EXCURSION THROUGH TIME

Part I

Genesis



PROJECT AEGIS

Cabo Verde, Praia, 1979

A young man sat alone in the back of a bar, a silent observer in a carnival of people wearing masks. His dark skin caught faint glints of the low, amber lights that hung from the ceiling. His eyes were keen and attentive, inspecting every person present like an ocelot observing a family of agoutis before it struck. Before him, a neat glass of rum caught the wan light, casting fractured reflections on the worn surface of the table. His journal, a storehouse for his meticulous observations and independent study, was located next to the glass. He was dressed in nondescript apparel to avoid drawing too much attention.

He watched intently, searching, his gaze lingering on each patron, as he dissected their movements and mannerisms. Near the front bar, a group of middle-aged women erupted in peals of laughter, their merriment tinged with desperation. Crow's feet and deep wrinkles, covered poorly by thick layers of concealer, spoke of years lost and dreams unfulfilled. They wore lavish clothing, an effort to seem wealthy, he inferred, but the garish scent of their cheap perfume and the fact that this was a low-class bar evidently betrayed them. The rings on their fingers glinted

in the low light, signalling their matrimonial bonds. All except one. She was quieter, more reserved, and perhaps, the young man mused, easier to isolate. Her friends may not mind her absence, but that was a gamble he couldn't rely on. He'd need to charm her somehow, captivate her in a way that would draw her away from the group, though that was not exactly his forte. Still, separating her from such a tight-knit circle wouldn't be easy. Any sudden disappearance could raise suspicions, even if they weren't paying close attention initially. Had she been alone, things might be different and more manageable. Maybe not her, he considered, weighing his options. It'd be too difficult to pull off.

His eyes shifted to a stocky man slumped at the front bar, fatigue etched into his demeanour, probably tired from a day's work. The man's inebriation was obvious in his sluggish movements and heavy-lidded gaze that lazily swept the room. He was alone but seemed to be a regular based on his interactions with the bartender. And the way he sat, it was as if he had carved himself into the fabric of the place. He also seemed a bit anxious, tapping his two fingers idly against the worn countertop. The young man considered him briefly. Could he possibly be an easier target? The right amount of persuasion might easily lead him away, but his sheer size created a logistical nightmare. He was too bulky, too big. Again, the young man concluded it'd be too tricky to pull off.

After carefully observing the other patrons, he decided that today might not be the day. As he began to close his journal, the leather cover made a soft thud, and a voice cut through the ambient chatter of the bar.

"Hey, are you here by yourself?" a stranger asked him. Although the question was casual, it carried an undercurrent of curiosity.

"Yes," the young man responded in a measured and neutral tone.

"What brings you here to Fen's Bar?" the stranger pressed, leaning in slightly.

"I'm a tourist, just visiting," the young man responded.

"Same here," the stranger responded, smiling with his eyes, an expression that seemed suspiciously friendly to the young man. "Ahhh,

from your accent, I can tell you're not from around here. Let me guess, Nigeria? No, perhaps, maybe Ghana?"

The young man's expression remained inscrutable. "Maybe, but where I am from doesn't matter."

The stranger chuckled. The sound was hollow. "May I at least know your name then, stranger?"

The young man paused briefly and then responded, "Gatimu."

"Dembe," the stranger replied, extending a hand.

Gatimu shook it, feeling the clammy grip of Dembe's hand linger a moment too long. In that instant, an uneasy tension crackled between them. Dembe's eyes were dark, almost too dark, like twin black holes in a binary system, threatening to swallow Gatimu whole. For a fleeting moment, Gatimu felt as if he was being appraised, much like he had appraised the other patrons. There was something off about Dembe, something that set his nerves on edge. He became enamoured by it. But Gatimu's senses, honed by years of practice, screamed at him to be cautious. He knew then that Dembe was no ordinary patron, and this was no ordinary encounter.

Dembe sat opposite, facing Gatimu, "So what's in the journal?"

"It's my notes for my research."

"Ahhh, so you're a scientist, eh? What field?"

Gatimu found it strange that his first guess was that his research was of a scientific nature, but he entertained the conversation despite this. "You could say all."

Dembe became intrigued. "I've never heard of a scientist who is in all fields."

Gatimu didn't respond. The two men sat in silence for a moment.

Dembe leaned forward, eyes narrowing slightly, his tone casual but laced with intent. "You know, I've always believed the greatest minds are never born to *contribute* to the world, they're born to *correct* it. And those who grasp time... well, they don't just correct the world, Gatimu, they escape its flaws altogether."

Gatimu didn't answer, but a stillness came over him. The words had lodged somewhere deep beneath the layers of intellect, past the corridors of grief and anger, to that flickering point in his fractured psyche where hope still reigned. His fingers unconsciously tapped the edge of his journal, not in irritation but in rhythm. A faint tremble moved through his jawline, a subtle clench, barely noticeable but telling.

Correct the world? No, burn it down and remake it. Strip it of its rot. Rip out its flawed wiring and replace it with perfect symmetry. He'd once believed in equations, in rules, in elegant boundaries. But time... time was the only truth now. And Dembe's words voluted around that truth like incense smoke around a hidden altar.

Escape its flaws altogether.

That voice again, low, familiar, corrosive. The one he tried to drown in formulas and injections. *You could do it if you break free. If you let go of this feeble flesh, this soft-minded guilt. She's waiting, somewhere beyond cause and consequence, beyond entropy. You just have to reach.*

His pulse quickened. Not from fear. From the ache. That raw, gnawing ache of being almost whole. Almost divine.

He didn't speak. But his silence was no longer empty.

Dembe's friendly demeanour suddenly changed and became more serious.

"I'll cut the small talk here, Gatimu. We're both smart men here, and I'm pretty sure you've figured out that this encounter was not random but intentional," Dembe said with an expressionless face.

Gatimu's eyebrows raised slightly, "What do you want?"

"I've had eyes on your work for some time now. Your research into temporal mechanics has piqued my group's interest and mine. I've come here to ask you to join our team."

Gatimu was silent, deep in thought. "I work alone."

"Haha, I figured you'd say that. I'll leave you with something special."

Dembe slipped him an envelope.

"What's this?" Gatimu questioned.

"Something that will definitely change your mind. My address is also in there. I'll be in the country for another week. If I don't hear from you by then, we'll likely never see each other again."

Gatimu took the envelope. He opened it to pull out what was inside, but Dembe's hand stopped him.

"Not here, do it in private," Dembe said as he stood up. "Anyway, I'm off."

Dembe left, leaving Gatimu alone in a haze of bewilderment. After about twenty minutes or so, Gatimu left the bar, and his path led him to an abandoned factory on the city's outskirts. It was quite dark, so he needed to use his flashlight to navigate the shadowy landscape. The stench of rot filled the air, and vermin scurried underfoot as he pried open a rusted door that he had done many times before. Inside, the dampness was palpable, with pools of stagnant water dotting the uneven floor. The persistent drip of a leaking pipe echoed through the quiet. He trudged forward, eventually standing before an old mine cage elevator. He entered it, and as it descended, the machinery creaked, its bolts threatening to snap under the strain.

The elevator groaned to a halt with a forlorn *ding*, and the creaky gates crept open, revealing a scene of decrepitude. The place smelled vile, and insects swarmed the surrounding area. Broken lights flickered above, and loose wires hung like tangled lianas from the ceiling. A cluster of desks littered with scientific apparatus stood at the far end of the room. Test tubes, beakers and burettes, stained with dubious residues, lay scattered. Gatimu moved towards his chaotic kitchen, the centre of his grim experiments, and placed the envelope Dembe had given him on the desk.

He opened it and pulled out a stack of papers held together by staples. In big black bold letters on the cover page, it read: *Project Aegis*. Underneath this cryptic heading was a summary detailing the contents of the project. He was halfway through reading it when a metallic clink interrupted his focus.

"Please, let me go," a voice pleaded from a shadowy corner.

Gatimu placed the papers back into the envelope, put it on his desk and walked towards the voice. Switching a light on, it illuminated the area. Dried blood streaked the walls, and human excrement caked the floor. In front of him was the source of the voice, a man. His precious lab rat. His plaything. He looked upon it with pleasure, his senses tingling in anticipation. Beside his toy, in a row on both sides, were his other toys. Long dead now, as they had succumbed to their procedures. Some were just piles of organs, slowly decaying, while others were still whole.

"Please, let me go. I need to pick my daughter up from daycare," the man implored again, somnolent, his voice a weary whisper. Bound by chains that hoisted his arms above his head, he hung limp. His left leg was amputated at the knee, and his right was a grotesque mess of infection and infestation. His body was a canvas of scars and needle marks like polka dots, each a testament to Gatimu's relentless experimentation.

Gatimu's eyes narrowed with a perverse delight. He clasped his hands, inhaling deeply, savouring the moment. Retrieving a small recorder from his pocket, he began to dictate:

"Experiment T-Int3, attempt number two hundred forty-eight, dated the fourth of July, nineteen seventy-nine, at twenty-three forty-three hours and forty seconds."

He returned to his desk, retrieving a syringe filled with a bizarre, luminous substance. Approaching the captive, he injected the concoction into the man's vein. The reaction was immediate and violent; the man convulsed, his bones snapping audibly as his joints dislocated. His screams tore through the stale air, culminating in a horrific climax as his chest burst open, like an overheated bowl of soup exploding in the microwave, splashing everywhere, showering Gatimu in a gruesome spray of blood and viscera.

Another failure, Gatimu reflected. How many more times would he have to try this until it worked? He became frustrated, flinging the syringe to the floor. In a rage, he started tearing the place apart, knocking over all his equipment and bashing in computers. As he stood there, drenched in blood and guts, a thought crossed his mind. Maybe, just

maybe... yes, that might work. He sat on the floor in a meditative pose and looked up at the ceiling. His mind was calming now, but still, a hint of anxiety lingered in his chest. After about an hour in this posture, without moving a muscle the entire time, he got up and headed to a sink stained with muck and bits of expired flesh. He washed the blood from his face and hands and looked at himself in a broken mirror atop the sink. He smirked slightly. He had an idea.

Quickly, he retrieved the envelope that Dembe had given him and opened it to continue inspecting its contents. He pulled out the stack of papers and realised another device was in the envelope, which he had never seen before. He pulled it out. It was hard, flat and rectangular. He inspected it, trying to make sense of it. A circular button was on its surface along one of its edges. He pressed it, and a coloured image appeared on its surface. Gatimu was startled. He was unaware that this technology existed. On the screen was an animation of a finger, prompting him to swipe to the left. He did as suggested, and a pre-recorded video started to play on the following display. It was Dembe, in some lab with two other individuals.

Gatimu spent the rest of the night watching the video on repeat, eyes unblinking, jaw clenched, a near-maniacal stillness overtaking him. The footage flickered on the screen like an echo of prophecy, and he sat in silence, absorbing every frame. He thumbed through the papers marked with the Project Aegis insignia—dense diagrams, gravitational schemas, nano-tech and cryptic field equations. His lips parted slightly as he read, a low exhale slipping out, almost a laugh. Yes. This was it.

With this newfound information, his plans were finally able to become a reality.

But it wasn't just science. Not anymore. It hadn't been for a long time.

He pulled a small, nearly faded black and white photograph tucked beneath his journal's final page. A girl, no older than seven, caught mid-laugh in a sunlit garden.

He touched the image with a trembling finger, not reverent, but hollow. Once, she had been the centre of his world. Then the centre collapsed. Her death shattered something in him beyond description. A rupture in the fabric of his psyche that no therapy or theory could suture. Time had mocked him. Laws of nature had stood smugly in place, untouched by grief.

So he broke them.

What began as a desperate quest to reverse a tragedy became something far more significant and dangerous. He no longer sought to bring her back. Not directly. He had glimpsed possibilities beyond dimensions where death did not govern, time folded like paper, and the mind could exist in multiplicities.

His experiments had not merely changed him. They had unstitched him. Piece by piece, atom by atom, his sense of self had begun to erode under the relentless quarrying of impossible equations and irreversible grief. What had once been the pursuit of knowledge had mutated into something darker, a devotion twisted by pain and a hatred that pulsed like a second heartbeat.

He no longer sought discovery. No longer did he do this for the sake of science, but rather to satiate his lust for the damnation of the human species. His hatred for humans had hit a tipping point, and his enjoyment in their suffering grew stronger every day. He craved it, calculated, righteous, complete. The very idea of humanity now repulsed him. Their cruelty, their selfishness, their idiotic belief in permanence. Each new face was another lie told by biology, another symbol of the species that had failed that little girl and spat on the meaning of loss. Their screams, in the shadows of his mind, no longer stirred guilt. Only satisfaction.

But then—

No.

No.

His hands flew to his temples, trembling, clawing as if he could dig the rot from his skull. How could he have these despicable thoughts?

The thoughts came in waves, black and boiling, like sugar browning in a hot iron pot, consuming everything good he once was.

"I'm not a bad person," he gasped, voice cracking. "I only do this... for the right reasons."

His breath came in shallow bursts now. He felt the fracture line along his psyche widen like a fault line, splitting him between the man who mourned and the thing that watched the world burn with cold amusement.

"I'm a saviour," he whispered, almost pleading.

But the room did not answer. Only the silence, thick and indifferent.

And in that silence, something inside him smiled.

There were days he heard his own voice echo in unfamiliar accents, moments when time skipped or dragged like a damaged reel of film. He no longer experienced life in a straight line. And in that fracturing, a belief took root: that to become whole again, he would need to leave this plane behind. Escape the flat geometry of human experience. Ascend.

Project Aegis, this reckless government endeavour to touch the edge of chronal reality, had unknowingly handed him the last missing piece.

At eight A.M. sharp, Gatimu rose from his chair, eyes bloodshot but gleaming, and gathered the papers with surgical precision. His coat hung by the door like a shadow waiting to be worn.

He practised it once in the broken mirror before he left: the easy smile, the open and unguarded eyes, the face of a man you would follow into fire. It came to him as naturally as breathing now, and that frightened the last honest fragment of him more than the bodies behind him did. Grief had taught him one useful thing. People do not follow truth; they follow warmth, and warmth can be manufactured, calibrated, worn like a coat and hung up again when the day is done.

He took his coat from the door.

Yes. Today, he would meet Dembe. And soon, one careful kindness at a time, the rest of the world would come to understand just how little time they truly had left.