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## CHAPTER ONE

The young woman gasped for air so violently, the action shook her body awake. She was so dizzy, her stomach clutched. She barely managed to avoid throwing up. Her heart raced. She opened her eyes.

Pitch black.

And not just any darkness. The black from her nightmares. Cold. Demonic.

*What the fuck is going on?*

Fear and confusion flooded through her.

*Where am I? How did I get here?*

Her heart pounded so hard her chest hurt.

*Get a grip! You need to calm down!*

Her mind was wrapped in a thick fog. She fought to clear her head. Not only did she fail, she was sinking into unconsciousness again. She began to panic.

*Snap out of it! Someone might be drawing a bead on you. Don't move! Stay still and assess.*

She took a deep breath and forced herself into professional mode.

*No apparent wounds. Terrible headache. Feels like a hot poker right behind my eyes.*

She moved her arms and legs.

*Nothing's broken. Good. But I'm freezing. And the way the air's moving against my face feels odd.*

She paused and focused.

*Fuck! Am I falling? Spit.*

The moisture immediately came back in her face.

*Crap! Yell.*

She counted the seconds.

*No echo.*

She tried again.

*No sound of any sort. Absolute silence.*

She gulped.

*Spit again. Harder this time.*

The moisture barely got out of her mouth. She attempted to turn over, or at least move enough so she could look behind her. There was nothing to press against.

*Crap! Definitely falling. Falling in pitch black, silent darkness. What's happening?*

Her mouth went dry, and her heart rate ticked up again.

*Stay calm. Assess.. Where am I? How'd I get here?*

Her mind was a blank. She peered into the blackness, desperately searching for even a spark of light. Anything that would give her a clue. Instead, the dark void tightened its grip. Severely claustrophobic, she couldn't stop feeling she was imprisoned in something she would never escape from. Her heart raced, pounding hard in her chest. Her breathing quickened. Her body started shaking. The all-too-familiar cold sweat broke out. A full-scale panic attack was building.

*You know how to handle this! Focus! Breathe! You're OK. You aren't hurt. It's just darkness.*

As she fought to keep the anxiety at bay, she ordered herself to get as much information about her situation as she could.

*Identify details. It'll help you concentrate and clear your head. OK. Slacks. Short-sleeve jersey. No watch. Wearing one shoe. Why only one?*

She moved her arms and legs and discovered that her body felt steadier if she kept them extended. This reminded her of something. She couldn't recall what. A tiny white dot appeared in the distance. Her heart raced—with excitement this time.

*A way out!*

She relaxed and concentrated on the dot and the breeze against her face. They were linked. She focused on the spot of light. As it became a circle, the breeze strengthened.

*Feels familiar. Good. Still can't remember why. Figure it out. Put everything together. Lying down. No resistance. Arms and legs extended. Wind. The circle's getting bigger, faster. Really bigger! Really faster!*

It was like being shot out of a cannon. Brilliantly white light surrounded and blinded her. The powerful wind's roar replaced the silence and deafened her. Its force buffeted her and made it impossible to keep her eyes open. She struggled to hold her position and open her eyes.

*Blue! That's sky!*

A memory burst through with such force it burned away any remaining fog clouding her brain.

*SHIT! SKY DIVING!*

She instinctively ran her hands over her body desperately searching for parachute straps, even though she knew there weren't any.

*SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!*

Her mouth went dry.

*Assess! Where am I landing?*

She squinted, battling against the wind distorting her face.

*Blue-grey and white. Water and sand. A beach.*

Looking at the land racing towards her, she did a quick calculation.

*Twelve hundred yards. 15 seconds. Fuck!*

She shuddered and gulped.

*At least it'll be quick.*

She resigned herself to the inevitable. She was stunned at how calm she felt. Bracing for impact felt silly, but she did it anyway. She closed her eyes and held her breath just before she hit the sun-kissed beach.

With *zero* force.

One second, she was plummeting towards her demise. The next, she was lying face down, her frigid body cradled by the warm sand.

*I'm alive?*

She was stunned.

*What the fuck? It makes no sense I'm not roadkill. Was it a dream? Did I fall asleep on a beach?*

She sat up and quickly scanned her surroundings.

*No obvious threats. A typical beach.*

She relaxed. She checked her body for injuries.

*Whatever happened, it wasn't hitting the ground at 150 MPH.*

She surveyed her environment again, meticulously this time. The place looked familiar—yet different. It was a beautiful, warm summer day with a welcome breeze. The beach of white sand was about 50 yards wide. It was bordered on one side by the ocean and on the other by steep dunes about 20 yards high. The fresh salt air and the heat of the sun felt comforting after the hostile, frigid darkness. The sky was gorgeous blue with a few white, puffy clouds. The ocean was calm, and the waves gently rolled up towards her. She looked down the beach. The air was remarkably clear. The closest beachgoers were at least half a mile away, but the air so was transparent, she could make out the intricate designs on the beach umbrellas with ease. A couple dressed alike in tan shorts and brilliantly scarlet jerseys caught her eye. She chuckled.

*Holding hands, smiling, matching outfits. Honeymooners.*

She was struck by the details she could make out—on their clothing, on their faces. If she knew how to lip read, she could have understood what they were saying. She took a deep breath and was stunned.

*Remarkable! She took another breath. How is breathing so energizing? OK. Enough lollygagging. I've got to get there as soon as I can.*

She stood up and brushed the sand off. She felt a little dizzy, but knew it was important to get there. Feeling awkward with only one shoe on, she kicked it off and started walking barefoot. She stopped mid-stride.

*Where?*

She closed her eyes and thought.

*I can't remember.*

She surveyed the area, looking for any detail that could help. She frowned.

*This is familiar, but it's not. I'm not sure where I am. Shit!*

A wave of confusion swept through her. Feeling unsteady on her feet, she sat back down on the sand. Staring at the smooth blue water helped her focus.

*Think. What do I know? I popped out of freezing blackness, fell 1200 yards without a parachute, and survived—which is impossible. What do I remember before the darkness? How did I get there?*

She cleared her mind, concentrated, and waited for the answer. Nothing. She took a deep breath and focused. Still nothing.

*Lie down. You must have been injured and passed out. You're experiencing some sort of trauma. Close your eyes and relax. Give it a few minutes. You'll be OK.*

The rhythmic sounds of the waves, the singing of the gulls overhead, and the fresh sea air helped. So did the warmth of the sun. The stark contrast called to mind just how cold and terrifying the blackness had been, however, and she shivered.

*At least the headache is fading. You're safe. Uninjured. No one's better than you in a crisis. Trust your training. Get centered. Then attack the problem. Take some deep breaths. Don't panic.*

The rich scents of the ocean air were familiar—comforting and relaxing.

A woman's friendly voice startled her awake. "Are you OK?"

She'd either been more injured than she knew and passed out, or she'd relaxed so much, she'd fallen asleep. She opened her eyes to see the couple she'd spotted earlier.

Sitting beside her to her left was a beautiful, Black woman with a shaved head. The sunlight accentuated the golden flecks in the woman's light brown eyes so much they virtually sparkled.

To her right was a bronze-skinned man sitting cross-legged. He had long, straight black hair, and high cheekbones. His dark brown, almond shaped eyes were intense and penetrating.

*The honeymooners.*

She sat up abruptly.

"I'm sorry." The woman's voice was warm and soothing. "I didn't mean to upset you." Her accent was almost musical. She spoke surprisingly slowly, as though to a child.

"Uh, no problem." She struggled to wake up—and to decide what to say to the two strangers. "I guess I dozed off."

The couple exchanged a quick, surprised look. "The sun is strong today, and we don't see any sunscreen." The woman held out a green tube. "Do you want to borrow ours?"

*The fastest way to get rid of them is to act like a local. Put the lotion on.* She took the tube and quickly applied it to her arms and face. "Thanks. I guess I forgot mine." She handed it back. "Thanks. Enjoy your day."

"You too. By the way," the woman stuck out her hand. "I'm Osumare."

*Damn. A Chatty Cathy. Be polite, but don't encourage her.*

"That's a beautiful name."

“Thank you.”

As she took the women’s hand, the man, from the other side, offered his hand with a big smile. “And I’m Massasoit,” his voice a deep bass. Turning his way, she was befuddled at what she was supposed to do. She took his hand with her other hand and shook both at the same time. They all laughed at their pretzel-like configuration as they let go and untangled.

*Great. Still in that giddy, newly married stage.* She noticed that her new companions had one arm decorated with tattoos running from wrist to shoulder. The designs were similar, but not identical.

“And you are?” The man asked.

“I’m,” she responded automatically—then stopped, her mouth open, “. . .”

It was a proverbial ‘tip of the tongue’ moment. The word she wanted was just out of reach. She ran her hand through her short blonde hair and chuckled at the idea she couldn’t remember her own name. *That must have been some crack on the head.* At first, it was as though her name was just about to bubble up. But the harder she tried, the deeper it retreated.

Fear gripped her. Her face turned pasty. *Something’s wrong. Seriously wrong. Your brain isn’t working. You can’t remember your name. You’ve been drugged! You obviously hallucinated falling from the sky without a parachute. The effects are only going to get worse. You need to find a hospital. Make an excuse and leave.* A line of perspiration formed on her forehead. Her breathing picked up more than a tick.

“I’m . . . late for an appointment.” She stood and brushed herself off. “I’m sorry. It was lovely to meet the two of you. You’re a cute couple. Congratulations. Thanks for the sunscreen. Enjoy this beautiful day.” Despite her inner turmoil, she tried to be a model of grace and courtesy. But she was aware she was prattling.

Osumare looked up at her. “You don’t know your name, do you.” It was more a statement than a question. “Why don’t you sit back down. You’ve been through a lot. We want to help.” Her face was earnest and showed concern.

Outwardly, she kept her composure. Internally, her mind was racing. *You’ve got to get out of here! They know who you are—but you don’t! They know what’s going on. If they were*



*friendlies, they would have told you what's happening! It wouldn't have been, 'You don't have any sunscreen'!* She scanned the area as casually as she could, looking for the straightest escape. *There are two of them. And they're fit. Damn! How do I lose them both?* The more difficult her situation seemed, the faster her heart raced.

“Please,” Massasoit added gently, leaning back and looking up at her. “You don’t know where you are or where to go. Like Osumare said, we just want to help. We *assist*.” His relaxed demeanor was reassuring.

One final look down the beach told her escaping was impossible. She wasn’t even steady on her feet. Outrunning them was out of the question—even if she knew where she was going. If nothing else, humoring them gave her more time. If she was lucky, she could find out what was going on. She hated being in such a weak position. Her chest tightened as she sat back down facing the two of them.

She took a deep breath. “No. I don’t know my name. But obviously you do.”

“Actually, we don’t,” said Massasoit, who was now glancing towards the part of the beach they’d come from.

“All we know is that you’re suffering from cognitive disorientation and retrograde amnesia, which is only temporary,” Osumare added.

“Caused by—?”

Massasoit stood up, looked at Osumare and directed her attention down the beach. “We’ll tell you everything we know. But right now, it’s better to do this in private.” His tone and the way he held himself gave off an air of authority. He was no longer a simple honeymooning beachgoer. “Please.” He extended his hand. “We assist.”

Respecting the urgency in his face, she let him help her up. As they began walking—away from whatever Massasoit had seen—she realized how unsteady she was. She also noticed just how fit her two, taller companions were. One on either side of her, with no apparent effort, they supported her so it wouldn’t be obvious to anyone watching how weak she was.

They walked close to the ocean. Given their brisk pace, she knew it was because the footing in the cool, dark wet sand was better than on the hot, white powder closer to the dunes.

Taking her measure of the situation, she held back on her questions. Conversation—even if her companions would engage—would only slow them down. When they got opposite an opening in the dunes, they turned and headed across the wide beach for it.

The other side of the dunes was forested, populated mainly with large maple trees at least 80 yards tall. The shade from the trees and a light, cool breeze provided a welcome relief from the heat. They stepped onto a wooden walkway about 100 yards long. It led from the beach to a small structure. The sign in front simply said, “Assistance.” She pointed to it. “You’re lifeguards?”

“We *assist*.” Massasoit spoke as though he was explaining something to a child.

She looked away so he couldn’t see her roll her eyes. *Let it go. There’s no point in alienating anyone yet.*

It was a two-story, octagonal building. There was so much glass, she had trouble figuring out what held everything together. A large deck jutted out of the second level and went around the whole building. Someone dressed like Osumare and Massasoit was looking towards the ocean. The deck was obviously high enough to see over the dunes. When the man turned their way, she noticed he wore what looked like a pair of large sunglasses. But there was a solid piece of black metal across the front instead of lenses. He smiled and waved. *That’s got to be opaque. How can he see us?* Her companions waved back. *Blend in. Be friendly.* She waved to him as well. His smile abruptly disappeared, he crossed his arms, and glowered at her as she approached the entry. *OK. So maybe the locals aren’t so friendly.*

The first floor was basically one large room. It looked like a cozy, family living room. It was divided into a series of sitting areas consisting of overstuffed, tan chairs and brilliantly colorful area rugs. The bright light streaming through the glass made everything look warm and inviting. Many of the glass panels were open, and a cool breeze flowed through. Right now, the three of them were alone in the room.

She followed her companions, and they all sat down. As she sank into the chair, she was struck by how comfortable it was. It was as though the chair fashioned itself to her form. The relief she felt at being off her feet told her that whatever her body had been put through, it was serious.

“Can we get you anything? Tea? Coffee? Water?” Osumare leaned forward. She removed a small, thin, green rectangle stuck to the inside of her wrist and placed it on the table between them. She stared at it for a few seconds.

“Thanks. Water sounds great.”

Massasoit headed to the other side of the room.

“How about some answers as well? Like, shouldn’t I go to a hospital? I apparently hallucinated that I fell 1200 yards without a parachute, and I can’t remember anything.”

“We’ll take you to a medical facility when you’ve gotten some rest, but your initial scan says you’re OK. No broken bones or brain damage. The amnesia will be temporary.”

“Scan?” *What scan? Did I black out?*

At that moment, Massasoit returned and handed her a bottle of water. The glass was so pristine it literally sparkled. She welcomed how chilled it was and downed it immediately. She was struck by how clean and fresh it tasted. She examined the bottle. *No brand. Just a logo I don’t recognize. How can plain water taste so good?*

“We know this is difficult, and we’ll be happy to answer all your questions,” he said. “We have no reason to be anything but completely honest with you. We don’t lie. But it’s important that you start by telling us everything you can remember. This kind of amnesia is tricky. Important details may fade. It’s like what happens with dreams. Everything’s clear when you wake up. Then it gets fuzzy or disappears altogether.”

Everything about the bronze-skinned man sitting opposite her said he was trying to be helpful and supportive—his open posture, the concern in his face.

*Your best strategy to get more information is to cooperate.* She nodded and settled back into the chair. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She recounted everything in precise detail. Coming to. The blackness. The dot and the breeze. Not knowing where she was or how she got there. Emerging into the light. Plunging. Lying on the sand. Looking around. Getting up to go somewhere. Realizing she didn’t know where. Sitting back down. Meeting them. She opened her eyes and laughed nervously, “And not having a clue who I am or how I got here.”

“I think we can at least start to help with that.” Osumare looked at her partner who nodded in agreement. “Describe everything again. But this time, tell us what you were *thinking*. I have a theory I want to test.”

Desperate for any clue to her identity, she was willing to wait on her questions. She closed her eyes again and concentrated. Seeing if she was hurt. Assessing the situation. Focusing on as many details as she could. Calculating the time to impact. Being stunned and confused it didn't kill her. Looking for threats. Studying her surroundings. Getting up, but not knowing her destination. Sitting back down, closing her eyes, and trusting that her training would help her decide what to do next.

“Very interesting.” Massasoit leaned forward. “Your systematic, disciplined approach. Staying calm in a crisis. Your attention to detail. Assessing your body for injury. Knowing how to calculate time and distance in free fall. Looking for threats on the ground. Referring to your ‘training.’ You have a military background.”

Something clicked. “That feels right, although I can't tell you any more than that.”

“And just one other thing to test another part of my theory.” Osumare held the thin green rectangle by her blonde hair, put it back on the table, and stared at it again.

*Weird.* The unfamiliarity of everything was making her uneasy. *It's time for some answers.* “You'll agree I've been cooperative. I really have to insist on some answers.”

“Absolutely.” The pair leaned forward. She was relieved they weren't going to play games to keep her in the dark.

“Where am I?”

“You're in Nauset,” the Black woman answered. “We think it's the same place you left from. You haven't gone anywhere.”

*Nauset. That has a familiar ring to it.*

“But the better question,” Osumare continued, “is ‘*When* is this?’”

She sat forward with a start. “*When?*”

“Yes. You've traveled into the future.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“I’ve traveled into the future,” she repeated carefully.

“Yes.” Osumare relied.

*HOLY FUCK! She means it! This is one sick hallucination. I so need to get to a hospital. Her heart beat harder. Hold it together. Get as much info as you can. Then make a plan.*

“How far into the future?” She tried to ask it as casually as, “How’s the weather today?”

“For a variety of reasons, that’s very difficult to say. However—”

“We’ll come back to that, then,” she interrupted. “You say I’m in the same place I left. Nauset?”

“Yes. Nauset.”

“Will you show me on a map?” Her tone was polite, but direct and firm.

“Of course.”

Osumare placed the colored rectangle back on her wrist and pointed her hand at the large window beside them. It turned into a screen. The image that came up looked like an arm jutting into the ocean, flexed at the elbow. Halfway up the ‘forearm’ was a red dot. “That’s us.”

She got up from her chair, walked close to the screen, and studied it. The couple joined her. *Damn. Vaguely familiar but nothing more than that. That’s going to be the story of my life until I wake up out of this.* “Give me a bigger view, please.”

“Just tell me when to stop.” The view zoomed out in clicks—one every few seconds. When she saw the land mass defined by another ocean on its left, she said. “That’s fine. Thank you.” She waved her hand over the whole of it. “What is this called?”

Osumare furrowed her brow. “I don’t understand.”

She started at the land by the ocean on the left and traced her finger until it reached the ocean on the right. “All of this. What’s it called?”

“All of it isn’t called anything in particular.” The Black woman still seemed puzzled. “There are too many communities to name, but I can tell you what a few of them are called, if that will help.” She walked up to the map herself. She pointed to a spot on the far left. “This is Tongva.” She moved towards the middle. “This is Lakota. This is Kahnawake.” Bottom right by the ocean. “Seminole.” Half-way up the coast. “Liberia. Back to Nauset. Is any of this familiar?”

“Yes and no.” She ran her fingers through her hair. Her pinched face showed her increasing frustration. She continued to stare at the screen. She looked at the green rectangle on Osumare’s wrist, and something clicked. “You said something about a ‘scan’ earlier,” she changed the topic abruptly. “No injuries or brain damage. You held that up to my hair.” She pointed to the thin rectangle. “Is it some sort of scanning device? What did it tell you?”

Osumare glanced at it and the screen changed. Two three-dimensional, holographic images emerged in front of the screen. On the left was a skeleton. On the right, the body’s soft tissues and organs. She touched the skeleton and it rotated. “As you can see, no broken bones.” She moved her finger to the other image. Again, it rotated 360 degrees. “Only minor bruising in a few spots. Sometime during the last year, you were seriously injured—but no long-term loss of function. Same with some earlier injuries that have healed—one connected with that scar on your leg.” She looked at the green rectangle again and a 3-D image of a brain appeared. “Your brain scan is normal. Is there any specific region you want to examine? The hippocampus? That will reassure you about the amnesia being temporary.” The image changed. It was like they were diving deep into her brain heading for a specific spot.

“Like I’d understand any of that?” she laughed nervously.

“You *don’t*?” The surprise in Massasoit’s voice was evident. Osumare shot him a sharp look. “Sorry. Right. You wouldn’t. You have amnesia.”

“The scan of your hair does give us a very general idea of the time you’re from.” The 3-D images disappeared, and a list of chemicals and their levels came up on the screen. “From the amount of various toxic substances in your hair, you’re probably from the mid to late-21<sup>st</sup> century. Because of how terrible the environmental pollution was in the past, it lets us place you in that century. We will take you to a health facility to be examined and—” she studied some of the levels, frowned, and looked back, “I wouldn’t say ‘decontaminated,’ as much as ‘detoxed.’”

There's nothing to worry about. You're healthy. Your memory will return, but slowly. First, you'll notice that some things *feel* familiar. You'll also be able to perform tasks—some simple, some complicated—without thinking. Like a kind of body memory. Specific facts about your identity and your world will emerge later.”

She nodded. “That’s reassuring. So, let’s start with how you knew I had amnesia.”

“Temporary memory loss is a side effect of time travel. And dropping out of a wormhole isn’t normal even in our time. It was a pretty safe bet that’s what caused the amnesia.”

“Next, what year it is, who you are, and what happened to me. I’m happy to hear speculation if you aren’t positive, especially about—”

“I’m sure you have a million questions.” Osumare interrupted. “And we want to help you find the answers. After all, *we* want to know your identity as well. But,” she tapped the screen and the image changed again, “as you can see, your blood chemistry shows that your body has experienced enormous stress. Look at your blood oxygen, adrenalin, and cortisol levels.” The woman pointed at specific readings as though their meaning was obvious.

She looked at the numbers and pretended she understood their significance. “Sure.”

“Let’s take a break then,” Osumare suggested. “We’ll start up again as soon as you get some rest.”

As anxious as she was to plow ahead, she recognized the prudence of pacing herself. She’d been running on adrenalin since she came to, and that was a poor strategy for the long run. *Regroup. Assess. Plan.* “You’re right. I’d appreciate being able to lie down. But I’ve got to ask. Am I right in thinking that time travel is normal now—whenever *now* is? You don’t seem at all surprised that I just fell from the sky from who knows how long ago.”

Her companions exchanged a look. “Let’s just say,” Massasoit explained, “time travel is in an experimental phase. The theory has been clear for a long time. The practical part is very recent. And as long as you don’t remember your name, it feels rude and disrespectful not to have something to call you.”

The abruptness with which Massasoit changed the topic struck her as forced, noteworthy, and suspicious.

“Do you have any preference?”

The idea of a temporary name made sense. She looked out the windows at the tall maple trees and the beautiful clouds hoping for some sort of inspiration. “Nothing’s coming. I could use some help.”

Massasoit thought for a minute. “How about Peregrine? It’s an old-fashioned name, but it may fit. It means—”

“Traveler,” she interrupted, surprising even herself. *Hmmm. Where’d that come from?*

Her response startled her companions. They exchanged a worried look so quickly it was like a knee-jerk reaction. It disappeared so quickly, she was tempted to think she imagined it. But she knew she hadn’t.

*My knowing the meaning of a name shouldn’t cause that kind of reaction. They let down their guard for an instant. My remembering something should be good news, unless—*

“Yes. It means ‘traveler.’” Massasoit spoke with a casualness she categorized as “studied.” “How do you know that?”

She laughed to herself. *He’s worried I’m hiding something. If only. My mind’s a blank. So, no need to play games and lie.*

“I don’t know. I just blurted it out. I guess I was right. Does it mean my memory is coming back? Is my knowing what it means significant?”

“Well—” He paused and looked back at his partner.

“Let’s be optimistic and assume it does,” Osumare quickly interjected. “But as Massasoit said, it feels rude not to have a name for you. Is Peregrine OK, then?”

She turned it over in her mind a few times. “Peregrine,” she said. “Peregrine,” she repeated slowly. *Weird. Something about that feels familiar.* “Peregrine it is.”

“In that case, welcome to Nauset, Peregrine, traveler from the past,” Osumare smiled warmly.



Massasoit pointed to the far corner of the room. “The living quarters are two levels down. The stairs are over here.”

As ‘Peregrine’ followed the couple, she asked, “Do the two of you live here?”

“When we’re on duty,” Massasoit replied.

“On duty as—” she paused.

“We *assist*.” He said it in the same, patronizing tone as before. She clenched her jaw. *You know, if you really wanted to ‘assist,’ you’d stop signaling you think I’m stupid.*

“We help anyone in this area who needs it,” Osumare added.

“And you’re partners—personally as well as professionally?”

“Yes,” she gave Massasoit a warm smile, which he immediately returned. “We were both assigned here three years ago. We’re very lucky.”

“Am I right in thinking your ink is related to that?”

“Ink?” he asked.

“On your arms. I see a pattern, but I don’t understand it.”

“Very perceptive,” Massasoit nodded her way respectfully. It was the first genuine compliment she’d received from him. *Maybe he’s not as big a jerk as I thought.* “Symbols of our joining.”

Downstairs led first to a dining area. Although underground, the lighting seemed natural. The room had a comfortable, homey feel—not institutional. Warm, wood paneling. Artwork on the walls. A few people dressed like her two companions—tan shorts and scarlet tops—were at a couple of the tables. When they saw her, they frowned. Massasoit went over to chat with them. *It must mean something that no one’s saying, ‘Yay! Let’s welcome the new girl to the future! . . . Their clothes. Must be a uniform. I’m not seeing any insignia. If this is some sort of headquarters or station, where are the typical signs of officialdom—flags, photos of officials, and the like?*

Osumare and Peregrine continued down another level to a long corridor with shorter ones branching off. The carpeting was plush and brilliantly colored. It looked more like an upscale

hotel than anything else. A giggling couple stepped out of one of the rooms at the far end of the corridor. Peregrine did a double-take as their body language registered with her. *There's only one thing that leaves people that relaxed and happy! Did they really just have sex? On the job?* When they saw her, they stopped and took a few steps back. Their expressions darkened, and they murmured something to one another. They stayed where they were until Osumare opened the door to a room, and she and Peregrine entered.

Lights automatically came on. The large space had the feel of a luxurious suite. Thick carpeting. A relaxing color scheme of soft green and sand. A big bed with lots of pillows. Beautiful artwork on every wall but one.

Osumare pointed to the corner. “The bathroom and shower are through that door. You’ll find shorts, jerseys, shoes, and sandals of various sizes in the closet if you want a change of clothes. Brightness and temperature are voice-controlled—as is the shower and tub.”

Massasoit joined them and handed her a chilled glass bottle with a mint green liquid inside. “This will help you feel better. If you need anything,” he added, “just say ‘Contact Osumare’ or ‘Contact Massasoit’ and we’ll be connected. Remember, we’re here to help.”

“Right.” Peregrine directed her comment to Massasoit. “You *assist*.” She included just a hint of snark.

He laughed at the tease. They closed the door behind them.

She walked around the room, studying it. *Gather intel. In a foreign situation, nothing's unimportant. You never know what can save your life.* Her careful scrutiny reinforced her initial impression. High end luxury. *The artwork looks pricey.* The bathroom was especially surprising. Expensive stonework on the walls and floor. Very large, jetted tub. Huge shower. Everything was gleaming and immaculate. Richly scented soaps, shampoos, and body wash. The towels were plush and matched the color of the walls in the bedroom. She shook her head. *If this is a job site, these people waste an enormous amount of money.* Back in the bedroom, she experimented with changing the light. “Brighter.” “Brighter.” “Dimmer.” “Dimmer.” There were no light fixtures evident. Brightness simply changed. *It's got to be something in the walls or ceilings.* She examined them carefully but couldn't figure out the lighting system.

She wondered whether the voice control could give her any information about her situation. “Date . . . Major events of the day . . . Location . . .” Nothing happened. *I bet they’ve restricted my access. That’s what I’d do. I should have asked more questions.*

She sat down in a chair like the one she’d been in earlier and looked at the room again. *Is this really the future?* She laughed. *How would I know? I have no memory of ‘the past.’ How could I tell what’s different in ‘the future’? What else might be the case? Some elaborate ruse? They said I have a military background. Am I on a mission but got hurt somehow? Has the enemy nabbed me, drugged me, and cooked up this ‘you’ve traveled to the future’ bit? What would they want from me?* She brooded about that. *Information—when my memory returns? Maybe they plan to turn me. Whatever, the best strategy is to reveal as little as possible. Don’t be defensive or evasive. Answer questions, but volunteer as little as you can.*

Having a strategy made her feel better. *Speaking of information, what exactly do you remember—about anything?* She closed her eyes and rummaged around in her brain like someone with a flashlight searching through an old attic to see what’s there. Little showed itself. *I know what skydiving is. I understand ‘honeymooners,’ ‘lifeguards,’ ‘military,’ ‘friends,’ and ‘enemies.’ I recognized that Osumare and Massasoit were in a ‘relationship’ . . . That other couple! I member what sex is!* She smirked. *That’s a relief! But not a good sign that their expressions changed so much when they saw me. What’s the deal with that? They hurried me off the beach. The guy on the platform scowled when I waved. Get an answer to that.*

She continued to poke around inside her mind for more memories, but it seemed either empty or wrapped in a fog. *Let’s go at this a different way. You don’t know who you are. Do you know what you believe? What do you stand for—and against? Important to know if you have enemies.* She searched. *Nothing?* She took a step back and just opened her mind—hoping something would surface. Nothing did. *Still? I can’t believe this. Maybe they’re right. Your body has experienced huge stress. Try again after you’ve rested.*

Thirsty, she opened the glass bottle, took a sip, and swirled it around her mouth. *Nothing obviously toxic.* She laughed at herself. *If they wanted to hurt you, they wouldn’t need to resort to subterfuge. There’s being alert—and then there’s paranoid.* She drank about half of the bottle. *Time travel doesn’t freak them out. It’s experimental? It weirds me out so much, it can’t be normal in my time. Are they reaching into the past and pulling some of us into their time? Who*

*are these people? High tech lifeguards? No. It has to be more than that. They knew I didn't know my name. They weren't there by accident. They were looking for me! Who looks for people falling from the sky? The military. But nothing about this place says 'military.' Intelligence? Are they agents embedded in a lifeguard station? Better be careful about what you ask them. Don't want to give away too much.* She laughed. *Considering that my mind's a blank, that shouldn't be too hard. So many questions to get answered.* Her brain felt like it was a hamster in a wheel going faster and faster, desperately struggling to keep up—but, of course, going nowhere. It was exhausting.

She looked at the bed. Walking over to it, she pressed her hand into the mattress. *Oh my God does that feel comfortable!* She ran her hand over the exquisite comforter and was tempted by its softness. The mound of oversized pillows beckoned. *Doesn't make any sense to run yourself into the ground so early in a mission. Fatigue level? . . . Seven. OK, program yourself for 20 minutes. Then back out there for more answers.* She kicked off her shoes and stretched out. Like the chair she'd sat in, the bed seemed to mold perfectly to the contours of her body. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Lights off." *20 minutes.*

\*

The pair stepped into their own chamber. "You realize suggesting 'Peregrine' might have backfired," Osumare said seriously.

"True. It was a calculated risk. You were as startled as I was she could converse with us. Since we don't have much time, we're going to have to take some chances."

She nodded. "Let's examine the scans again." When she looked at the green rectangle on her wrist, one of the walls lit up as a screen. The holographic images and data appeared. Brain. Blood chemistry results. Heart scan. Cardiovascular analysis. VO2 max. Body composition.

She studied the data intently. "Amazing. We're the first people in ages who have been able to look at the scan of a living Homo Ir? What do you think?"

He pointed to a specific spot and shook his head. "It's terrifying to see that. No wonder they couldn't stop themselves. And just like we've been told—no paralimbic lobe." He brought

up a different view. “At least there’s no hint of conscious deception. But this” he pointed to another spot, “is different from what we were told to expect.”

“I noticed that as well. Do you think that’s good or bad?”

“Too soon to tell.”

“Then there are these.” She pointed to two spots in the brain. “Her memory loss may be severe, then. Some of it may be permanent. Look at this. Is that a block?”

Massasoit frowned as he looked closer at the scan. “It’s hard to tell whether it’s a block or an injury. It’s suspicious that it seems so well defined. It’s possible there are specific parts of her history she’s being prevented from accessing.” He paused and looked at Osumare. “It doesn’t make any sense. No matter which side she’s on, why would you hamstring her by blocking memories?”

“We’ll know the answer to that only when we see which parts of her memories *don’t* come back. All we can do is wait and watch.”

Osumare nodded then directed her attention back to the scan. “Now *this* is really intriguing.” Her finger landed on a very different part of the image. “This isn’t supposed to be there in a Homo Ir brain. It’s why she understands us.”

“Genetic aberration?”

“Or.” Her eyes went wide. “Could she be an evolutionary precursor?”

“*Her?*” he virtually spat out the dismissive reply, then caught himself. “I’m sorry. Anything’s possible. The only way we’ll know is to watch how she behaves.”

“How much do we tell her?”

Her partner rubbed his chin. “Ultimately, everything, of course. We aren’t Homo Ir. We don’t lie. But until we know more, I suggest we don’t volunteer anything unless it’s necessary. When she remembers something on her own, we confirm it. I’m hoping that—coming from her—that will give us more information. Also, she’s very vulnerable at this point—desperate to remember what she’s lost. She’s probably very suggestible. We don’t want to risk her

constructing false memories from something we say. Better to let her restore memories at her own pace.”

“Agreed,” Osumare nodded.

“So, let’s try to find out who our visitor is. We have the DNA. The real question is whether she’s on the other side of The Gap.” His looked at the thin red rectangle on the inside of his right wrist—a twin to his partner’s. The screen flashed. “We’re in luck. We have some information, but most of the file is corrupted.” A picture and a few paragraphs of text appeared. “At least we have a name.”

Osumare read it off. “Jane Bradford. Wellfleet Police Department. Massachusetts.”

“Ancient Nauset. I suspected that,” he remarked.

“Detective,” she continued. “Mid-30s. Recruited from Armed Forces. Advanced training in cryptology, surveillance, counter-terrorism, weapons. Impressive career. That would be consistent with the evidence of combat injuries.” She pointed to a couple of spots on the holographic image.

“Can you get a date?”

“No. The best this tells us is sometime in the twenty-first century.”

“Scroll to her last assignment. Maybe that will give us something.”

The two of them read the existing fragments of a case summary.

“Damn,” Osumare frowned. “Just enough to be worrisome. Then the data is corrupted.”

Massasoit nodded. “If we’re lucky, we’re looking at the edge of The Gap. I wonder if Tech can retrieve anything.”

“I’ll ask. But even if they can, it might be too late to help.”

The two sat down on the sofa. “You’re going to have to work harder to conceal your feelings, my love.” Osumare’s voice was firm.

He sighed. “I know. I know. I just get so impatient. I guess I’ve just gotten used to people who know more about basic anatomy and biochemistry.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it,” she replied sharply. “We discussed this when you asked to join the team.”

He nodded. “I’ll do better. I promise. But—” As he hesitated, his face tightened suggesting an internal struggle—which he then lost. “Homo dystopus was so *primitive!*” His voice was filled with disgust. “Looking at that white skin and blonde hair, am I supposed to forget everything they did?”

“Of course not. But it was centuries go. And archaeologists still don’t know the cause. Yixuan tells me the current leading candidate is The Infection theory. And if it was, compassion and forgiveness are more appropriate than anger and blame.”

He leaned back and laughed. “The Infection theory?” he mocked. “Don’t tell me you believe that ridiculous idea? An entire race has the *bad luck* of getting infected with something that makes them aggressive, greedy, stupid, and self-destructive. A spiritual infection that then spread to other races. We and they are really the *same species*? Ha! You just saw her brain. Do you know they called themselves Homo *sapiens*? Homo *dystopus* calling themselves Homo *sapiens*! That’s a joke!”

“I’d be careful with that HD stuff around Yixuan,” Osumare cautioned, “unless you want a lecture on bias in scientific terminology.”

“Fine. Fine. Homo Irrationalis. But no matter what you label them, you can’t tell me your reaction to her is any different from mine. You feel like you’re babysitting some toddler. Just the way she looks at us screams fear and distrust. There’s no light in her eyes. And you’d better hope The Infection theory is wrong—because if you’re right, we could be vulnerable as well.” He ran his hand through his long black locks and gave her a worried look. “If she or any of the others are infected, we’re talking about a planetary disaster.”

“True,” she looked back seriously. “But in The Infection theory, even if it started with the Azungu, they weren’t all affected. And you saw the same thing I did on the brain scan. No obvious abnormalities. Ideally, she was sent here to help. Even if she’s not, she’ll be useful. But,” she punched her partner hard in the arm, “*not* if she gets a whiff of anything other than respect and acceptance from either of us. It’s going to be hard enough when we take her on the mission. She has to trust us completely.”

He laughed, rubbing his arm. “Point taken. I forget how good a punch you still pack. You’ll pay for that . . . later,” he winked.

“In your dreams,” she laughed.

“Speaking of the mission, do you think it’s time to bring Yixuan onboard?” he asked. “We could really use her expertise.”

She nodded. “I’ll contact her now.”

\*

‘Peregrine’ flailed back and forth on top of the bed.

Falling through the tunnel again—only this time crashing into the beach and lying there, her twisted, broken body wracked with pain.

Blackness.

She’s heartbroken and terrified. Get out of here! She runs as hard as she can. She’s panting—gasping for breath. She risks a quick look back. No! They’re gaining! It’s not going to be enough! Her heart sinks. She climbs. A voice shouts, “Jump, Jane!” It’s as though a powerful electrical current surges through her. Everything goes black. She slams into the beach again.

Blackness.

Frantic to get somewhere before being caught, she bikes past the scrub pines, through the dunes, and up a path. . . . Marconi . . . There are four huge towers with all kinds of wires running to the ground. . . . A hand grabs at her. Struggling to break his grip. Barely escaping. . . . A loud bang! Another one! . . . She falls . . . through the cold, dark, silent tunnel, she is gripped by terror as she plummets towards her demise.

“NO!” She screamed in real life as well as in the dream, waking herself up with a start. She was drenched in sweat. Her heart pounded so hard she was dizzy. Forcing herself to sit up, she looked around. All she saw was darkness. *Where am I?* Then she remembered. “Lights,” she shouted. As the room brightened, she lay back down until her head stopped spinning and her



heart and breathing returned to normal. *Just a nightmare. You're OK. Next step?* Still groggy from the nap, she decided a cold shower would wake her up. Entering the bathroom and undressing, she shook her head at all the soaps and shampoos to choose from. *I hope this is something like a VIP guest billet.* Within five minutes she was finished. She found shoes and a 'uniform' in the cupboard that fit her. Sipping more of the green drink, she walked through the dining area—much more crowded now than before.

The room went quiet. It was obvious everyone was trying to do the same thing—catch a glimpse of her without being obvious. Some dark murmuring and no small number of unfriendly looks made her uneasy. As she walked up the stairs to the sitting area, she noticed that the sky was nearly dark. Clearly, she'd been asleep for longer than 20 minutes. *My inner clock always wakes me up? Why not now?* She looked at the bottle in her hand. *Shit! They drugged me!* She marched over to Osumare and Massasoit who were conversing with a young woman.

She slammed the bottle down on the table, startling everyone in the room. Massasoit glared back.

“What's in this?” she barked. “What did you put in this that knocked me out for . . . for . . . I programmed myself for a 20-minute nap. How long was I asleep!”

“Four hours,” Osumare answered calmly.

“Four hours! What did you put in this to knock me out?” She demanded angrily, holding out the bottle.

Massasoit rolled his eyes impatiently. He took the bottle, unscrewed the cap, and sniffed. He looked at her, eyes wide. “Oh my God, you're right! This bottle is laced with . . . *electrolytes.*” He didn't even try to hide his mockery.

She bristled at his condescending tone.

Osumare gave her partner a disapproving glare, took the bottle from him, and handed it back to Peregrine. “Your scan revealed your body chemistry was off. And as for why you slept so long, it's because your body must have needed it. Where did you get the idea you can override that? Is that normal in your time?” Her curiosity seemed genuine.

She struggled for an appropriate answer. She felt chastened and ashamed. *Get a grip! Accusing these people of drugging you? What's wrong with you? You need their good will until you get your memory back!* "I'm sorry," she finally managed. "I still find everything confusing."

"Which is perfectly normal under the circumstances," Osumare said gently. She gestured towards the empty chair beside the unfamiliar young woman. "Sit down. You need to meet our new team member. Peregrine, this is Yixuan. Yixuan, this is Peregrine, our visitor from the past."

They shook hands and exchanged smiles. The woman was probably about twenty, at least a decade younger than the other two. Her skin tone was a pronounced yellow, her eyes were smaller and a shade slanted, and she was dressed differently from them. She wore tan slacks and a navy blue, short sleeve shift. *Not wearing a uniform. Interesting.* She had a tattoo on the inside of her right wrist. On her left wrist was a small blue rectangle like the ones Osumare and Massasoit wore. Her face had an exotic look. Her long, brilliantly white hair and electric blue eyes made her instantly striking.

"Yixuan actually wanted us to wake you up before you were ready." Osumare directed a teasing look at the young woman. "She was so excited to get our call about you, she was here in a flash. And don't be fooled by her age. She is a Senior Fellow at Wampanoag University. She does research in ancient history and specializes in your time period."

Yixuan extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you." Her voice was soft and gentle but her bearing and confidence suggested an authority that belied her years. Her eyes were as intense and penetrating as Osumare and Massasoit's. "I look forward to our discussions."

"Which there will be plenty of time for," interrupted Osumare, "but let's start with dinner." She turned to Peregrine. "I assume you're hungry?"

"Famished," Peregrine confirmed.

The four of them stood and headed downstairs. Yixuan was about the same height as Osumare but a bit heavier. She didn't have the ebony woman's athletic body, but she looked healthy and fit.

In front of the kitchen were a man and a woman who would take their orders. The scents from the food being prepared were delicious. A menu hung on the wall. It was an international cuisine. Peregrine was encouraged that the menu made sense to her. She figured out what most of the offerings were. *Something familiar. Dependable.* “Filet mignon, medium. Fried potato pieces.” *I’m assuming they’re about the same as French fries.* “Asparagus.” She turned to her companions. “It’s nice to see some things in the future are the same. I know I eat too much red meat, but I’m starving.”

“I should explain that the filet—” Massasoit began but was interrupted by his partner, “—will be even better than you’re used to.”

“Thanks.”

“If you drink wine,” he asked, “will you allow me to choose it? I know just the thing to pair with your steak.”

*Drinking at work, and fucking at work? Weird! But your task now is to observe. Fit in.*

“Sure. Go ahead. Thanks.”

He removed a bottle from the rack in front of them. “It took about 200 years, but the local wines are excellent now.”

She took the bottle from his hand hoping the label would at least tell her what year it was. In addition to “Nauset Pinot Noir” there were some images. But they didn’t mean anything to her. What struck her the most was how light the glass bottle was.

They settled in a quiet corner. The sturdy, circular table was made of some kind of wood. The comfortable chairs, the same. Both looked practical, but stylish. Their food arrived quickly. Dishes and utensils were definitely not ‘industrial.’ Fine China plates with beautiful designs. Simple, but elegant flatware. The wooden salt and pepper shakers were distinguished by beautiful, hand-carved designs. Soft music added to the relaxed setting.

Osumare poured the wine for all four of them and proposed a toast, “Here’s to Peregrine. Welcome to our time. And here’s to getting her all the answers she wants and returning her home.”

“Not that I don’t enjoy your company,” she laughed, “But I’ll definitely drink to that.” Sipping the wine, she was surprised at how good it was. She knew next to nothing about wine. But what she did know was that if a wine tasted this good, it had to be expensive. *They don’t scrimp at all, do they?*

Massasoit added a splash to her glass. “Where would you like to start? Remember, we’re here to help.”

“That’s easy. Tell me everything you know about the situation I’m in. Clearly, we’re all professionals, so I don’t need to go down the list. But be sure to include why you were concerned about my being seen on the beach.”

He held his glass up and gave her a nod of respect. *No surprise in his expression. OK. He’s coming along.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Osumare and Massasoit exchanged glances about who would start. With an unspoken agreement, he took a sip of wine and turned to Peregrine.

“This is about 2,000 years in your future. As best we can tell, you came from the twenty-first century. We can’t be more precise than that because so many records connected with your time were destroyed.

“You’re probably wondering why we aren’t stunned to have someone from the past fall out of the sky—literally. Time travel isn’t just theoretical. A few weeks ago, four temporal incursions from your time took place. The others landed elsewhere. We had reason to suspect the final one might arrive here. And you did.”

*“Temporal incursion. That sounds like an attack.”*

“It is,” he said in a matter-of-fact fashion.

She looked straight at him. “You mean that people from my time are invading your world? Why?”

“To be blunt, you’re trying to change history, so we never exist.”

She sat back, her eyes wide. *He can’t be serious. I’m part of an invasion trying to destroy them? So why didn’t they shoot me as soon as I arrived—or at least lock me up?* She looked around—evaluating her situation. *Maybe they have. Gilded cages are still cages.* “I don’t understand. How does going to the future make you never exist? And why would we do that?”

Massasoit turned to Yixuan. “I think it would help if you gave her some background.”

The seriousness that flooded the young woman’s face made her age a decade. “Look at everyone in this room. What do you see? And what do you *not* see?”

Peregrine studied the two dozen diners. *No one younger than 20 or older than 50. As many women as men. Everyone’s fit. Single individuals. Couples. Groups. Colleagues. Friends. Lovers. No small number of unfriendly looks cast my way. Massasoit’s not alone in his distrust*

*towards me. Wait . . .* She looked at her hands then back at everyone in the room. “How could I miss that?” Her anxiety was palpable. “I’m the only person here with skin this light. What’s wrong with me? Am I sick?”

“You think your light skin means there’s something *wrong* with you?” a surprised Yixuan asked.

“Of course. Everyone else here is darker. I’m pale. Anemic? What else could it mean?”

Her three dinner companions exchanged puzzled looks.

“Don’t worry,” Osumare answered. “You aren’t sick . . . But you don’t remember that there are different *races*?”

Peregrine paused. “I’m sorry. My brain is firing on only one cylinder. Give me a minute.” She closed her eyes. “I don’t remember anything about *races*.”

Osumare reached across and stroked her arm. “Race was so important in your time—especially to the Azungu—that the fact it’s not registering with you is significant. It may mean more serious memory loss than we thought. However, you aren’t sick. Your light skin just means you’re a different race.”

“Hominids are basically the same,” explained Yixuan, “but there are some irrelevant surface differences—skin color, face shape. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just different from us. However, there are relatively few Azungu on the planet now.”

“*Azungu*? You said that a minute ago as well.”

“The word is from my ancestors’ land.” Osumare turned to Yixuan. “Africa?”

“Yes. Literally, it simply means ‘white.’ Over time, it’s taken on some . . .” she hesitated, “unfortunate overtones.”

“Which is why we hurried you off the beach,” Massasoit explained. “Your species—especially your race, the Azungu—doesn’t have the best reputation. Our species is largely free of irrational bias. But the Azungu are our weak flank. Radical nationalists—white-skinned—from the colonial, industrialized nations drove the conflict that led to the war. Some people in our time still blame your race for that. I got the feeling at least one other person on the beach might have

seen you—an Azungu—fall from the sky. We didn't need wild speculation about what that meant. We needed to get you off the beach quickly.”

*War? Skin color? What the fuck is going on?* Her face tensed. She looked around at the others in the room. Everyone else's skin was some shade or mixture of brown, red, or yellow. Her lily-white skin was in such stark contrast to the range of skin colors around her, she looked pallid.

“Don't worry,” he reassured her. “You're safe. Everyone here has sworn to assist any who need it—no matter who they are—even those of us who may struggle with the stories we heard about the Azungu. I will recommend that any of us in this facility who have been feeling anything negative towards you, your race, or your species should focus on addressing that weakness the next time we meditate. We're only human.”

“Wait a minute!” she interrupted. “I'm not just a different race but a different *species*? That's crazy. We're the same.”

“That's interesting,” Massasoit interrupted. “You don't know what race means, but you *do* understand *species*.”

“OK. Maybe interesting to you,” she said impatiently, “but not as important as you saying we're a different species? What do you mean?”

The three looked at each other. Osumare took the lead. “There's no easy way to say this,” she said gently. “No. We aren't the same. You're an earlier, less advanced hominid than we are. Yixuan is best qualified to explain the details.”

The cocktail of emotions flooding Peregrine's brain—confusion, panic, fear—took control. “Stop!” she shouted. “You think I'm *inferior*?”

“Hardly. And I apologize if that's what you heard. I didn't mean to insult you.” Despite Peregrine's outburst, Yixuan replied calmly. “You are a unique, special being, and we honor that. But you are *different*. I appreciate that this isn't the way Azungu from your time think. Unlike your species and race, *we* don't think that *different* means *inferior*. It simply means *different*. Children aren't inferior to adults, but they are different. They're less advanced. Similarly, Homo Ir is less advanced than Homo RC. People in your time called themselves

*Homo sapiens*—the thinking hominid. But after the devastation you wrought—especially the Azungu—it was clear that was inaccurate. You needed to be reclassified. No truly *intelligent* species would have behaved the way you did.” Her voice filled with grief. “For centuries, you savaged each other. Then you basically destroyed the world. It took hundreds of years for the survivors to create something livable.” She paused. “You are,” she explained in a voice more clinical, “*Homo Irrationalis*—the irrational and emotional hominid. To be honest, most people who aren’t scientists call you *Homo dystopus* because of how terrible your societies were. We try to discourage that, but, objectively, that assessment is largely true. Your race gets most of the blame because the Azungu nationalists of your time believed you were the superior race—and acted like it. You launched a race war. As a result, we consider the Azungu to be the most primitive and the most dangerous of the races of your species. We are *Homo rationalis concorsque*—the intelligent and cooperative hominid.”

Yixuan continued talking, but her voice faded into the background for Peregrine. She was stunned. *This is all about race and skin color? In what universe could that matter? And lead to war and planetary devastation?* “Wait,” she interrupted. “Why does skin color matter?”

“To rational people, it doesn’t,” Yixuan replied. “To an irrational, fear-based, and emotional species like Homo Ir, it became an excuse for domination.”

Massasoit shifted uncomfortably in his chair, looked at Peregrine, opened his mouth—then looked away.

“You obviously want to say something. Go ahead.”

“Be honest with us. When you look at our darker skin, you instinctively think you’re superior to us, don’t you?” His voice mixed suspicion and gravity.

*I’ve had it with how arrogant this horses’ ass is.* “I think skin color tells me everything it tells you—that it’s *irrelevant!*” Her delivery was a perfect balance of, “Do I really look that stupid?” and “Fuck you, you bigot!”

Massasoit was silent. *Hoisted on your petard, you bastard.*

“We should apologize,” said Osumare. “Not even the Azungu who are living now doubt that the Azungu of your time believed they were superior to everyone else. And my partner has a



bad habit of being too ready to believe the worst about your race.” She gave Massasoit a disapproving look. Turning back to Peregrine, she actually looked a shade puzzled. “I confess to being surprised. You honestly *don’t* think skin color tells you something about the person inside?”

“Of course not! Why would anyone think that?” she shot back. She was reeling from the shock of everything she’d just heard. *I’m an inferior, dangerous primitive? I’m an enemy because of my skin color? The current troubles of my time not only won’t be resolved, they’ll mushroom. Fueled by racial warfare, they’ll culminate in an unparalleled level of destruction? Destruction? Fuck! That’s Armageddon!* She tried to force her mind to remember anything from her time. *Where are the global hotspots? How did it start? When? Is it going on now? What’s my part in this?* Frustrated that her brain was still a void, every part of her body tightened. *Get a grip! You need intel.* She stared silently at her wine glass as she struggled to process the terrible idea. A minute later she realized her three dinner companions were sitting silently, waiting until she was ready to proceed.

“I’m sorry. That’s a lot to take in.”

“No. We shouldn’t have been so blunt,” Osumare squeezed her hand. “It was insensitive of us not to realize what a shock all of this would be to you.”

“It’s OK. There’s never a good reason to hide from the truth.” Peregrine took a healthy swallow of wine and clicked into professional mode. “Tell me more. War. Destroyed the world? Are we talking a Third World War, then?”

“Something like that,” Yixuan observed, “but so much information about that time was destroyed, we can’t be sure what happened. What we can say is that it was a global conflict and fought with EMP weapons.”

“Electromagnetic pulse weapons,” Peregrine said, almost automatically.

Massasoit’s eyebrows raised. “You’re familiar with them.”

A wave of guilt washed over her. *Oh my God! That really rings a bell! Was I working on developing those?* “Apparently I am, although to my credit, I get the feeling I wish I weren’t,” she added somberly.

“Electromagnetic pulses can fry any computer—anything with a chip,” Osumare continued. “Imagine entire societies that depend on computers. Their economy, government, public utilities, health care, educational system, military. Everything from airplanes to home appliances to personal chronometers. Think of all the interconnections around the globe that depend on this technology. Now imagine EMP weapons so powerful they destroy all of this. It would—”

“—send everyone back into the Stone Age overnight,” Peregrine said grimly, interrupting her.

“Yes. Everything about how people operated on the planet had to be retooled. Old technologies had to be rediscovered. Massive amounts of data of all sorts were lost,” Yixuan added. “Scientific. Medical. Historical. Literary. Every category of knowledge. It’s like walking into a library and discovering each page in every book is blank. There’s a huge gap in humanity’s recorded history as a result. We’re just beginning to piece things together.”

Peregrine struggled to take in the impact of such destruction.

“But it’s even worse than you think,” Yixuan continued. “The people who designed these weapons were so hasty and careless they didn’t realize the weapons had two unanticipated side effects. Not only were they so powerful they had a residual effect that lasted for centuries, they damaged spacetime in a way that even affected *the past*.”

Peregrine’s eyes went wide. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes,” Yixuan nodded. “As paradoxical as it sounds, the devastation actually pre-dates the war. My guess is that you come from a time shortly before the EMP impact from the war to come begins.”

“You referred to ‘The Gap’ when we were introduced. That’s what you meant.”

“Yes.”

Peregrine sat for a minute in thought. *We unleashed weapons that destroyed everything and blasted a hole in history? Nobody would be that stupid. It’s been a couple thousand years. What’s the evidence?* She took the saltshaker and softly tapped it on the table a few times.

“Because so much information was lost, you can’t be *absolutely certain* what happened.”

“True. But,” Yixuan shook her head somberly, “the stories about what happened in The Gap are terrifying. Even if they’re only half true, people had it very hard for centuries.”

“*Stories*,” Peregrine frowned. “Not historical records.”

“True. Stories, but not tales people simply made up. These are fact-based *chronicles*—not the fictional tales common in the Age of Ideology. Losing other ways to record information, humanity fell back on oral traditions. Does Homer’s *Iliad* mean anything to you?”

She rummaged around the still empty attic of her mind. “I’m sorry.”

“The *Iliad* was an ancient Greek epic poem about a war between two groups, the Greeks and Trojans. It has more than 25,000 lines of poetry. The Greeks memorized it. It was recited and passed on with remarkable consistency. During The Gap, humans rekindled that ability. The stories that were created carefully preserved what happened. They weren’t fictions or propaganda tools. They were humanity’s attempt to record what occurred through epic poems. They aren’t as precise as we’d like, but we can’t dismiss them out of hand as fiction.”

“Even so,” Peregrine pushed back firmly, “there are bound to be exaggerations, inaccuracies. Maybe my species and my race weren’t the demons you think we are. After a disaster, everyone looks for a scapegoat.” She spoke confidently. But part of her feared she was looking for any excuse to question the explanation because the alternative was unthinkable.

“No, Homo Irrationalis was as bad as we fear,” the young woman said sadly. “Even the Azungu records before The Gap we’ve been able to find show that. We’ve retrieved enough of your chronicles describing the broad sweep of your species’ history for about 5,000 years. Homo Irrationalis was a self-destructive hunter who preyed on anyone or anything it could. You slaughtered one another for every reason—good and bad—until you made your own survival impossible. You made every vice a virtue—cruelty, greed, arrogance, ignorance, prejudice, racial, and sexual hatred. Your history is nothing but repeated cycles of domination, genocide, slavery. And while all Homo Ir races share the blame, the Azungu were the prime mover of the final push that led to global devastation.”

Her tone and demeanor had been unemotional and clinical. But anger now slowly crept into her voice. “You decided the planet was yours to do with as you pleased, and you waged war against anyone who stood in your way. When you encountered a new culture, your first impulse was to conquer it, steal its wealth, and use it for your own purposes. Did you try to merge your culture’s best ideas with the best ideas of the other culture? No. Did you try to make peace with it? No. You rolled right over it—always assuming your way of doing things was the best way and that anyone different from you was inferior and a threat. And if that weren’t bad enough, after abusing all the *people* you encountered, you made the planet—your *home*—a dangerous place to live for you and your children. You told yourself it made sense to do so! You contaminated the air, water, and land. You used anyone you could as a tool. For *material wealth*. For you! YOU ALONE! Not everyone on the planet. Not for anyone living in the future. And certainly not the races you ground under—”

The young woman stopped herself mid-sentence. Osumare and Massasoit looked astonished at the young woman’s passionate diatribe. They quickly eyed their guest from the past. Peregrine’s glare said she was furious at the tirade of accusations.

Yixuan closed her eyes, sat back, took a deep breath, and sat quietly. “I’m sorry. I’m having trouble describing this with scientific objectivity, and I’m not treating you with respect. You’re our guest. I apologize.” The tension around the table dissipated. She faced Peregrine. “Let me explain something. When I first started researching Homo Ir,” she continued in a calmer, more analytical voice, “my thinking was colored by the anti-Azungu biases of my family. When I began my studies, my teachers were appropriately severe in criticizing my prejudice. I resolved to be more objective and to become a respected scientist. I decided to challenge the bigotry head on. I set out to show that over the course of time, the evidence would demonstrate that Homo Ir was at least progressing out of your initial barbaric stage and that your cultures were becoming less violent, less self-destructive, and more compassionate. This would set the stage for the emergence of Homo RC. I even started looking for evidence that the EM damage was caused by a massive solar storm that produced a solar flare and coronal mass ejection. Logically, that was a possibility.” She paused.

Peregrine turned to her. “You saw something that changed your mind.”

She nodded, as sadness filled her face. “It broke my heart that the dark characterization of the Azungu had been right in the first place. Everyone in my field prays for finding data fragments that can be reconstructed. Most of the time, it turns out to be something like a recipe book. Interesting, but not earthshaking. But I had remarkable luck. I discovered an actual, physical book that somehow survived in the vast, dusty archives of the library in Boston. Printed at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the book surveyed the time’s highs and lows. From our perspective, it confirmed that a hallmark of your species is unthinkable cruelty and self-destructive stupidity. It also documented the Azungu racism. First, Germany and World War Two. Then, your homeland, the United States. But because that’s where Azungu supremacy was championed, we have reason to believe that’s where the terrorist attack is coming from. You’re somehow connected with that.”

Shocked, confused, and crestfallen, Peregrine looked away. *This is a nightmare. I wake up on a beach supposedly 2,000 years in the future with no memory of anything. I’m told I may be part of a terrorist attack launched by white supremacists aiming at genocide.*

“We believe the invasion is part of an Azungu campaign of racial purification,” Massasoit added. “If the rumors are true, all five of you who have arrived from your time are white. Isn’t that what you’d think?”

It was torture even to imagine the possibility, but she forced herself into strategic mode. She looked directly at him. “Yes. It can’t be an accident. Give it to me straight. What’s their . . . our . . . mission?”

She caught the flicker of surprise and respect in his eye.

“In the course of reinventing technology, it was always a major goal to develop a way to neutralize EMP weapons,” he explained. “Our species has evolved beyond warfare, but we are pragmatic. We need to be prepared for any threat. We recently made a critical breakthrough. We don’t know how people from your time learned about this. But we suspect that a team has come to take it, return to your time, and use it to change the outcome of the war. They’ll protect Azungu countries while unleashing EMP weapons on the other races. We want to stop that from happening. For centuries there have been rumors about a secret Azungu cell whose members have been looking for a way to get revenge. Most of us dismissed the idea as foolish paranoia.

Apparently, we were wrong.” This is a dangerous moment.” His tone couldn’t have been more somber.

The prospect made her shudder. Her mouth went dry. She braced herself as she prepared to utter the most difficult sentence of her life. “You’re telling me I’m part of a group trying to steal this technology to use it in a race war to prevent your world from ever existing.”

“Yes. At least you *might* be,” Osumare said calmly. “But that’s not the only possibility. There’s another we’d much prefer. That you are here to help us stop this from happening.”

Peregrine paused, then looked at Massasoit. “You don’t believe that, do you? You think I’m one of *them*.”

He looked squarely at her. “Like Yixuan, I heard a lot of Azungu horror stories growing up. I know my weaknesses. But I make judgments based on evidence. We reveal who we are in what we *do*. My opinion of who you *are* will be based on *your actions*.”

Peregrine took the bottle of wine and refilled his glass. “I didn’t ask you to be diplomatic, Massasoit.”

He nodded, with a glimmer of respect in his eyes. “You’re right. Honesty is better. Until I have evidence to the contrary, I’ll assume you’re one of them.”

“Smart man.” She held up her glass as a toast to him. “That’s what I’d do. So, how will we know which it is? When my memory returns?”

“Yes. You may remember you’re a terrorist. However,” Osumare reached across the table and took her hand, “even if that’s why you came here, your role in this matter from this point on is what you *decide* it will be.”

Peregrine’s head was swimming. *I’m either a terrorist, a terrorist hunter, or a terrorist they want to turn. How do I know any of this is true?* She could feel a migraine coming on. But she never stopped midway in anything. She turned to Yixuan. “You said self-destructive stupidity and unthinkable cruelty. I imagine that’s just the start.” She motioned with her hands as though the list would be endless. “Come on. I can take it. It can’t be worse than what you told me. And I don’t make excuses for bad behavior—no matter who does it,” she said firmly.

Her three dinner companions exchanged a quick glance.

*Huh. They're surprised. They expected an inferior whatever-species-I-am to be incapable of anything but tribal loyalties. Let's call that progress.*

“We’ve been able to document at least two episodes of what was literally suicidal behavior by Homo Ir. Beginning in your nineteenth century, the Azungu nations championed the exclusive, wasteful use of fossil fuels in powering your economy. The increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere made the planet’s temperature rise to catastrophic levels. Despite decades of warnings from the planet’s best scientists, your homeland—one of the planet’s worst polluters—took the lead in denying it was happening. You undercut attempts to address things until it was too late. Rising sea levels. Superstorms. Drought. Population migrations that resulted in wars. Failed states. Terrorism.”

“Terrorism?” Her eyes widened.

“You seem surprised.” Massasoit looked puzzled. “If the Azungu were destroying the planet, other races would surely attack them—either to try to stop them or, when it’s too late, at least to exact revenge.”

Peregrine nodded. “But how could anyone *deny* that any of this was happening? How could anyone close their eyes to threats right in front of them?”

Yixuan sighed. “That takes us to the second self-destructive episode. Your country became the exemplar of one of the main features of the Age of Ideology—an assault on truth. An entire industry emerged with a business model of profiting from lies, increasing fear, and pitting people against each other. Homo Ir is easily manipulated. Simply put, your country spread destructive lies and propaganda, championing ignorance over facts—even when it came to a series of global pandemics. Deadly viruses. A reappearance of smallpox and a variant of the Black Death. Millions of people died needlessly in your country because they believed the lies. Tens of millions on the entire planet.”

“That can’t be right,” Peregrine pushed back. “My memories may not be intact, but if I’m representative of my species, I’m certain that no one is stupid enough to be tricked about whether their life was in danger.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but while your species had the *potential* for intelligence, you never got there,” Yixuan explained. “There’s no reason to be diplomatic about this. As a species, yes, you are that stupid.”

Peregrine’s head was spinning again. This was too bizarre an idea to accept. “No, we’re intelligent,” she pushed back. “My memory may still be shot, but I’m intelligent enough to be conversing with the three of you. According to you, my species developed powerful weapons and advanced technology. Some of us have traveled from my time to yours. Surely that means we’re intelligent.”

“No,” Osumare replied calmly. “That means you were *clever*. Let me ask you this. Would you agree that a necessary trait of an intelligent species is the ability to perceive threats in its environment and to respond appropriately in order to save your life?”

“Of course. That’s obvious!”

“It is to *us*. But, as Yixuan has been explaining, that’s exactly what your species did *not* do. You refused to take threats to your very existence seriously. You denied they were real. You disregarded the safety of yourselves, your children, and your grandchildren. You caused global devastation. That’s hardly the sign of an *intelligent* species.”

“Your misuse of language was especially damning,” Yixuan added. “Language is a tool. Its proper use is communicating facts, strengthening relationships, and solving problems. You used it more to deceive and manipulate people.”

Peregrine was at a loss. It was such a simple, commonsense way of looking at things, it was impossible to argue with it. *Are we really not who we say we are?*

“This isn’t some academic dispute over the meaning of terms,” Osumare looked at her seriously. “We’re trying to stop a terrorist attack that will erase us from ever existing. You can help us. But if you don’t accept the limitations of your species, you’ll not only put our mission in jeopardy, you could easily end up dead. You have to trust me when I say that you cannot believe what you were told about your species your entire life. You cannot trust your instincts, because the instincts of your species led to self-destruction.”



The gravity and sincerity in Osumare's face gave Peregrine pause. She leaned back in her chair, took another swallow of wine, closed her eyes and tried to make sense of everything she'd just heard. Her head was pounding. She was amazed that everything she'd heard hadn't made it explode.

"Fortunately, there are two different explanations for what happened," Yixuan continued. "One. It was simply the nature of Homo Ir to be self-destructive. You blossomed towards the end of the Age of Ideology. Your actions resulted from irrational beliefs—political, economic, religious, cultural—more than truth and facts. Extinction was your inevitable fate.

*"However, some of us believe that you were vulnerable to a spiritual infection that made you act that way. It started with the Azungu and spread to the rest of the races. Unfortunately, the practical results were the same. Global devastation."*

As her head throbbed, Peregrine regretted having insisted on hearing more bad news. *We ignored threats? My country lit the fuse for global destruction? We're either self-destructive, or a 'spiritual infection'—whatever the fuck that means—made us crazy and no one noticed? None of this makes sense!* Her face tightened in response to the pain.

Osumare looked concerned, reached over, and took her hand. "You're freezing. The tightness in your face tells me you have a terrible headache. Correct?"

She nodded.

"It's from the stress. Since it's such a lovely night, let's walk along the beach. It will help. Then you can sleep. We'll continue any discussions tomorrow."

\*

When the four of them stepped outside, the heat of the day was gone. The evening ocean air was refreshing, and the rhythmic sounds of the waves were relaxing. Osumare instructed Peregrine to stand in front of her. "I can help you with the headache. Trust me. Take both of my hands, close your eyes, and breathe slowly and deeply." Peregrine did as instructed. After a few breaths, the headache felt less piercing. Then she heard Osumare gently humming some sort of tune. It was very soothing. A couple of minutes later, the headache was gone.

"Thank you. How did you do that? What were you humming?"

“It was a lullaby my mother used to sing to me. I knew that if you could just clear your mind, relax, and feel safe, the pain would subside. Often if we just give our bodies the chance to regain inner balance, they can heal themselves. Come.” She led the group down the walkway to the dunes, the full moon lit their way. Peregrine stopped short.

She pointed at the tall maples. “The trees!”

“Yes,” Massasoit laughed. “We call those *trees*. *T-r-e-e-s*,” he said slowly and deliberately, with an obvious smirk.

She joined in the laughter then stopped mid laugh. “I remembered something! When I slept, I dreamt about this place. I *never* remember my dreams. But the trees were all short and scrubby. This is a forest now.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. “There were towers and a building, but it was different. It was called, ‘Mar—, Marco. No, there was more... *Marconi*,” she announced confidently.

“Brilliant!” Massasoit shouted. “Do you know what it means?”

It was the same as when she tried to remember her name. The meaning was just out of reach. “Shit! I can’t get it. I don’t know.”

“That’s OK. At least you’re starting to recall things. That’s a good sign.”

Osumare turned to Yixuan. “Marconi. Does that mean anything to you?”

“No. But I’ll look into it. In fact, I’ll go home now and start the search.”

“Are you sure? It’s a beautiful evening. Look at the moon. Listen to those waves. Feel the breeze. It’s glorious. A night like this is meant to be savored.”

“You enjoy it,” the young woman said abruptly. “I need to work on this.”

As the other three stepped onto the beach, Osumare and Massasoit held hands. “I need to apologize for Yixuan,” she said. “She’s passionate about her work, but her fixation on the past pulls her in the wrong direction. The past may be interesting, but it’s dead. The gifts of the present are meant to be enjoyed.”

Massasoit put his arm around his partner and squeezed. “Missing a glorious night like this so she can work is very sad. The work will still be there in the morning. The moon won’t.”

Peregrine shook her head. *They want to stop some sort of temporal catastrophe, but they take time to go for a midnight, moonlit walk by the ocean? Not encouraging.* “You people are real hedonists, aren’t you?”

Her companions laughed. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. Of course we are.”

“Even now? When you just told me what danger you’re facing?”

“*Especially now,*” Massasoit explained. “If we thought that continuing to work through the night would make a practical difference, we would. Our assessment is that it won’t. Tomorrow morning, we will all be rested.”

“But why aren’t you more worried? The two of you are strolling along holding hands. Why aren’t you strategizing and marshalling resources based on what little you’ve learned from me today? Based on what you’ve told me, I’m so freaked out I won’t be able to sleep for a week.”

“Remember that while you may have just learned about this situation,” his tone became decidedly more formal, “we’ve been working on this for a while. Many are involved, with a wide array of talents.”

*Of course. They’re professionals. Don’t insult them.*

“But everything that makes up moments like this,” he gestured at the beach, ocean, and sky, then kissed Osumare on the cheek, “strengthens us.” His tone was friendly and informal again. “How can one flourish without being enriched by one’s surroundings?”

She frowned. *I don’t get it, but I’m not going to poke the bear again. Be diplomatic.* “Pleasure strengthens you?”

“Pleasure doesn’t—in itself. But it promotes flourishing. As does hard work, sacrifice, generosity, discipline, study, compassion, creativity, meditation, purpose. Our strength lies in our flourishing.”

“OK, flourishing, not pleasure. What do you mean?”

Osumare laughed. “Has anyone ever told you to enjoy the moment more?”

“But I just want—”

“No more discussing tonight,” she interrupted. “Take in everything around you. Breathe. Relax. Your body will thank you for it.” The corner of her mouth moved up a tad. “By the way, how was the steak?”

“Delicious.”

“The plants it was made from will be happy to hear that.”

“Plants? You mean—”

“Of course. We don’t eat animals.”

\*

By the time Peregrine returned from the moonlight stroll, she was more relaxed. When she entered her room, the air felt as cool and refreshing as it did outside. *We’re underground. How do they do that?* Undressing, she climbed into bed and felt the mattress form to her body. She stared at the ceiling and smirked. *Just an ordinary day. Travelling thousands of years into the future. Not knowing who I am. No, that’s not entirely true. I’m either a terrorist or a terrorist hunter,* she groaned.

In their room down the hall, Osumare and Massasoit sat at a table that was effectively a large video display. They stared at a fuzzy, black and white image. It showed a small building surrounded by a circle of very tall wooden towers and wires.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Wellfleet. Marconi,” she nodded. “It makes sense that’s where they’d try. The quantum properties of that location make it as good as it gets for supporting an artificial wormhole. That’s why we were alerted this might be a landing spot. And if she saw towers, that means it was after the site was reconstructed. That should help us figure out what year she is from.”

“But why was her targeting so far off? The others landed in Atlantis. Why not her?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think she was sent to stop them by the authorities of her time. But if she was prepared properly, she shouldn’t have such extreme time travel amnesia.”

“Do you think she’s doing this on her own? She’s impatient. Headstrong.”

“I wouldn’t rule it out. Maybe she thought she knew how to manage it by herself. Or—”  
Her expression turned grim.

“I’ve thought of that too. She’s one of the terrorists and was about to get caught. She gets to the site barely one step ahead of the authorities and is able to jump, but with no preparation. She ends up here because the default setting would be the same place she left.” He rubbed his chin. “Are you still willing to tell her everything?”

Osumare stared back and shrugged her shoulders.