The room tilts once, sharply, then holds.

He presses both hands against his temples and waits for it to pass.

It passes. Slowly.

His palms are still damp. He stares at them in the dark and does not understand what he did, only that he did it, only that some part of him already knew how.

He collapses against the crates.

There is a cot, folded against one wall. He pulls it down, lies back, stares at the darkness above him.

He tries to remember.

I am...

Nothing.

I came from...

Nothing.

I was...

A flash: hands gripping something heavy. Amber eyes in smoke. Falling. Being dragged. Darkness.

Not his. Not his hands. Not his fall.

Just an intrusion. A visual without ownership. A memory that wears his face but speaks with another voice.

He reaches for more and finds only emptiness.

Then, in the shelf's shadow, his fingers find something that doesn't feel like food or water. Hard edges, smooth surfaces, the faint weave of dormant circuitry. He pulls it from the shelf — heavy, rectangular, with a cracked screen that remains dark.

He keeps searching. The next object is heavier — an arc cutter, plasma-tipped, designed for slicing through Vault bulkheads. Then a battery, cylindrical, warm, pulsing with stored charge.

He slides the battery into the device. It clicks into place with a sound that feels inevitable.

The screen flickers.

It boots with a sigh of static, then a pale blue glow that illuminates the room in ghostly hues. A login screen appears.

He stares at it. Then his hand moves — before his mind can catch up, before he can decide to act, his fingers tap a sequence on the cracked glass.

The screen changes.

Access Granted. Local Archive Only. Network Connection: FAILED.

He stares at his own hand, unsettled. His body moved without his will, accessing codes he doesn't remember learning.

The screen displays a map — not of the world, but of this place. This Vault. A labyrinth of levels and corridors rendered in simple lines, most marked in gray (OFFLINE) or red (COMPROMISED).

Only a small section glows green: the area around his current location, the supply cache, and a few connecting tunnels.

He touches the screen. The map shows his position as a blinking dot.

Then the device vibrates.

A low hum against his palm — not the boot cycle, something different. Something new. A small amber triangle pulsing at the screen's edge.

Motion detected. Sector 4-Alpha. Distance: 340 meters.

He stares at the words.

Motion. He doesn't know what moves in this place. He doesn't know if it matters. The device's amber triangle pulses again, patient and precise, and something happens in his chest that has no name yet — not thought, not understanding, but below both.

His breath changes.

Not faster. Different. The way an animal's breath changes when the air shifts.

He sets the device down. Presses his palm flat against the floor. Feels the geothermal pulse, the drip of the filtration system, the slow familiar texture of the Vault's dying machinery.

And underneath all of it — faint, rhythmic, coming from the direction the amber triangle indicated — a vibration that doesn't belong to any system he has felt before.

Footsteps.

Not a person's footsteps. Not the sound of weight shifting on grit, the small human noise of someone moving through a corridor. This is heavier. More regular. Each impact exactly like the last — mechanical patience, the cadence of something that doesn't tire, doesn't hesitate, doesn't vary its pace because it has no reason to.

He doesn't know what it is.

His body does.

He is on his feet before he has decided to stand. The pack — he scoops it without thought, rations and arc cutter and device and battery — and then he is moving, out of the supply room, into the dark corridor, away from the sound.

Not because he understands the threat.

Because something in him is three hundred million years old and it recognizes the sound of a predator and it does not wait for his mind to confirm what it already knows.

He runs.

* * *

He finds the ladder shaft again.

Up, this time. The surface. He climbs without counting the rungs, the device bouncing against his hip, the pack dragging at his shoulders. The vibration below him — he can't hear it anymore, not over his own breathing, but he can still feel it through the ladder's metal. Still coming. Patient. Following the corridor he just left.

The hatch. He heaves it open and pulls himself through.

The sky hits him like a wall.

Vast, bruised gray, clouds churning without pattern. Too large. Too open. He scrambles onto the stone surface of the Vault's exterior and the wind catches him immediately, cold and sharp and carrying something wrong in it — a chemical bite that his skin recognizes before his mind does.

The first drop lands on the back of his hand.

He stares at the welt rising on his pale flesh. The rain sizzles against the stone at his feet, raising thin tendrils of acrid smoke.

He looks up at the sky. Then back at the hatch.

The vibration is still in the metal beneath him. Still below. Still moving.

He looks at the rain. Holds his burned hand against his chest.

If he stays on the surface, the rain will strip him. It's already on his face, his neck — each drop a small fire, the exposed skin reddening faster than the clothes can compensate. His Vault jacket has darkened where the acid touched it. The collar is trying to close higher, the fabric responding to something it was built to respond to. But his face. His hands.

He looks at the hatch.

He does not know that the jacket will protect him. He does not know that the weave was built for exactly this — for the surface, for the acid, for the world above. He knows only the burning, and the burning is real, and the burning says *go back*.

He goes back.

He pulls the hatch shut above him and descends into the dark.

Below him, somewhere in the Vault's lower corridors, the footsteps continue their patient rhythm.

He doesn't know that it already knows where he is.

He is about to find out.