

## Chapter 1

Earth Date: October 1, 2023

Time: T-minus 168 hours until Launch

Location: APE'KEK Headquarters, Washington DC

[AUDIO: CREAK, CREAK. CREAK, CREAK.]

*The steady rhythm of a desk chair as the weight of a frumpy and rather plump man in a white lab coat rocks back and forth. His feet are crossed and propped on top of the mega desk in front of him that's littered with an array of computers and monitors. Whirling hard drives and blinking lights saturate his senses and the familiarity of his workspace creates a sort of cocoon around him. A safe space. He touches a finger to his temple to disable his optical holographic display, and squints through his wire rim glasses. He's one of the last amongst his colleagues to wear such a kind.*

*Hmm that's strange. It appears that someone has paused in the middle of their upload sequence.*

*He jolts out of his daze and leans in toward the monitor to read it more closely. His heart rate nearly doubles as he dreads the thought of having to bear the bad news; they might have his head for this. Especially considering how the Razi just celebrated the near closing of the last year until launch. He wastes no time reaching for his keyboard and immediately attempts to resume the upload.*

*"What the hell?" Dread yes, but also surprise is laced into his voice.*

*An error notification pops up. Uplink #10081995 - error. His heart skips another beat as his fingers dance across the keyboard in a second attempt to fix the problem.*

*"Thank GOD." He breathes a long, drawn-out sigh as he slowly eases back into his comfy chair. Whew. He interlaces his fingers and cradles the back of his head, creating a little hammock, and then props his feet back up onto his desk. It must be some type of glitch in the sys—*

*"Shit!" He screams as he rips off his glasses and, this time, jumps to his feet.*

*Uplink #10081995 - error.*

*This cannot be possible.*

“Wha—?” He nervously runs his plump fingers through his short brown hair.  
“Why are the numbers going DOWN?” A question for the universe as much as for himself.

This person is **reverse sequencing**. The upload percentage is slowly decreasing.

“How is this possible?!” Perhaps another question for the universe to answer.

The A.P.E. hammers away at the keys, desperately trying to resume sequence upload. Click... nope. Click... nope. Click... - UNAVAILABLE. The numbers continue to go down seemingly faster than mere moments before. He has no choice but to say something now.

He raises a finger to the brim of his glasses and lightly taps near the temple, and the lens blink to life; a vibrant blue hue illuminating the glass from every side. His eyes toggle back and forth before he, again, touches a finger to his temple to make the light blink out. Moments later footsteps resonate from the direction of the sliding doors at the entrance of the lab.

The doors slide open, and a stocky, menacing man wearing a rigid scowl struts into the room. Although not the largest - but certainly not the smallest - his presence fills the space making the air seem heavier and the shadows deeper and darker. He's dressed in a form-fitted jet-black suit with the only contrast being his blood red tie, and a symbol embroidered on the breast pocket of his suit jacket. Golden thread is stitched into what appears to be ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. A perfect match to the symbol that is also etched onto the breast pocket of his subordinate's lab coat.

In two strides he is eye level with the A.P.E. His stare does not waver, and his lips barely part to demand...

“What the hell is going on in here Hager?!” Chewing on the first three words and spitting out the rest.

The A.P.E. shrinks down into his seat.

Hager: “U-uh um, there's a problem. With the uh...”

He fumbles on every word and his voice wavers more than a quivering bow. Sweat beads across his brow and upper lip.

Hager: “S-something's wrong with her.” He lifts an index finger and points the end of it to a single line of text on the screen closest to them. “She paused in the middle of her upload. I tried to resume it, but for some reason it's not working.”

*He steals a glance at his superior who gives nothing away. Face still as stone.*

Hager: “Not only has she paused mid upload, but uhhh n-now it appears she is reverse sequencing, Sir.” *He throws up both hands as if in surrender as a rush of words spill out of his mouth.* “I’ve never seen anything like this before. I swear I did everything I could to fix it, but I have no idea how this could have hap—”

[AUDIO: CRASH!]

*In a surge of rage, his superior clasps him by the throat and slams his body atop the desk. Hager releases a slight yelp of surprise and endures the growing pressure of the hard desk beneath him and the weight of the solid body pressing on top of him.*

*His oppressor leans in close to his face and growls, “I question your dedication to our cause with this display of disappointing performance. Are you not aware of the stakes? Or do you simply not care?”*

*Hager’s eyes stretch wide, and he vigorously shakes his head in disagreement.*

Hager: “No, Sir! Zosar, I swear I have no idea—”

*He is cut off again as the monstrous man flings him around, still gripping his throat, and smashes his face into the computer monitor in the exact spot on the screen where this piece of viral scum is reverse sequencing.*

*He gets real close and whispers. Zosar: “You’re going to fix this. You’re going to fix this now.”*

*Lingering for a second longer, Zosar finally releases him. The A.P.E. barely has time to collect himself before murmuring a pathetic, “Yes, Sir.” but his superior has already left the room with a wind trail behind him kicking up a flyer that’s taped onto the wall. But this no ordinary flyer. It’s old, like ancient old, and it’s not even made from normal paper but instead papyrus. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs litter both sides of the page. Even more strange, there’s also a picture. Not a drawing. Not a painting. A printed picture of an ostrich feather. Hager recalls his first encounter with the flyer on his first day in this lab as a junior A.P.E. That flyer on the wall has, by far, remained the biggest mystery even after thirty long years of his expert service at the hands of the Razi regime.*

*He finally snaps out of his daydream and shouts a command.*

Hager: “Aye DD! Get Maddox down here stat.”

A.I.D.D.: (echoes) “Right away, Sir.”

*Seconds later, another A.P.E. enters the room. Although he sports similar attire to his colleague – slacks, button up shirt and a white lab coat – the energy surrounding his presence and demeanor is quite the contrast. Scrawny and tall, but somehow still fails to reach Hager in height. Mocha brown skin. Longer brown hair toward the crown of his head and elaborate designs razored into the tapered sides. A smug look appears to be permanently etched on his baby face. This young man can't be a day over 25, and his expertly masked diffidence often speaks before he does.*

Maddox: “Are you good, Bro?” *He does a terrible job at hiding his smirk. Word travels fast. “Zosar must have really let you have it this time, you look like you’re about to pee your pants.” He chuckles, finding amusement in his colleague’s misery.*

*Instead of entertaining childish taunts, Hager turns to his keyboard and begins to fiddle with some code that’s displayed on his monitor. Still, he does not respond to his apprentice’s original question.*

Hager: “I don’t know what’s happening. She paused in the middle of her upload.” *He takes a moment to sneak in a sideways glance, “No biggie right?” and raises his eyebrows as if daring anyone to protest. “Charge the implant, flood the system with mock impulses, and then boom we’re back in action. Nothing new. It happened a lot at the start of all of this.”*

*The apprentice appears bored of this lengthy explanation, but slowly nods in agreement.*

Maddox: “Okayyyy.”

*Up-nods to the blinking line of text reading the subject’s name, age, and uplink number on the screen.* Hager: “After I re-integrated her into the upload sequence, there was some type of error or glitch or something!” *The panic creeps up on him and startles his company.*

Maddox: “Relax man, just get to the point already.” *His audacious annoyance is quite ironic considering the gravity of the situation.*

Hager: “My point is”—*finally a bit of grit*—“I can’t get her to resume.”

*Before he gets a chance to move onto his next thought, his apprentice has already pushed past him and reaches for the keyboard.*

Maddox: “Let me try.” *He makes himself at home in the plush desk chair, and even wastes a few precious seconds cracking his knuckles. He reaches for the keyboard, but stops short, fingers hovering above the keys. His eyes bore down on*

*the screen in front of him. “Wh-what the hell?” He blinks. As if it will help to change reality. “Is she... reverse sequencing??”*

Hager: “I didn’t even know it was possible!” *Panic has returned to his voice, and he interlocks his hands on top of his head in near defeat.*

*Instead of responding with reassuring or helpful advice, Maddox studies the monitors. He furiously types away, eyes darting back and forth between lines of code. As his brow is furrowed in concentration, Hager re-focuses his attention back to the screen; His curiosity piqued as he leans in closer to examine what the newbie is up to. Despite his sour attitude, Maddox is rather brilliant. He wouldn’t be here otherwise.*

Maddox: “I think I might be able to place her on a private interface. Temporarily of course.”

Hager: “Okay, but what good is that going to do?”

Maddox: “Well that’s the thing. Any *outside* disturbance to an uplink—such as switching interfaces—will automatically pause that individuals upload, but within our scope of control.”

Hager: “Deep Digitum.” *He whispers as the pieces in his mind start to come together.*

Maddox: *He nods in agreement.* “This will hopefully buy us some time. Meanwhile, we can construct a more er... *unique* sequence to run on her.” *He purrs.*

Hager: “Okayyyy.” *He ponders as the notion begins to settle.* “Okay.” *A bit more sure this time.* “So, what’s the plan for this alternate sequence?”

Maddox: *His eyebrows raise in hesitation.* “Uhh I haven’t figured that part out quite yet. Soooo,” *(exaggerated exhale)* I suggest we call in the psych analysts.”

*Hager pinches his brows in confusion.* “The analysts, why? We need a team of our best programmers in here stat!”

Maddox: “Eh, the programming can wait.” *A dismissive shrug.* “Their role will play out as more of an afterthought anyway.”

Hager: “You’re losing me kid.”

Maddox: “C’mon bro, you’ve been doing this for how long? Do I really have to spell it out for you.”

Hager: “Oh please, don’t lecture me. I’ve been overseeing this project since

you were blowing spit bubbles and baking mud pies in the backyard sandbox of your parent's estate."

*In one swift motion, Maddox stomps his foot and swivels around in the chair to face his superior.*

Maddox: "We must break her." *He emphasizes each word.* "She will lose her will to fight our systems. Then, and only then, can we re-upload her to the mainframe. From there, we should expect zero complications until completion." *He pauses for the thought to resonate.* "If we can break her. We can re-make her. The psych analysts are our best bet for finding her deepest and darkest psychological vulnerabilities. Once we pinpoint her weaknesses, we can deploy any and every resource we have to exploit them." *A menacing smile creeps up on his face.* "She will fall victim to the fallacies of her own imagination."

*Hager is still a bit skeptical, but the plan is taking root.*

Hager: "Alright. I'll call them in. Aye DD! Summon the analysts to the Nucleus. And inform the Razi of a new mission of the utmost importance. A mission that knocks over the first domino to determine the next lifetime that proceeds us. Failure is not an option. Success is our only requisite."

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*Abduction. I was taken in, and everything else was taken away.*

*Sedated. Physically and psychologically. Trapped in my own consciousness... sinking deeper, deeper, and deeper down into Digitum.*

*Then invasion.*

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[AUDIO: KNOCK KNOCK.]

"Come in." *Responds the man seated at his desk. The name tag toward the edge of it reads 'Zosar Kane - Chief A.P.E.'*

*Head of the psych department - Dr. Nathaniel Atlas - pokes his head into the office. 'She's ready for you, Sir.'*

*Zosar finally looks up. "Bring me to her."*

*Zosar joins his colleague at the open doorway, and their brisk, choppy steps echo down the hallway as they make their way to the main control center for Cosmic Age Sequence - the Nucleus. They round the corner and enter through sliding doors that lead to a massive lab. Instruments of science, medicine and technology of all*

sorts occupy the surrounding space of a young woman who is situated in the dead center of it all. She floats upright in a massive, cylindrical incubator, and wears a pair of ripped jeans and a baggy blue, plaid jacket over a t-shirt. The only piece of attire that seems strangely out of place is a paper head dress that crowns her thick, brown locs. With it on, it looks as if she were a patient in a hospital during the 1930's. But this is no place for rehabilitation. Only the mission.

There she lies in an electro-chemical induced sleep - deep *Digitum* - thanks to the expertise of our best A.P.E. programmers and doctors of sciences on-call for this momentous occasion. They are tasked with saving the known world! And from what? Alas, there she is.

Zosar: "My oh my. The peril you have reaped upon us."

He paces forward until he stands facing her. His eyes toggle up and down, studying her body before finally honing in on her mind. At the same time, he reaches out as if to faintly caress her forehead, but only smears the glass that encloses her into the entire structure.

Dr. Atlas: "She just arrived. We dispatched a team of A.P.E. units to reprimand her, quietly of course. Her family fed a false story of her whereabouts that should buy us a few days to get this taken care of. As you know, we have done extensive research on the subject from time of birth leading up to her recent capture. Despite her upbringing and socioeconomic status, she is in excellent condition, or rather would be if current reality were of a *varying* circumstance."

Him and Zosar exchange a knowing glance. Then he slowly strolls around the controls and machinery as he continues.

Dr. Atlas: "Great health. Supportive and nurturing home environment. Relatively strong relationships with family and friends. A sense of *purpose*. She would have made a great individual. A strong individual. A leader among the masses. When she speaks, people would listen. She would defy the very nature of the structures and systems that society has built around us. She would be—"

Zosar: "A *threat*, to any and everything that we and our ancestors have worked so hard to build. You are well aware of the stakes, Nathan."

Dr. Atlas: "I'm afraid so." He returns his attention to the monitors and controls as he continues, "But we shall fear no more. The team has spent all night creating a fun, new sequence that they've been calling 'Peak Insanity'. It's

got a nice ring to it, yeah?”

*He pauses for a moment to type in a few keystrokes until an image is seemingly projected onto thin air – the jumbo holographic display on the far side of the room – to show an extremely complex blueprint of a human brain. There are little wisps of blue light that blink bright and illuminate the entire space.*

Dr. Atlas: “This is a live feed of our subject’s brain activity in Digitum. Notice the places where her neural impulses are most concentrated – the brighter wisps of light. Those are electrical impulses and give us an indication of which part of her brain is being utilized at any given moment. Now look here toward the bottom.” *He points to a section near the brain stem.* “This grey block is our implant. We’ve run multiple diagnostics, and it’s in perfect working condition. So the mystery remains, why is it not working on her?”

*Zosar raises his palm to nestle into his chin as he ponders the possibilities. His hesitance to answer prompts Dr. Atlas to continue.*

Dr. Atlas: “Okay. Check this out.” *He takes a few short strides to a nearby desk and picks up a clip board with some papers attached to it. Then he slips on his glasses.* “As you know, artificial neural impulses generated by the implant disburse electro-chemical scripts throughout the, otherwise, normal activity of the brain, and effectively distort cognitive processes even on the most fundamental level, hence the implantation on the brain stem. Over time, these artificial impulses generate a primitive association between the predacious information that’s pumped out and whatever part of the brain that is targeted. All according to the specific instruction of purpose and motive that the program harbors, in this case complete psychological control. This entire operation is regulated by our round the clock team of A.P.E. regulators, programmers, techs and analysts, and is how our mission has been able to get this far.”

*Zosar nods in agreement. Common knowledge to any Razi or A.P.E., but he remains patient as Dr. Atlas makes his way to the point.*

Dr. Atlas: “Upon her arrival, we primed the subject with a few basic impulses just to test the immediate effects in real-time, and what we found was quite startling. It appears that instead of the implant affecting her brain, her brain is, instead, affecting the implant.”

*He pauses a moment for Zosar’s reaction, but he’s not giving one. Zosar’s steady*

*stare has not strayed from the monitor, and his composure remains the same.*

Dr. Atlas: *So, he continues, “Our theory to explain this phenomenon is not yet conclusive, but we have a pretty good idea. We believe that her frontal lobe, the control center of the brain, is no longer fooled by the ‘fake thoughts’ that we have been feeding it. At least not anymore. He taps a single keystroke and walks back over to the monitor. “I have just entered a series of scripts that should sequence a flood of dopamine into her nucleus accumbens.” He points to the display.*

*Their eyes focus on the grey square near the brain stem and watch as the blue wisps of light rapidly blink in a line.*

Dr. Atlas: “The nucleus accumbens is only a short trip away from the brain stem and is as impressionable as wet sand. This should be an extremely effective script yet,” *He slides his finger slightly to the right to indicate a new spot. “We have zero activity here. Nada. That’s almost impossible.”*

Zosar: “Almost?”

Atlas: “Yes, well the entire point of the upload sequence is to weaken the connection that people have between themselves and others, and the universe as a whole. Then replace those inner voids with false fulfillment and gratification all according to the programming of Cosmic Age Sequence. Her brain should be lighting up like a Christmas tree, especially since she’s so near completion.”

*Zosar continues to stare, a bit more antsy now that he doesn’t know what’s about to come next.*

Dr. Atlas: *Deciding to take a different approach, he slides his finger up to the front of her brain. “This is her frontal lobe.”*

*Zosar looks puzzled because there isn’t any activity there either. Wait! He notices there are indeed blue wisps lighting up there too. Faint, but present.*

Dr. Atlas: “Despite the minimal activity shown here, it seems to be enough to counteract the artificial impulses of the implant. As you can see here,” *He traces his finger back to the brain stem. “The artificial impulses are decreasing. And even worse.” He points back to the frontal lobe.*

Zosar: “Whoa.”

Dr. Atlas: *He nods in agreement. “These connections are getting stronger.”*

*The blue wisps in the frontal lobe grow brighter in color, and blink more rapidly as the artificial impulses in the brain stem get fainter... and fainter...*

*Zosar tears his attention away from the monitor and focuses on the young woman floating in the incubator. He takes a tentative step forward until he stands mere millimeters away from her face, nearly kissing the glass. Resenting the specimen that dares to rise against him.*

*How dare she?*

*Dr. Atlas meets him, so they stand shoulder to shoulder, and they stare into the shielded eyes of the young woman in deep slumber. In this state she looks almost serene. Incapable of such atrocities against the Razi and their - our - mission, yet here we are.*

*Zosar: Speaking to no one in particular, "Prepare for launch."*

*On command, a small crowd of professionals in white coats and blue lit eyes expertly assemble themselves at their posts. Each with the same hieroglyph symbol stitched onto their breast pocket. There is an ominous atmosphere that settles upon the room as Zosar takes his place behind the central control monitor.*

*He does a quick sweep of all fifteen of his personnel, meeting their eyes as they each acknowledge him with a nod. Finally fixing his attention on the stern gazes of Nathaniel Atlas and Vincent Hager - his first and second in command for this rogue mission. All ready to go.*

*Zosar: "DD, prepare for launch!"*

*A.I.D.D.: "Ready, Sir."*

*Zosar: "Peak Insanity Sequence commence in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1..."*