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# Copernicus

A novel about AI and Consciousness.

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Written by James Mahu

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# Chapter I

The jagged brush stroke divided the new canvas into an unholy whole. Muted crimson rolled onto the ivory landscape like a river of blood. A thin smile, shy at first, animated the face of Saraf Winter as she wielded her brush with both measured abandon and technical competence—the birthright of a Goldsmith’s College MFA (Master of Fine Arts) graduate.

Saraf, a 32-year-old bohemian, was a free spirit barely contained by a body. Apart from her rather large nose, she was petite in every dimension, topped with a bramble bush of black hair. She carried herself with the physical presence of a ballerina, and indeed, had studied ballet when she was a young girl, but it was to visual art that her passions swung.

Her ethnicity was an exotic blend of Irish, African and Catalan bloodlines. No one had ever

successfully guessed her ethnicity; a fact that Saraf found disquieting.

Her education granted her the pedigree that most artists dream of. It was a private token into the prestigious corridors of art museums and elite galleries. She had been on the art radar early when she was only nineteen. Her professors had made private introductions to the crème de la crème of gallery owners throughout the art centers of Europe.

London's gallery directors were always on the lookout for the next sensation. Gallery owners had relationships with the top art school professors and worked those relationships to have access to the work of their foremost students. Saraf was one of those sensations.

She was the *total package*.

Her studio, bright and spacious, lacked organization. Large canvases leaned eight deep against 12-foot walls. Drawers, filled with brushes

and messy paint jars, were left half-opened in absentmindedness.

When Saraf painted, she was utterly absorbed in the act of imprinting matter with ideas: lucid, bright, vivid ideas. As these ideas left the clutter of her mind, they were birthed in color fields orchestrated by a hand untethered to ownership of any kind. She was as amazed as anyone when her canvas filled with paint.

There was no premonition. No plan. No preliminary sketches. It was sheer instinct that radiated the length of her arm without censor.

Her teachers recognized it in Saraf—the confluence of confidence and surrender. It was the difference between the good artists and those who were destined to bring the high art—the metaphysicians' language.

At 24, Saraf experienced her first solo exhibit at the Tate Gallery in lower West London. Financiers, and power brokers in their navy suits and pale yellow ties, cavorted with hardened art critics at

the opening gala. The power of Saraf's work was undeniable. Before the wine had been exhausted, each and every one of her paintings possessed the footnote of a SOLD tag.

Saraf was thus initiated into the world of high art. Her work was commercial *and* important. Most importantly, art critics praised them. This is how great artists were born.

After her birth as an artist of stature, she spent the next eight years on a rollercoaster ride of great success in Western Europe. There were some downslopes into despair, triggered by the disquieting feeling that success had come too easy.

She felt indebted to her galleries and collectors who had an insatiable demand for her "slash" paintings. A spontaneous brushstroke that cut the canvas into smaller sections. It held a magical presence in her paintings that other artists—even great artists—could not replicate.

It was precisely the bold slash of her brushstrokes that had made Saraf a sensation in the London art scene. The pangs of feeling hemmed in by her own talents ate away at something emergent deep inside her.

Saraf knew it was really her eye that made the difference. An artist can't move the brush without the eye guiding it. She had the ability to relax her outer eye and let a different way of seeing guide her arm, hand and fingers. They operated as one mechanism to express something that had never been birthed before on the planet. It was exactly why Saraf loved to paint.

Whether it was a brushstroke or a line rendered with pencil lead or charcoal, the result was the same. There was something in that line or brushstroke that was imprinted with a touch that wealthy patrons and museum directors desired and obsessed about.



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An intruding buzz interrupted Saraf's brush. She backed up to look out her loft window to the street below. She smiled and set her brushes down carefully to ensure there was no contamination of color. She pushed a button on a small rectangular panel near her apartment door.

An electric buzz filled her studio menacingly. Moments later, the sound of footsteps echoing in the stairwell grew louder. She opened the door just as David Coleman beamed his broad smile and put his arms out for a hug.

"I knew you'd let me in," he said.

He was a tall, slender man, distinguished by his owl-like appearance, due to his round spectacles and brittle look. Long gray hair framed his thin, but handsome face. He looked tired most of the time, yet he was capable of flashing a brilliant smile if the mood struck him. As the director of

the Tate Gallery, David had great stature in the art world. To Saraf, he was a mentor.

“You said ten, but I figured you’d be sleeping if I came that early.”

“You’d be wrong in that assumption,” Saraf said with a forced frown, “I’ve been painting since eight.”

“That?” David asked, pointing to a half-finished canvas on an easel in the far corner of the studio.

“That.” Saraf bobbed her head once.

David walked over a little hesitantly, stopped a few feet in front of the canvas, and put his hands to his mouth in a steepled configuration, his head shaking back and forth almost imperceptibly. He let out a deep sigh.

“I can sell whatever you make, Saraf, but this new style... it’s not you.”

“Well, I sure as shit painted it. If it isn’t me, then who the hell is it?”

“You’ve gone too far,” he said, his voice quiet and introspective. “There’s stylistic *evolution*, and then there’s stylistic *discontinuity*. Your collectors won’t recognize the structure, color palette, or even the subject. The brushstrokes are... are less confident. I don’t know. This isn’t your voice.”

“I’m a fucking artist, David, I’m not here to produce the predictable.”

Silence filled the room for a moment, as Saraf retreated to her couch. The distant wails of a police siren suddenly drew their attention.

“You can evolve,” David offered, his voice tired. “You don’t need to swing the pendulum so far. Sometimes...” he glanced at her new painting, “sometimes, it’s enough to make subtle changes and see how your market reacts—”

“You make it sound like I’m a bloody business!”

“You *are!*” David replied emphatically.

“That’s exactly what you are. You’re a bloody business. Every art journal wants to promote you. Every museum and gallery wants to represent your work. Every collector worth their salt wants to possess your work. There’s demand, and you, my dear, make the supply, and there’s only one of you. You want to experiment? Go experiment. Do it and be done with it, and keep the paintings to yourself.”

David almost glared at the half-finished painting. It was strangely beckoning, he had to agree, but there was a monstrosity to it that he knew would make it unmarketable.

“Maybe I need a new clientele.”

“Maybe you need a new agent, new gallery distribution, new museums, a new network of patrons... new everything. Don’t you see that what you’ve built over the last eight years will fall apart if you pursue this style in favor of the one that

brought you success? Why would you want to do that?”

“I’m bored.”

“Why?”

“Because my collectors and curators have put me in a box and said: *'do more of these and we'll buy it. But if you dare to do anything else, we'll find someone new'*. I’m a hostage to their money and influence.”

“A hostage? Really?” His arms went out like the first branches of a tree.

“This studio is one of the best in London. You made nearly a million Euros last year doing what *you* love. Did you forget that? You’re one of the privileged. You’re an elite artist at the tender age of thirty-two. Corporate collections all over the world are funding your success—”

David let out a long, exasperated sigh, as he turned to face Saraf.

“I know this won’t come as a shock, my dear Saraf, but your collectors don’t give a *rat’s ass* about your artistic needs. You *know* this. Why are we even having this conversation?”

“You’re missing the point,” Saraf said. “I’m not happy. All of this... this stuff, it’s meaningless if I can’t be free to create what *I* want. My artistic temperament is—”

“Then get a real job,” David interrupted.

“You want artistic freedom? Then don’t be a professional artist.”

“Are you joking or trying to be ironic?”

“No joke, my dear. Artists aren’t free. That’s a bloody lie. Any artist who’s made a name for themselves will tell you that. They live in their gilded cages, owned by collectors and museums. They create at the behest of those with deep pockets and large egos. That’s reality. I’d be doing a disservice to you if I didn’t tell you the way it is.”

David sat down next to Saraf and put his hand on her knee.

“Your success is my concern. We’re a team. If you throw your career out the door, you throw *me* out the door with it. Look at me, I’m an old man. My legacy is in the artists I help, and you’re my last project. At least consider it as you spend your time on that.”

His thumb pointed at the new painting behind him in the corner, seemingly cowering from his condemnations.

“How will I know if my experiments are any good if I don’t share them?”

Saraf snarled, her lips curved in a question mark.

“That’s what I’m here for, my dear.”

David squeezed her knee and patted it lightly. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an oversized business check and handed it to Saraf.

“This should help ease your angst.”

David stood up slowly, stealing a quick glance at the new painting. He smiled and looked down at Saraf.

“It’s not horrible. It’s just not you. You’re reaching for something that isn’t you... at least not yet.”

“I don’t know if I should thank you or hate you,” Saraf said, pouting.

“Maybe you’ll thank me later, but for now, you should probably hate me.”

He tightened his necktie a bit and buttoned his gray, pinstripe suit coat.

“But I do need to run, my dear. You’re prepared for the meeting this evening with the Andrews, right? She *really* wants to meet you.”

“I saw it on my calendar, so, yeah, I’ll be ready. What’s her first name again?”

David grabbed a pen and jotted something on a scrap of paper, handing it to Saraf.



“Her name is Roberta Andrews. Google her and find something to talk with her about. She married one of the most powerful men in the City of London fifteen years ago. You’re on her short list for a project that she and her husband are developing.”

“Remind me, what’s the project?”

“I don’t think I ever told you, because I don’t know myself. It’s all a big secret. Perhaps she’ll tell us tonight. I’ve arranged a private room at The Ledbury, so we can get acquainted with the project.”

“They’re coming here first, though, right?”

“Yes, 7 p.m. They wanted to see your most recent pieces, so have a few of those presentable—not that one.”

David pointed to one of her paintings she had leaned against a wall.

“That’s mine, and don’t forget it, I waived my fees last month for a reason, and it’s sitting right there, waiting for you to finish it.”

Saraf let out a long sigh.

“I know. I promise I will tomorrow.”

David nodded.

“Good, I’m counting on it. Once we’ve concluded our business, we’ll walk over to The Ledbury... and don’t be cheeky. They’re aristocrats.”

David flashed a quick grin, gave a definitive nod, and then walked out the door without giving Saraf a chance to argue.

The door closing into silence troubled Saraf. She was alone in the rejection of her trusted agent. She wanted to have a drink or smoke, possibly both. She lit a cigarette. It was within arm’s reach. With every drag, she unleashed mental curses on the iron bars that surrounded her. What she felt inside wasn’t as simple as career sabotage or

narcissism. It was something rooted deeper, and its depths made it inexpressible. She could feel a movement towards something magnetic. She just wasn't sure if it was her will that was moving her in this new direction or some invisible hand tethered to a rebel heart.



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# Chapter 2

The Ledbury was an easy walk from Saraf's flat. Long held as one of the best restaurants in London, if not the world.

Saraf and David never missed an opportunity to meet new collectors there. It was a favorite routine to have them visit Saraf's studio, view her most recent work, and then walk over to The Ledbury for lunch or dinner after a sale was consummated.

Martin Andrews, according to Saraf's research on Google, was a major powerbroker in the City of London. A senior banker who specialized in mergers and acquisitions. Martin's fiefdom was a large, but relatively unknown investment bank in London's Canary Wharf. His eight-figure income was, for tax purposes, increasingly diverted to public projects that brought him honor.



Roberta, mid-forties, was not a typical trophy wife. She was educated at Cambridge, possessing two advanced degrees: one in philosophy and the other in psychology. Her family were aristocrats.

When the four of them arrived at The Ledbury, they were ushered to a private room in the upper reaches of the restaurant. The Andrews looked elegant in their black attire, entirely at home in the opulence of the storied restaurant.



“We love it here. Shall we enjoy some wine to get started?” Martin asked as he sat down at their private table and then nodded to the waiter.

“Saraf, tell us about your story,” Martin suggested, as he gave a quick nod to the Sommelier.

“We only know bits and pieces from what we’ve read online, and that, as you well know, tells

a partial story—sometimes, in my own case, an inaccurate story.”

He smiled mischievously.

Saraf took a deep breath and stole a quick glance at David.

“I guess I’ve always been an artist. Even when my mom was teaching me ballet I was pretending I was a brush in the hand of God, and he was moving my body. I never really had any doubts that art was where I was supposed to be.”

“Very poetic,” Roberta said.

“Your mother was a great artist of her own. I watched some of her performances online.”

“Thank you. Yes, she took her ballet seriously,”

Saraf replied, as a frown grew on her face.

“Someone like me, for example, would say, *too* seriously.”

“More about your story, please,” Martin requested.

Saraf’s face instantly turned introspective, as she closed her eyes for a moment.

“Let’s see. I grew up in London... Dalston, specifically. Dropped out of public school when I was fifteen and started at the Art Academy full-time. From there, I got a scholarship to Goldsmith’s College to study fine art.”

“As a mere sixteen-year-old, I read.” Roberta smiled when she spoke, Ingrid Bergman-like.

Saraf shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “No one knew what else to do with me.”

Her guests chuckled in unison.

“I got my MFA when I was twenty and started working as a full-time artist that summer.” Saraf nodded dutifully in David’s direction.

“David landed me my first solo show and I was fortunate to sell out—”



“Fortune had nothing to do with it my dear,” David interjected. “Your work was so original that every collector who saw it fell in love. It’s really that simple. Of course, it helps when the critics fawn over your work, too.”

“Whatever the reason,” Saraf said, “it validated my choices. Until people actually buy your work, you never really know if you can call yourself an artist. It was after that first show, for the first time, that I could call myself a *bloody artist*.”

She beamed a smile that echoed in her guests.

“How do you define your artistic voice?” Roberta asked.

Saraf studied the ornate moldings that wrapped around the 18-foot ceilings, and then looked down at her wine glass.

“I thought I understood it, but lately I feel it’s much deeper or perhaps better hidden than I had expected. Layers... it’s like a labyrinth. I think it’s

one of those things that beckons. It's very subtle. One day you think you have it understood; the next day you doubt you ever possessed it. The other thing, at least for me, is how to put it into words."

"Please try," Roberta requested, though it was spoken like a command.

"Some artists call it a muse or daemon, but I definitely feel it guiding me. I don't really think of it as my voice—in the strict sense of personal ownership. It's more like a voice of intuition that inspires me."

"In what way?" Martin asked, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, cradling his bearded chin.

"Well, for example, I've had sleep paralysis since I was a young girl. When it happens, I often receive... ideas or visual suggestions—"

"It's a voice that *talks* to you?" Martin asked.

“No, it’s not a voice. It’s more like a feeling of being led, sometimes it’s a vision. For example, before I begin a new painting, I’ll often get a flash or a vision the night before I start the painting, during these episodes of sleep paralysis.

“It isn’t the subject or composition of the painting that I see, but rather the emotional content. I *feel* it. It’s as if some part of me is arranging the painting within me before I start to put brush to canvas. Does that make sense?”

Martin smiled.

“Not to me, but then I’m a banker, and the only voices that get through to me have to be holding cash,” Martin looked at Roberta, “or originate from the lips of my lovely wife.”

Roberta smiled back at Martin and then turned serious. “How’d you and David meet?”

David cleared his throat.

“She was introduced to me when she was just a teenager... seventeen, I believe. She was a small, quiet girl, waif-like in her torn jeans and cotton t-shirts, which were always white—dabbed with paint. Her hair, believe it or not, was even wilder then.”

David paused and smiled knowingly at Saraf, who smirked back.

“What’d you like best about her... when you first met?” Martin asked.

“Her confidence and skill with a brush,” David replied without a thought.

“You can’t really teach that. She’s an old soul when it comes to art. Very precocious. That kind of talent is genuine because the passion isn’t manufactured. It’s *felt* and it drives them from an early age. That fuel lasts an entire lifetime. When I find that, if the art has potential, I watch as they develop. I saw her first group show and made

note of her skills. I wanted to represent her even then, and I told her teachers that I did. One day, about eight years ago, she came into my gallery with a set of canvases and asked me what I thought of them.”

David took a sip of wine and then rolled his eyes. “They were brilliant. *Bloody* brilliant! I hadn’t seen anything like them. I bought them on the spot and wrote up an agreement that very day—”

“—Which he forced me to sign,” Saraf interjected with a grin.

“There was no force, other than my greed, my dear.” David dabbed at his upper lip with a white linen napkin. “She signed the next day and we’ve been joined at the hip ever since.”

“And what do you see in David?” Roberta turned her attention to Saraf.

“He’s my mentor. I think of him as my guide into the strange and perplexing world of collectors,

museum directors, global distribution, financing... all of that. He's a truth-teller, too. Something an artist needs from time to time."

"You are too kind, Saraf," David remarked, as he tidied his necktie. "Would you like to order food now?"

They ate a five-course dinner and emptied four bottles of wine in the process. The table conversation remained focused on London politics, the differences between the City of London and London proper, and the vagaries of collecting art in an increasingly global world.

As coffee was served, Martin shifted in his chair and looked pensive for a moment.

"I think it's time we tell you a little bit about our project."

"Yes, please do," David said.

"We're very excited to hear what you have in mind for a commission."

Martin looked at Roberta and nodded, gesturing with his hand, as if he were introducing her.

She took a long sip of Amaretto di Saronno, swallowed, and locked eyes with Saraf.

“We want you to join a team of artists that we’re assembling to finish a new property we’re developing. A very special property that we intend to turn into a world-class contemporary art museum.”

Saraf blinked hard, opened her mouth, then closed it. She tilted her head slightly.

“Team?”

“I know... I know artists don’t usually work in teams, but the scale of this property requires it.”

Roberta paused, gathering a deep breath.

“We spend our summers on the French island of Corsica. Are you familiar with it?”

“By name only,” Saraf replied, her voice distant.

“I’ve never been...”

“Well, it’s a beautiful island that Martin and I just adore. Four years ago we bought an estate on the western shoreline, a large property, but the home itself was in disrepair, so we razed it and built a new structure in its place. It’s been three years in the making, and it’s nearly complete... *except* for the interior design, which is where you come in.”

“You see,” Roberta continued, tracing her finger along the rim of her glass, “every wall is primed with white paint. It’s really quite sterile by design.”

“It’s insanely large,” Martin added. “The only reason we built it so large is that the French government agreed to provide tax incentives since they believe it’ll become a tourist magnet.”

“How large is it?” David asked.

“A little over 52,000 square feet,” Martin replied.



“That’s indoors. There’ll be sculpture gardens in the back that will total another 21,000.”

“We want to have certain rooms that are immersive, which is to say, we want the walls to be murals, the furniture to be sculptures, the lighting to be mobiles, the floors to be mosaics... you get the idea. These rooms will be the featured elements of the museum, and you’d have a hand in developing them.”

“In what way, exactly?” Saraf asked.

“We want you to paint the walls in six rooms,” Roberta answered. “These rooms are strategically placed to draw visitors to all parts of the museum. They’re *circulators*, as our architects call them.”

Roberta took another sip of her after-dinner liqueur and looked directly at Saraf.

“What do you think?”

“My mind is reeling,” Saraf admitted.

“I’m thinking about all of the ramifications... I don’t know, it’s simultaneously amazing and fear-provoking.”

“What’s the fear?” Martin asked, concern showing on his face.

“It could be a major detour in terms of my career,” Saraf answered. “I’d have to move to Corsica. The project would... well, it would consume me.” She turned to David.

“What do you think?”

David cleared his voice and leaned forward.

“Six rooms... she’d have full control over the subjects?”

Martin and Roberta nodded in unison.

“How large are the rooms?”

“We can’t give you exact dimensions, but they’re large,” Roberta said emphatically.

“We’d want you there for as long as the project takes. If you get bored being on the island, you can take breaks.”

“We’d pay you whatever you think is fair,” Martin said.

“The team of artists we’re assembling has very high project caps. We have a site supervisor who’ll authorize work, according to budgets. Our objective is to manage the overall project and make sure it’s progressing according to plan—not crimp your style.

“One of the perks of building this in France is that the Louvre will provide conservateurs to consult on best practices to ensure the longevity of the works.”

“The project sounds fascinating,” David said. “I can’t imagine Saraf *not* wanting to be a part of it. We just need to work out the details of scheduling—”

“Yes,” Martin interrupted, taking out a folded agreement from his breast pocket and passing it to David.

“I’m sure you’ll find all the details in this agreement. And to sweeten the deal, we’ll buy the three latest works that you showed us earlier at whatever the current market prices are... for the museum, with a commitment to have a minimum of two pieces—in addition to the murals, of course—in our permanent collection.”

David did a quick glance in Saraf’s direction and unfolded the agreement, which consisted of nine pages of legalese. He scanned the section on page two that contained the *Terms* and nodded, his lips moving silently as he read. The table, for a minute, hung in awkward silence.

“Everything looks in order,” David said, looking up.

“I’ll talk with Saraf in the next few days and we’ll get everything buttoned up.”

“What’s the timeframe to start?” Saraf asked.

“Oh, we want you as soon as you can get started,” Roberta said cheerfully.

“If that’s tomorrow, wonderful. If it’s in two months, we’ll make it work.”

“Why me?” Saraf asked, her voice quiet and withdrawn.

Roberta straightened in her chair and leaned forward on the table, crossing her arms.

“For the very reason you just asked that question. You’re not a hothead. We went after the best talent in the art world, but we didn’t want egomaniacs, no matter how talented they were.

“We wanted those who had philosophical ground. Those who were intellectuals commanded the respect of the most critical of the critics. And those who had trajectories whose arcs would likely take them into immortality.”

David turned to Saraf.

“A worthy criteria to say the least, don’t you think?”

“I’m honored to be considered in the company of these artists, but I still don’t know why you want me to paint six rooms or how that will contribute to your museum.”

“These six rooms are the soul of the museum,” Martin replied. “It’d help you to see it. Saraf, are you up for a trip this weekend?”

Martin winked and looked at David with a nod.

“You, too, of course.”

“This weekend?” Saraf grinned, half-incredulously.

“You mean tomorrow?”

“We have a private plane,” Martin said.

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning at 9:30 a.m. and arriving in time for lunch. We’ll return Sunday evening around 8 p.m. Why don’t you join us and

you can see the property yourself. We think you'll be inspired."

There was a pause, while all eyes seemed to converge on Saraf.

"What if I don't sketch?"

"Pardon?" Roberta asked, narrowing her eyes.

"You said that your only request is to see a sketch before I begin painting. I don't sketch. I paint autonomously. I visualize my starting point, then after that, it's one thing that leads to another and the painting, quite literally, paints itself. I'm just an instrument of its completion."

Roberta blinked, her face suddenly contemplative.

"Then you won't be submitting sketches, will you? A simple adjustment to the agreement."

Roberta smiled, and held out her hand to David, gesturing for him to return the agreement. She then opened it up to page three, while Martin handed her a pen. She crossed out a sentence and

initialized it. Martin added his initials and handed the document back to David.

“Any other concerns or issues?” Roberta asked.

Saraf smiled and shook her head.

“Then we’ll leave in the morning!”

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# Chapter 3

The Gulfstream G-550 was opulent. The 32,000-foot views lingered, spotlighted by a clear and ever-present sun. Time literally flew against a slow-motion, fractal landscape.

What I had expected to be a long flight to Corsica, actually went by in what seemed like 45 minutes. Martin and Roberta were superb hosts, offering exotic omelets with mango and lime—combinations I hadn't even contemplated.

From the mint juleps that accompanied our brunch, I was tipsy enough halfway through the flight that I couldn't vanquish the smile from my face.

I was sitting opposite Roberta who leaned in, touched my arm, and tipped her wine glass in my direction.

“It sounds like your ex-boyfriend was a royal pain in the ass.”

Having only met her the day before, I was in doubt that she really understood my situation, but even with her assertion, my smile remained steadfast.

“He just got addicted. Before the drugs, he was a good man. The drugs changed him into a monster.”

Roberta put her head back against her seat and stared up at the ceiling, her tone, reflecting resignation.

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process they don’t become a monster themselves,” Roberta said, and then looked at Saraf.

“Recognize those words?”

“Nietzsche?”

“I’m impressed,” Roberta said, smiling.

“It’s tricky.”

“What?”

“Not to fight monsters... especially if you love them.”

I nodded, not sure where she was steering the conversation.

“My father was one of those... monsters, I mean. Not from drugs. His addiction was power. He beat me... my two sisters... my mother, too.

“None of us fought him. It was pointless.

“I didn’t want to become like him, and regrettably, he didn’t want to become like us.”

“So you ignored him, then?”

Roberta smiled thinly.

“He was not the kind of man you could ignore.”

“I suppose monsters never are,” I suggested.

Roberta nodded and looked out the window.

“We’re close. That’s it,” she said, pointing to a green edge of land cutting into the calm, azure Mediterranean.



“Can you see your property yet?” I asked.

“No, it’s hidden behind those cliffs. Depending on the winds, our pilot will fly over the property.”

Roberta touched a switch on her chair’s console.

**“Morgan, are we able to do a flyover today?”**

There was a slight delay and then:

“Yes, the weather is cooperative today, Mrs. Andrews... I’ll get permission from the tower right away. Should be in about five minutes that we’ll have a good view.”

Roberta picked up the bottle of wine, and swirled it slightly as if testing how much was left.

**“That gives us just five minutes to finish this.”**

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# Chapter 4

When our driver pulled up to the property, I immediately saw the resemblance to the *White Lady*. The Martins referred to the property, with great affection, as Guinevere, the mythological queen.

The massive building rose out of the golden-rock cliffs spotted with junipers, like a castle of white alabaster. Guinevere was surrounded by a black rod iron perimeter fence. The entire complex felt like an Embassy without the flags.

As we passed the guards at the Guard Station, they bobbed their heads in unison and smiled. Their courteous smiles seemed authentic. I always try to assess authenticity.

Once we got past the Guard Station, Guinevere was as regal as her namesake. Martin had shown me some pictures from his cellphone as we were leaving the restaurant last night, and on that tiny

scale, it was hard to be terribly impressed. Seeing it in person, knowing that its purpose and my destiny were somehow colliding, my skin seemed to vibrate in a way I had never experienced before.

It was divine.

“What do you think?” Martin asked, his arms stretched out as far as he could within the confines of a Mercedes Benz C400 with three people in the back seat.

“It’s more... gothic... more like a castle than I expected. Larger... much larger than I thought. It’s brilliant! I’m stunned!”

I knew my response sounded like a gushing girl, but I was literally breathless with excitement.

Martin and Roberta floated a smile between themselves.

As the car came to a methodical stop atop the crush of white gravel, I noticed a parking lot was being leveled with bulldozers. The finished section

was full of cars, jeeps, vans and pickup trucks. Mostly pickups.

“How many people are working here... on a Saturday morning?” I asked.

“Not that many, really,” Martin said, looking around. “Maybe thirty or so.”

“Seems like a lot for a Saturday—”

“We’re paying them by the phase of completion,” Martin replied.

“The workers see one day the same as the next. They get paid the same amount if it takes them six months or two. It motivates them to work hard and smart.”

We walked inside the portico that was dappled in light from the shade of newly planted olive trees. My sunglasses were hardly a match against the bright sun and the dominant white that surrounded everything.



Martin turned to his wife, then looked up, splayed his arms, and smiled approvingly. “Guinevere is looking lovely today, and so are you.”

Roberta thanked him with a light kiss on his cheek and pulled him closer to her.

“You know what I’d like to suggest?” she asked, with a mischievous glance.

“What?”

“Why don’t you and I show David around the grounds, and while we’re doing that, let’s let Saraf tour the inside on her own. She’ll probably learn more on her own anyway. Does that suit you, Saraf?”

Before she had finished her sentence I felt my head nodding. My mouth caught up and managed to form words, “Yes, I think I’d like that.”

“Good, then we’ll do that,” Martin replied.

“We’ll meet back here in thirty minutes and then have a little lunch. My only advice, relative to your

tour, is to start at the top and work your way down. You can use the center stairs. Nothing's off limits, so feel free to roam wherever your spirit takes you. Have fun."

He started to turn away and then turned serious for a moment. "And no pictures. That's our only request. Fair?"

"Certainly, no photos." I shook my head for emphasis.

"I can't wait to hear your impressions," Roberta said.

"How will I know which rooms are the ones I'll be working on?" I asked.

"There're two on each level," Roberta replied. "You'll know them because they feel like wombs... no corners. Enjoy!"

Martin grabbed Roberta by the hand and walked down a gravel path.

I turned to face the main doors and climbed the alabaster steps. The doors were massive. I knew enough about architecture to appreciate the importance of first impressions, but these doors were more exotic than anything I'd ever seen before—in person or in any book.

Their reddish-gray wood, with rich and vivid patterns that looked like three-dimensional topographic maps, stood nearly 20 feet high and were easily six inches thick. When I opened them, they opened with ease. Not a single squeak. First impression: *impressed!*

I left the double doors slightly open behind me while gawking at the interior entryway. It was flanked with marble columns, giving the room a classical feel.

The checkerboard floor had the accent color of twilight blue, otherwise, it was all white with tinges of gold for the door knobs. Large skylights, like portals to the golden orb, allowed the sunlight to dapple the floor and walls in a kaleidoscope of

vivid patterns. I think I gasped at the beauty of the place.

The staircase was massive, beautiful, curved, and white—everything was clean and pure. I felt dirty in comparison, and yes, I had taken a shower that morning. Wrought iron railings with intricate depictions of astronomical symbols were topped with a reddish cherry wood that gleamed in the sunlit main room.

I stood still, frozen like a sculpture. Only my eyes moved. The smell of wood lacquers filled the air. I wanted to take pictures. I wanted to touch everything, but I was transfixed.

I finally managed to kneel down, examining the blue and white tiles. Each tile was about three-foot square, trimmed in a fine line of gold, barely a millimeter thick. I rubbed at the gold; *was it real?*

The blue tiles held tiny stars like ghostly scribbles of light. Each tile was unique. I started to wonder, *how's it possible?*

I heard a voice clear itself like a gun cocking its trigger. “Excuse me, can I help you?”

An older man, his face grizzled with a stubbled, mostly gray beard. His beard looked 70-years old. His face 50. His body 30. Anyway, he was confusing. His hands, blackened from dirt or ink, held a gray towel, with which he seemed to be fidgeting in a nervous or annoyed way. I wasn’t sure which.

“You are...?”

“I’m Saraf... a friend of the Andrews.” I smiled but kept my eyes sweeping through the majestic space like a searchlight.

“Who are you?” I asked as an afterthought.

“A friend of the Andrews?” He said, stepping a few feet forward. “Where are they? I don’t see them around.”

He held out his arms, his puzzlement clear.

“You must be a worker. What part are you working on?”

“How did you arrive here?”

“By plane.”

“Whose?”

“Andrews, I told you.”

“What kind is it?”

“I don’t know what bloody kind of plane it is. I’m an artist, not a pilot. Why do you doubt me?”

“It’s my business to doubt anyone who trespasses this property.”

“Go ask them, they’re out there, showing my agent the sculpture gardens. They invited me to look around inside—”

“—Don’t take this the wrong way. I want to believe you, but no one announced you, and Mr. Andrews is very particular about who he allows inside. Are you under contract?”

I think I shook my head but remained silent for a while.

“Who are you?”

He walked closer, his hands continued to wrestle with the towel.

“Are you familiar with Juan Carmez?”

“Of course.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s an abstract expressionist from Italy.”

“Where in Italy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Name one of his paintings.”

“Untitled.”

“You’re guessing.”

“You really need to bugger off. I’m wasting my time talking with you when I could be exploring this place.

"If you go to the sculpture gardens, you can ask the Andrews for yourself. Nice chatting with you."

I started up the staircase. Problem resolved.

"I can't let you go up there."

"Look, I'm getting bloody annoyed with you. You haven't answered any of my questions. My host is Martin and Roberta Andrews. *Not* you! Please, leave me alone."

In an instant he positioned himself above me on the staircase, leering down at me.

"You're not a very good listener, are you? I need you to stay here, while I assess your situation."

I sighed. The sound of my frustration filled the entire room. I hoped my breath wasn't too foul.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a walkie-talkie, and pressed a button, watching me the whole time with amusement.

"Jules, did the Andrews arrive yet?"



A radio voice, hazed in static, replied:

“About five minutes ago.”

“Okay, thanks.”

My arms raised, palms up. “Why didn’t you do that when I first told you?”

“I don’t know... fear, probably.”

“Fear?”

“You look harmless... I mean in terms of your build, but there’s something about you that looks like an explosion is just a wrong move away.”

He smiled and walked down the stairs, holding out his right hand.

“I’m Noah. I run this place.”

I refused his conciliatory handshake.

“First of all, my build is not so slight. I imagine I could outrun and outfight you.”

“Well, you do have a good imagination. I’ll give you that.”

I ignored his slight.

“Secondly, when I’m treated like an adult, I behave like an adult. I am *not* a ticking time bomb.”

I stared at him as hard as I knew how.

I walked past him on the stairs, feeling his eyes on me.

“Have a nice day, Noah. I do hope you can calm your knickers and finally relax, now that I’m out of your hair.”

I marched up the stairs, my mood ruffled, but my eyes remained at the buffet of architectural splendor that surrounded me from every angle.

By the time I hit the second-floor landing, Noah was a distant memory.



\* \* \* \*

# Chapter 5

Greeting me on the second floor was a massive bronze sculpture. It was a collection of floating geometric shapes. I was enraptured by its suspenseful form.

A pyramid, burnished in gold, was the largest of the forms, standing about 18 feet high. Surrounding it were smaller spheres and cubes that orbited it like planets with varying degrees of a turquoise patina.

When I was a kid, I had a model of our solar system that was about two feet long, and it had a resemblance or kinship to what I beheld, but the scale of this work was breathtaking, and so much more... *exquisite*.

As I watched it, I suddenly heard footsteps behind me. Their deft touch was certainly meant to conceal the presence of the larger body, which I assumed was Noah. He was impossible!

“I know you’re there,” I called out, willing myself to remain focused on the sculpture.

“Good, I wasn’t trying to hide. These floors are spotless. I like to walk barefoot. Bare feet, no sound. It doesn’t mean I was trying to sneak up on you.”

He paused, while I pretended to be oblivious to his presence as if ignoring a pesky ghost.

“I’m actually a fan of your work. Somewhat...”

“Really?” I took the bait and bit my lip hard.

*I should ignore him.*

“And how is it that you know my work?”

“I just Googled you.”

I smiled but otherwise remained still. “You said you ran this place. What do you mean?” I asked.

“I manage the project. I’m the general contractor. I make sure that what the blueprint specifies gets done. I coordinate—”

“I know what a general contractor does, but thank you for your thorough description.”

“You’re really pissed at me, aren’t you?”

I didn’t answer him, preferring silence to words. I was pretty sure he’d make the translation.

“In any case, I meant no harm to you. I just wanted you to know.”

I ignored him. I had already moved on. The present is so much more interesting than the past. He, on the other hand, seemed lonely, and the lonely often live in the past.

“How do you know the Andrews?” He pressed, a congenial tone softened his voice.

I wandered back to the stairs, took one more look at the sculpture, turned, and walked up the staircase to the third floor in silence.

I thought I heard Noah sigh.

\* \* \* \*

# Chapter 6

The third floor was similar to its predecessor. The landing, as before, was huge, but without the presence of a sculpture. The sheer volume of space made me feel like an ant in a field of polished stone.

Walking down the huge corridor, the blank walls suddenly seemed empty. Despite the bright sunlight streaming in, I felt sad that the space was as sterile as a blank slate.

Further down the corridor, I found a thin window that exposed a large interior courtyard. For the first time, I could see the basic architectural structure of the building. It was “U” shaped on the second and third floors and rectangular on the first.

As I came to the end of the corridor, it began to curve. It also narrowed; its natural light was snuffed out by its smaller scale.

It became more of a passageway. The artificial light—provided by a sparse array of track lights—washed the walls with a slightly yellow glow.

I had gone from a large, light-filled space, to something that felt more like a tunnel, barely seven-feet high by six-feet wide. Then, without any warning, the corridor opened into a room that felt, for lack of a better word, *organic*.

It was as if unconsciously, I could hear a heartbeat. It was only then that I understood the reference to a womb.

The room was shaped like something Salvador Dali would have conceived after the inhalation of a mind-altering drug. It was, as Martin had said, cornerless. No straight lines. It was immediately arresting.

**“So, how do you like it?”**

I turned around like an owl who had just heard a mouse squeak.



The “mouse,” in this case, Noah, was leaning against the entrance, looking smug with his arms crossed. He held that look of expectancy. You know, the kind that feigns interest while simultaneously certain of all related conclusions.

“Normally,” I began calmly, my voice creamy in the resonance of the room, “when I think of general contractors, especially for a building as complex as this, I imagine busy people... *working* people.

“You, on the other hand, seem to have more bloody time on your hands than an idle child.”

“It’s Saturday. I’m off.”

“I see.”

I was lost between the room and Noah’s banter, which was, by the minute, sounding more and more like flirting.

I decided to relent and focus on him, letting the room’s magnetic charms fade for the moment.

“What’s the story of this room?” I ventured.

He smiled, looked down, and took a step forward, gesturing with his arms as he walked closer.

“It’s what the architects call an Attractor. It’s a focal point in the design, made to resemble a woman’s womb. There’re two on each floor, and each is meant to have a different scale, feeling, and purpose. As you can see, there’re no straight edges... even the floor.

“From a builder’s perspective, these were the most labor-intensive of all the rooms. Each one required a team of about twenty experts, working for nearly two months. This one, the one we’re in now,” he pointed down to the floor, “was the last one we finished... about a week ago.”

I swept my eyes around the room as he talked. He had a good voice. His accent was subtle, with hints of French that had been wrung out in America, I would guess.

He smiled at me and walked inside the room, pointing at the walls. “This is where you’ll paint?”

“Perhaps...”

“*You* haven’t decided, or the Andrews haven’t?”

“I haven’t.”

“What are you waiting for?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. I wanted to see the place. It’s a big move.”

He walked up to one of the walls in the middle of the room and put his left hand on it, patting it like a horse.

“Come here. Touch it.”

I hesitated for a moment, walked to his position, and put my right hand on the white plaster walls, our hands separated by a mere six inches.

The walls felt smooth. A vellum texture.

“The walls are a special mixture of plaster, buffed to the texture of a primed finetooth canvas.

“Martin requested it. I had to search far and wide to find the old-world craftsmen who could produce the effect.”

Noah paused for a moment and looked into my eyes.

“Your brush strokes will be treated like royalty here. That I can assure you.”

I found myself admiring him, maybe even attracted to him... slightly. Standing within a few feet of him, I could get a better sense of his presence.

He looked, French. His body type was not my preference. He was too average in height, weight, muscularity, and pretty much everything.

His eyes were dark, almond-shaped and magnetic. He was masculine, but without trying too hard.

“How long have you been on the island?” I asked.

“Corsica?”

“Have you lived on other islands?”

He smiled and wrinkled his forehead, then scratched the back of his head, as if my question required a calculator.

“Two years, three months.”

*He likes precision.*

“Do you have a family?”

I bit my lip. Sometimes questions fly from my mouth before I can consider how they’ll sound to the mind of the person I’m talking with.

“Yes, I have a family. Let’s see... a mother, a father... oh yes, and two siblings.”

“I meant a wife and children.”

“Oh, that kind of family. No. No, children. I was married once before, but that only lasted six years.

“On the road to success too much. Hard to keep the relationship coals hot when I’m married to projects like this.”

His arms went out, flashing a broad smile. He had nice teeth. Not that I care that much about teeth, but being in London, you can't really help but appreciate straight white teeth.

“And you?” he asked politely.

“No, never been married.”

I bent down, pretending to suddenly be absorbed in the floor.

It was a mosaic of tiles that felt ancient. Their edges were polished smooth either by time or a machine, I wasn't sure which.

The floor consisted of broken tiles placed together in a mosaic. The image of the mosaic looked very much like a sky with the occasional cloud drifting by and one or two seagulls naively painted as accompaniments.

“Why's the floor finished? I mean with color and pattern. Won't it clash with the art once it's completed?”

“The Andrews wanted this particular space to house the most ancient art found in France. Because the Lascaux cave paintings were on permanent loan to humanity, they settled for this mosaic.”

“Given its subject is the sky, why use it on the floor?”

“Because the ceiling is yours.”

It was Martin’s voice that answered my question.

I turned around to see Martin and Roberta smiling at the entrance.

David came up behind them, appearing to be a little out of breath.

“We didn’t mean to startle you,” Roberta’s voice rang out. “We thought you might still be in the first one.”

“She’d be further along if I hadn’t held her up,” Noah said with a twinge of guilt.

Martin walked into the room, his arms spread wide. “Yes, well one of the things I love about this island is that time’s an afterthought.”

As they entered the room, I introduced David and Noah.

“David,” Martin said, “Noah heads up our project, in terms of construction. He’s arguably the world’s preeminent builder of museums... what’s the number so far, Noah?”

“This would be my ninth.”

Martin laughed, slapping Noah on the back.

“That’s why I hired him, nine’s my lucky number.”

Martin smiled knowingly, turning to me.

“Saraf, what do you think so far?”

“It’s all... overwhelming... but I can’t help wondering who will come here?”

“It’s so exotic... and... and the location... Corsica... I mean, Corsica is for the rich and famous.



It's their playground. The regular people... how will they get here? I mean, how will this museum touch their lives?"

"See those?"

Martin pointed to a set of very small protrusions that hung from the ceiling like miniature track light fixtures.

"Those are live cameras that serve multiple purposes, but to your question, they'll be used to create VR (Virtual Reality) tours of the entire museum that can be taken online.

"They'll literally ferry an online user from start to finish, and when they're done with their tour, they'll have an experience similar to the physical visitor, but they'll probably be better informed because we'll have the best tour guides."

"Tour guides?"

I asked, my voice trailing off in doubt.

“Not just tour guides. The tour guides are actually software, artificial intelligence (AI), to be precise.”

Roberta smiled knowingly as she spoke.

“They’ll be advising the tour participant on every painting, every sculpture in our collection, giving them as much detail as they want.

“And it will all be interactive.”

“It’s really a high-tech museum, isn’t it?”

David noted.

“Not the usual place you’d expect to see a technology like AI fully exploited.”

“Exactly,” Martin said with a sharp nod.

“This museum will be the first to have AI tour guides, making the entire collection accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world.

“And those tour guides, they’ll have names, personalities, and special knowledge.

“They’ll actually get to know the patrons, regardless of where they are in the world.”

I was listening, though technology generally doesn’t interest me that much.

“You’ll get a chance to meet him tonight.”

The statement hung in the air for a few seconds before I took the bait.

“Who?”

“The man behind the AI technology, he’s coming here for dinner.”

Martin bobbed his head as he finished his words, as though reciting a declaration of some kind.

I caught Noah’s eyes as they swept the floor.

He turned and started for the door.

“Well, it’s back to work for me. Nice to meet you, Saraf... David.”

“You’re coming to dinner aren’t you?” Roberta asked.

Noah stopped for a moment and turned to us as if he'd forgotten something.

“Of course. Usual time?”

“Usual time.”

“See you then.”

It was suddenly different. My mood. It was like a candle had been blown out or a wind stilled.

Something changed, and I didn't like it. Had he crept inside my life with such stealth that I missed him? Already?

How long had it been? Too long.

It isn't healthy when a man talks with you for ten minutes then leaves and you feel that ache.

Ten minutes. It isn't right.

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