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**Translation as Interlingual Adaptation: Writing a Speculative Novel in English
and Spanish through Creative Practice-Led Research**

PhD ARTEFACT

STILL LIFE: a novel in three parts

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“You might even provide a Heaven for them. We need You for that. Hell we can make for ourselves.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

“You think you have a life. And suddenly, everything's gone. Art means nothing. Everything's an illusion. And you know it, and you have to go on.”

Daniel Kehlmann, *Me and Kaminski* (2015) – translated by Carol Brown Janeway

“How will she get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason, tell me are prepared for all flesh?”

Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853)

“... once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm is all about.”

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) – translated by Philip Gabriel

A woman who writes feels too much,
 those trances and portents!
 As if cycles and children and islands
 weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
 and vegetables were never enough.
 She thinks she can warn the stars.
 A writer is essentially a spy.
 Dear love, I am that girl.

Anne Sexton, *The Black Art* (1962)

“Now that she had known danger, and with that danger a genuine emotion, everything, however strange, suddenly began to have something in common with her. She felt herself in everything, and the world, once as transparent to her as glass, had come to mirror the dark shape of her own shadow. Wherever she looked, whatever she heard, was suddenly real.”

Stefan Zweig, *Fear* (1925) – translated by Anthea Bell

PART ONE

THE AGENCY

Chapter 1

It was as hot as always when I arrived at Barcelona airport. I took a taxi to the hotel at the end of Las Ramblas, the pink one overlooking the harbour. Along the way through the bustling city, it began to rain. It was the intermittent variety, with warm sticky drops; as usual, it gave me the shivers. No one had warned me about the weather, and I should have checked the forecast before leaving and prepared accordingly, mentally I mean. But this was a last-minute manoeuvre, hastily organised when we learnt that several of them were in town for major disruptions; some we knew, others were still nameless. There had been no time for scouting or groundwork checks, so we got underway without full clearance. With some luck, meteorological predictions would be the only serious omission this time. In recent ventures, critical components had been left out, names not adequately provided, even key responsibilities pushed outside my control. I had complained, but it was difficult to pinpoint guilty parties, not really a habit with us; we were more about collective responsibility than individual guilt, which in a way was comforting for all involved.

“Never mind the rain, it’s an indoor task anyway,” I said to myself, still feeling uneasy.

I loathed the rain, it disturbed me like the worst enemy. I was told it was a condition called weather stress, not yet fully understood. In any case, those very rare showers had almost ruined some of my more important tasks. No, I had never believed in good or bad luck, but there was an exception; rain seemed to jinx whatever I did.

“What if next time there’s any chance of rain I pull out?” I said, voicing an impossibility.

I put a stop to my usual musings –doubt followed by certitude and back again– by concentrating on the task at hand; I did not have long anyway. It had all happened far too quickly, even for me and my capacity for ad-libbing. But I had to live up to the challenge, there was no getting away.

“Hello!” the hotel receptionist said.

I registered swiftly, with the shortest of signatures and the fastest nod. Someone in a tired hotel uniform led me to my room. After his polite attempt to lift my suitcase, I insisted on carrying it myself. He accompanied me to the room, always two steps in front of me. I still gave him a generous tip; seeing a person smile at moments like this always helps. Once in the room, I stretched out on the bed for a couple of minutes; I had no more time for any degree of rest. It had always been about time. Yes, time had always been wanting, and I lived by the usual cliché: so much to do and so little time to do it all. But now there was to be no looking back, no dithering, no more imagining another place and another moment. I had to make do with what I was, and that meant my own warped nature as I saw it and my many unresolved issues. I quashed my hesitations with a few sonorous outbreaths, and then rang a room number on the phone beside the bed. The initial communication was to be a bland conversation between two people; they wanted it traceable to allay any suspicions from anyone listening in; no cellphones to start with.

“Take no delight in anything but the task at hand,” I whispered; no, not my words but the guideline we were most frequently bombarded with.

I checked my watch; it was four-thirty in the afternoon. As always, I had made it on time.

“Is it you, Tony?” I asked down the phone line.

“Have you just arrived, Iona?”

I nodded, thinking that perhaps he could see me.

But of course, Tony could see me. In a room across the courtyard, there was a man talking on the phone, standing beside a window, all that space crisscrossed with rain showers. He spoke into the headset and looked at me from the other side, briefly closing his eyes. And then I spoke into the phone and looked at him in the distance. I had not seen him for a long time and wanted more than a few harmless exchanges – not everything had been explained or justified between us. But it was not the moment or the place to reminisce on what could or should have happened. I resorted to my usual repertoire.

“I find the city unexpectedly drizzly,” I said blandly, as per the instructions.

“Small talk, Iona?”

Tony always tried to put me in my place; defiance in the face of immediate commotion was one of his traits. But I knew better, expressly when it came to cutting people short. And I did it in the way I liked best.

“Once this manoeuvre’s over, I’ll be taking long walks around the city. I always do that when I’m here, from one Gaudí building to the next. I’ve an almost religious affinity with his architecture, the shapes of effigies, the colour schemes, the spires, the organic structures, the painstaking details, all those mosaics made with oddments and shards. Because you see, Tony, even the discarded can be art...”

“I understand...” he said, trying to cut in, but I went on.

“And so you could describe my walks as a pilgrimage, following a route that is close to perfection... divine perfection. Yes, perfect accounts of art expression and...”

He barged in with the standard question.

“Are you ready for disposal, Iona?”

I hung up with a sigh. And almost immediately I phoned him on my brand-new

cellphone, resistant to the most hostile encounter, military-grade and untraceable, total control over location settings. Tony picked up.

“Yes, I am,” I said.

“You’re what?”

“Ready, more than ready.”

“Try not to put the phone down on me,” he replied.

“We’d agreed to do that after your initial question, hadn’t we?” I said.

He produced a loud exhale; perhaps he was already running out of patience.

“Look to your left, second floor, the room lit in yellow.”

Yes, there was another window on the other side of the courtyard, two floors down, three windows to the left, bathed in a soothing yellow light.

“Is that him?” I asked Tony because, at first, I did not recognise the man on that side of the courtyard.

“You know him only too well!” he snapped, already showing annoyance.

“Not after so long. He seems... changed.”

I could almost see Tony thinking in his usual way –smacking his lips, a shallow intake of breath, rolling his eyes sideways– at the other end of the line.

“Let’s get down to business, Iona,” he finally said.

“Yes, let’s do that, Tony.”

“The suitcase?”

“It’s here beside me.”

My suitcase weighed as much as an average tourist case but contained only one item. All that custom padding was to preserve a single, exceptional object.

“Is it inside the suitcase?”

“Where else?”

“Nobody suspected.”

“How could they?”

“You didn't say a word?”

“To whom?”

“Airport checks?”

“The usual procedure. I got through all the checks without anyone asking me a single question. We've our own failproof programmes, don't you think, Tony?”

Again, I looked across the courtyard towards Tony's window; fluorescent lights were shining into the room from the bathroom. I could distinguish him, looking at me from beyond the light showers, irritated. He still sported a goatee, one arm assertively on his hip and the other holding his cellphone. Even from this distance, I could tell that he had gone prematurely grey.

“And those grey hairs?”

“They started appearing the day you left.”

“I didn't leave. It was by mutual consent.”

“You mean by mutual disagreement.”

“Whatever.”

“Instigated by you.”

“No bickering, please,” I said, demanding it.

“At least we agree on that.”

“So, let's begin.”

“You mean, let's continue.”

“Look, we were told to keep the conversation short, Tony.”

“Well, we haven't spoken for such a long time, and so many things were left unsaid...”

“Unfinished, you mean...”

I breathed in deeply, but to no avail. Tony was still in my head. The idea of Tony, the memory of him. I thought I had erased it all, and forever. How many other things that I thought erased were still living inside my mind, moving freely and unhindered, dancing with my neurons?

He brought me back to the real world.

“Can you still see the guy?”

“Alongside the nameless others we need to deal with this time, at least he’s someone I know...”

“You mean, you *knew*...”

I took another deep breath before asking my question. Our instructions had been so rushed that no reasons or preferences were given. I had to know.

“I suppose it’s all part of the ongoing project against our... shall we call them our antagonists? Yet another battle to be won?”

“Not a battle but a war.”

“A war? Not one more war...” I said, but I was only thinking of the room with the yellow light and the man who was temporarily occupying it and who would shortly be obliterated, both as an enemy and from my mind.

“It’s all academic. Not another war but another front.”

“Yet another front?”

“You know we’re here for the kill, *deary*.”

I had not heard that *deary* for a long time.

“In every sense of the word *kill*?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

Tony did not reply immediately. He waited for a few beats; he would do that when suspecting there was a problem. That mind of mine they had cherished for so

long was now mildly dissenting as I began to grasp the enormity of it all; yes, the *who* that had to be disposed of. There was a degree of personal interest, yet I had to be composed to a fault.

“It’s not our job to ponder,” he said; it sounded like an order.

My eyes were drawn to the yellow hue across the courtyard, the third window, two floors down.

“Are you also going to...?”

“Yes, just like you. Iona. Somewhere else in the city. But I can’t give you further details, except to say that it is a nameless someone...”

“It’s just that I’m concerned about...”

“Are you regretting already, even before the action starts?”

“It’s a very high price we have to pay for...”

“Wars are always expensive! Especially when they’ve been going on for such a long time.”

“But...”

“Look, Iona. The worst thing that can happen to you is that you die.”

“Die,” I echoed, repeating the word that had threatened so many of my actions for so long.

“Yes. Die, dying, dead!” he exclaimed and laughed.

“Dead...” I whispered to myself.

“What a nuisance it is to die after all that effort,” Tony said, the pitch of his voice gradually rising with an annoyance that I remembered well from our time together. “But once you realise that the end can be around any corner or under any lamppost, in this street or that alleyway, in the hands of someone brandishing a weapon or attacking you with nothing but the look in their eyes, the subject of death is nothing at all, nothing

whatsoever.”

“You’ve become very profound since we last spoke,” I suggested, pulling a smile.

His voice was suddenly much louder.

“Once the subject of death is out of the way, everything else is easy, so very easy.”

“I’m not concerned about death but about the world ending,” I replied. “It ends when each one of us dies...”

I knew the subject only too well, but doubts always showed up before the final blow; it was not weakness so much as a moment of utter terror, the anticipation that it would all end and perhaps this time it would be my turn. Tony hung up without saying another word; I could see that he was still looking at me from his window and shaking his head in disagreement. I disconnected the cellphone and yet I still spoke.

“I don’t want to talk about death or war. And especially not about what we had, if you and I ever had anything at all...”

And as I said those words, I did what I had been trained to do: I placed the suitcase on the bed and opened it. I cautiously looked at what it contained.

“What’s here?” I asked almost playfully.

I had practised the task in preparation so many times, not for a particular mission but just in readiness. Yet when the day finally arrived, I felt ill-equipped; it had all happened without much warning, the whole manoeuvre triggered after some last-minute intel.

“Get on with it, Iona. You know what to do!”

Accordingly, I embarked on the well-drilled procedure, practised to perfection back at home, on the soft bed in my bedroom, in the privacy of my tenth-floor

apartment, with no traffic or city noises up there and with no one to disturb me. Now was the time to put it all into practice; even rushed jobs had to be carried out as fearlessly as we possibly could. I looked once more at the open yellow-hued window from where a man was leaning out and trying to smile, possibly in anticipation of the horror that was about to befall him. He could not possibly see me looking at him from my window in the far corner. Despite the intermittent showers, I had a good view of him from the side of the building; it was a case of judging without being judged.

“Hello, Bill!” I muttered to myself.

And before the next and concluding stage, I followed the usual protocols for initiating disposal. First, minor considerations to do with logistics and practicalities; then, conquering memories and *ipso facto* suppressing them, however vivid; finally, fully justifying my actions, whatever I thought of them. I wanted it all to go away before it started –one of those more human responses of mine that I still needed to work on. To placate my nerves, I reminded myself of the *how*, though I was not so sure of the *why*. No, I had not been as adequately briefed as I would have liked. I stopped trying to find justifications and reminded myself of my presence there.

“This is my mission!”

Yes, I was a woman on a mission; end of story.

Chapter 2

The action started, for it had to start; at this late stage there was no going back, and any misgivings had to be eradicated on the spot. I looked at myself in the mirror: eyes glowing, lips red and moist, black hair cascading over my shoulders, a subtle yet enticing smile.

“Perfect!” I said.

At two minutes to five, I opened the door of my room. The hotel appeared to be empty. Few sounds came from the corridors, and an uneasy calm reigned. People were probably in meetings that had gone on beyond the allocated time or were finishing their very late and plentiful lunches or were taking a siesta. The smell of rain infused the air through the open windows in each of the landings, reminding me that precipitations –however meagre– had never been propitious in any of my undertakings. But those showers also spoke about the fact that outside the pink hotel there was life, real life –as tangible as the water falling from the skies.

“Naturally!” I said in a loud voice.

Yes, it would all be over soon. If there was go be a next time.

In my hand, the minute weapon, the size of a pea. Why would anything that size require such a large suitcase? To stabilise, avoid rocking and rolling during the journey, preserve certain pressure, atmosphere, vacuum, even vibe. No, not that last word; I was departing too much from technical explanations. It was just that the very small but potent requires essential, substantial, imposing treatment.

“Naturally!”

It was all mostly under control, and if I had felt anything in the exchange with Tony –I had not seen him for a long time, busy as he was with his own manoeuvres since he had been promoted– it was nothing more than a fleeting cloud.

“Naturally!”

And I began my ritual, setting the pace and ticking the necessary boxes, one after the other. Yes, my memories had been appeased, at least I thought so. On balance, I had worked hard and managed to complete the harshest mental training. Seriously, most of what counted in my life was reduced to minutiae, most of the time. That was one of my specialities anyway, eliminating anything that raised its threatening head, roughly speaking. Any hesitations would be sent back to the darkest corner, at least many of them. After all, I had been inured to withstand the unkindest occurrences, in general terms.

“Naturally!”

I left my room and walked along the corridor, aware that every concierge, attendant, caterer, messenger in that pink hotel overlooking the harbour had been told what to do. It was an artificial calm, of course. Tony had briefed management and paid off whoever needed to be materially convinced. It was not the first time that hotel proprietors had shown such willingness.

“Naturally, naturally, naturally!”

I took the lift two floors down, walked along a couple of corridors, got to the right door. Tony had pushed the keyfob under the door to my room moments earlier without showing his face; we had been ordered not to be seen together, and maybe I should have disobeyed orders.

“You’re doing things out of character, Iona; think straight, concentrate, focus!”

I knocked as if I wanted to give the man inside a chance. No reply. I knocked

again. The yellow light was escaping from beneath the door into the corridor as if it could not be contained, progressing gently and enveloping me; it was vaguely warm. I had been told to expect no resistance from the man inside the room. He would likely consider my visit a surprise; after all, he and I had been close all that time ago; it was a marriage, but only of sorts. Whether he would recognise me as the woman he knew from back then, I was not sure; he was certainly changed from what I had seen across the courtyard. I breathed in the yellow haze around me and placed the keyfob on the sensor. As I slowly opened the door I noticed that my hands were shaking, something that so rarely happened. I took a deep breath and entered the room as cautiously as if I were entering the place of my death.

“Is this where I die?” I said to myself in a whisper. “Or will this be the beginning of something much worse?”

Once inside, I gasped. The yellow fog was thick inside the room. I could barely see through the cloud of colour pervading every space available. No one had said a thing about a yellow light in that hotel room; yes, another failure to add to the recent catalogue of mishaps.

“Naturally!” I said to comfort myself.

And as I was about to whinge and pass judgment on those who had hastily ordered the manoeuvre, I came to my senses. What I had to do could not be simpler: place an item the size of a pea inside a man. I had been told that, for the following ten minutes, the item would not lose its potency; after that, it would become as innocuous as an actual garden pea.

“Why didn’t I flirt with Bill in the hotel bar for old time’s sake, bring him to my room for sex and then put a bullet at the base of his skull while he slept?” I asked

myself, remembering that exploiting sexual appeal had been more than a regular part of my regular assignments; this time it would not have been totally out of character, bearing in mind what had gone on between him and me in the distant past.

But finishing off opponents in such a way was becoming a timeworn method. Now we lived in a different era, our new dictates instructed. There were fresh ways to eliminate opponents, whether thugs or not, and we needed to resort to cultivated personal relations until final disposal instead of orchestrating seedy encounters. We had undoubtedly moved with the times although the results were the same as they had always been: discarding adversaries without further consideration. As expected, there would be exceptions when running out of time or space, and occasionally things were done like in the old days by using any means available.

“I have always believed in fair game,” I had said to Tony earlier.

“Fair game?” he had sneered during our phone conversation.

“Yes, face to face. Like a gladiator.”

“You do have some strange beliefs!”

“Those who are about to...” I tried to explain. “You know, *morituri...*”

“I get it!”

“Disposing of someone you know is not, shall we say, stress-free.”

“Unlike you, Iona, I never question or doubt. I don’t even try to placate my conscience. It’s kept at bay every time I have to perform, and I’m sure by now it must have faded away. My rule is to avoid discussing the situation even with myself, so the task becomes less gruesome. I like to play it straight...”

I was taken back by his comments.

“A gruesome task? Placating conscience? Playing it straight? What has happened to you lately, Tony?”

He coughed.

“Figures of speech, I suppose. You see, Iona, I don’t think of anything at all when it comes to my work.”

Inside Bill’s room, the yellow hue was not from a fancy chandelier like the one I had at home, nor from orbital devices or radioactive materials or other curious bodies, but from a small gadget that had been placed in a corner. Whatever was emanating from it had to be sterile and harmless because I could hear Bill breathing. The tension I had felt moments earlier now gave way to a strange calm, almost unsettling because I was not used to that kind of stillness.

“I’ve come to see you,” I said, though I could not yet distinguish him through all the yellowness, the man I was about to obliterate.

“I knew you’d come,” he replied.

Through the yellow haze I finally saw his silhouette on an armchair. He was reading a newspaper, or at least pretending to.

“You knew?” I asked, almost in shock.

Either our protocols had been breached or someone... yes, someone had betrayed me. But there was no time to stop and discuss.

“This yellow mist?” I asked.

“Your favourite colour, isn’t it, Iona?” he said.

I did not reply. He went on.

“It’s entirely safe. As you can see, I’m breathing it all in. I thought I’d light the room in yellow in preparation for your arrival and then sit down and read today’s paper. Unhappy news as always, reporting problems that have no solution... wars on so many fronts... maddening issues with the planet... never-ending discontent... and however

hard we try to put things right, we always seem to fail. I'm glad that, at least, papers are back... the feel of them, their smell, their dimensions. Reading from a screen certainly did a terrible disservice to good writing..."

I had not known Bill to lament the past. Maybe he was uneasy about our encounter after so long. I sensed that there was something –however disappointing– between us despite the passage of time: for me, our relationship had been a task for which I had been conscripted; for him, it had been nothing more than an infatuation with an unknown woman. There was no use denying it; there was something there, in that yellow room, at least for a few seconds until my training kicked in. Yes, I had trained for months, decades, a lifetime really. I suspected, in fact knew, that the conditioning had seeped down to my deepest recesses. My brain was a mere instrument of action; my body, the tool to inflict whatever damage was required. But after two encounters with past love interests in a single day –first, a man with whom I had hardly peaked to great heights, and then this other man with whom I had shared parts of my life with solely for convenience as per the instructions received– I realised that there was a part of me beyond reach, even I myself was unsure of what I kept there. Little was I to know that the encounter would affect me more than anyone had envisaged. I began to think that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, which is what tragedies are made of.

"Hello, Bill," I said, as if the previous moments had not counted.

"How wonderful to see you again, Iona!" he replied, looking as if he meant it. "You're as radiant as always."

I was still not sure whether he suspected why I was there or whether he thought that my aim was to rekindle what we had once had.

"I knew you'd come to my room. I knew you'd break in."

“How come?”

“Call it male intuition...”

He got up and threw the paper he was reading on the floor. I closed the door behind me and approached him. Through the yellowish blur he came towards me until our bodies almost touched.

“You can hardly call a friendly visit a break-in...”

“With your own keyfob, Iona?”

“I like to travel in full gear.”

Holding the pea between my thumb and the index finger of my right hand, I went towards him and raised my left hand as if to greet him. And as Bill came closer, he raised his left hand and extended his very long fingers, just as I remembered them. I could see the time on his wrist; no need to check my watch. It was precisely five o'clock.

“There's only one word to remember from this encounter,” he said slowly.

“And what word might that be?” I asked, suddenly feeling very calm.

“The word is... *slaughter!*”

It was a perfect description of what was about to happen to him.

“Slaughter?” I echoed.

And yet the word was like a call for action, prompting me to do what I was there to do; that is, to dispose of him with a weapon the size of a pea, nothing more than that. Such is this incapacitating device, I had been told by those who created it and accordingly trained me. A pea? I asked when they showed it to me in all its minuteness and greenness. And they replied that it was a good name for their new creation and that, from then on, they would call it that. The pea; yes, the pea.

“It's catchy!” they said and laughed at my more than obvious designation.

And as I had been instructed, I put my hands over Bill's face. And with a twirl of the fingers of my right hand and a graceful pirouette of my left, I choreographically introduced the pea into his left nostril as far as it would go. And then I pinched the nostril shut. It was the safest method for disposal, I had been told, for it would leave no trace.

"Time's up..." I whispered.

And at the same time as I was doing that, Bill embraced me with phenomenal force and kissed me violently. I did not expect it; he had never kissed me like that before. No, not once. I recall how he used to kiss me in a leisurely way, almost in slow motion, as if we had all the time in the world. But it had never been like what he was doing in that yellow room, with such hunger and such urge. And I reminisced briefly, somehow enjoying what was happening and savouring it, and I could not help opening my mouth as if by instinct. And into my open mouth went something that he had in his. It tasted of strawberries; it felt smooth and comforting. But the taste was short-lived because almost immediately I collapsed on the floor whilst watching Bill fade away into the intense yellowing air around us.

And as all this was happening, I said something entirely matter-of-fact. It was all part of our training: you must engage in bland conversation until the very end.

"This isn't the best time to visit Barcelona, is it?"

But Bill did not reply, for he was nowhere to be seen. There was only the damning yellow light around me, getting more intense by the second. And for my part, I would never again be the person I had been until then.

"No, not the best time to visit the city at all," I muttered as a reply to myself. "No sun, no fun!"

Chapter 3

Whether it was the end of the day or the beginning of the next day, I could not say.

“Remember,” I heard.

I told them, whoever they were, to repeat the request, but I felt that my lips did not move as I tried to push out the words. Perhaps I was only speaking inside my mind. And then they said it again.

“Remember, please remember.”

What a ridiculous request! After all, why should someone ask me to remember and for what purpose? I was definitely able to remember my furthestmost memories, although with a few hesitations. Several important events ten years earlier, but in which city? A few truly victorious ones, but how recently? And when had my very first attempt at a disposal taken place? As hard as I tried, I could not recall a single detail from the past few months or recent years.

“Remember,” someone repeated.

So, I pushed air through my mouth, pouted my lips, and thought of an exciting thing to say. Was that not the way people did it? A single word on my part could mean that the cursed voice would shut up. But despite all that effort, I seemed to be producing no sounds at all.

“What is it you want?” I asked, but my mouth and tongue did not budge.

“Remember,” said the voice.

Such futile insistence could only be part of a dream, whether mine or someone else's. But what if it was a genuine request, pleading desperately with me as if my life entirely depended on it?

“I’m not myself today, can’t you see?” I replied to the voice, but again I produced no sounds at all.

I was lying on what seemed to be a bed, and there was little to see except the soft light trickling around me, with shapes undefined and colours faded. But they were half-images, blurry and dark. Maybe it was because I could not fully open my eyes, or so I felt.

“Remember!”

This time it sounded like such an important request that I tried as best I could to recall, summon, recollect –those words I used, but none were physically expressed, nor did they prompt me to remember a single thing. Despite my best efforts, no recent memory came to my mind, no facts or faces, no incidents however trivial. I needed to rub my brow and stretch my legs to prompt myself, but nothing moved or stirred when I attempted to do any such things. It could be that the light was playing tricks on my eyes, as if covertly invading the room like the fastest current, drenching the pleats of curtains and the frames of windows, swamping the walls, drowning me. I tried to clench my jaw and fists, screech, shake, burst out and emphatically roar. But nothing was accomplished.

“If I don’t have a voice,” I asked, though only in my mind, “what else do I lack?”

I was toying with the idea of a nightmare or a fainting spell; at first, I tried to describe the situation in a dispassionate way. Voiceless, motionless, speechless, possibly breathless. I went through a hastily crafted list of what I could and could not do. I realised that I enjoyed wordplay, like an old game that someone used to perform when talking to me, whoever that someone was.

“Remember!”

For now, remembering was out of the question. But I was also under the

impression that I had never been prone to that sort of thing –perhaps a simple inability of mine to remember, or maybe because I had not wanted to hold on to what was forever gone. It was as if I abhorred the past –so rigid and ultimate that it could not be changed– and my best skill was to dream about the future, with its wonderfully blank canvas, open to inspiration and possibilities.

“Hello,” I tried to say, to no avail.

Hearing was my best sense for now, although I could feel a few sensations on my skin, perceive hazy objects, taste apples. Yes, someone had carefully placed a piece of what seemed to be an apple on my lips, but I could not chew and certainly not swallow. I assumed it was a test to find out what I could and could not do. It felt like a refreshing awakening, as if restoring me to life. I was up to smelling and savouring the apple, but that was as far as I could go.

“I’m now going to inject you with something that’ll bring you back from the land of the dead,” someone said.

The land of the dead? If that was death, then it was not as devastating as I had always taken it to be; there was still some connection to the world, not all was lost. The voice replied as if my comments had been heard.

“A figure of speech, clearly. I think that you may be able to hear me faintly. We’ve tested your brain activity, it seems to be active on the frontal cortex, and certainly on the left temporal lobe. Signs of activity elsewhere seem a little weaker. A few other areas have been affected, but we’ve established that the damage isn’t permanent. We could say that you’re intact. In more than one way, obviously...”

And with the injection, darkness prevailed; it was to be the longest night.

“Remember!”

Whatever I tried to do was met with that dreaded word. Perhaps it was not such a bad request after all. It appeared to be the only thing that was allowed me in my present situation, whatever that situation might be. Incarceration certainly, but of what sort? Had my mind given way, or was it because some obscure power had taken hold of me? As to the *why* and the *when*, I did not allow those questions to get in the way for the time being. I sensed that I had always wanted to simplify, but the *simplicity* I had been reduced to in that place was ridiculous.

“Please, remember!”

This time it was a plea, formulaic and polite. By now, whoever it was –that shadow of a being, as yet with no revealing traits– must have realised that I could not respond to the request.

“Analyse and fast!” was the message that appeared on my mind.

Analysing felt like a faintly familiar approach. My body was immobile though somewhat sentient. Senses appeared to be available to me, mostly my hearing, yet in diminished form. I could feel my skin taut and fresh, and I could smell a flowery scent drifting through the air; it was possibly not a flower but a very ripe fruit, something very red and with a rawness that made me shudder, more something from the past than from the present.

“It’s not an apple this time, but something else I cannot quite recall. Red and with an intense flavour, perhaps... yes, perhaps a strawberry...”

As to my perceptions, they were all there, but things were muddled and vague, and I could not trust my memory to be based on facts.

“Interaction’s difficult,” I continued analysing, “but not entirely impossible, so let’s examine the facts because naturally there are a few. Yes, there seems to be a void; and yes, I seem to be submerged in it; and yes, I’m incapable of communicating

with anyone.”

Among the shadows and formless outlines of my surroundings, I was able to distinguish a few things. On the left seeped a misty light from a window framed with what seemed like pink curtains. Above my head there was the silhouette of a crystal chandelier hanging from a central rose in the ceiling and swaying gently as if in the breeze. The bed was soft, and the pillows cool. They were all familiar objects, as if they had been taken from somewhere I knew from before, possibly home, and placed in that unknown space; yet I could not exactly recollect what home was like, if I had one. And then a shadowy figure came towards me, likely the person making all those relentless requests. I finally understood that it was a woman’s voice.

“You’ve been in a medically induced coma, and we’re going to start the psychological recovery with a few mental exercises. Remembering past events is a good one.”

It was then that I panicked. I had suspected that I would break down with terror when I learnt more about my condition. Yes, I was in some kind of vegetative state; hearing those words made me lose it. I screamed at the woman.

“You damn bitch!”

No sound was heard, yet I was bursting into a fit of the wildest rage. I tried to move left and right to show my discontent, but there was not even a shrug of the shoulders. The woman’s requests continued regardless.

“Do remember. Please, please, please. Even if it’s only one word...”

Her persistence finally paid off, because I became even more annoyed with her and I remembered something. It was jumbled at first, hardly a memory and more a faded version of someone’s voice.

“There’s only one word...”

It was the beginning of a sentence that lingered from maybe not so long ago.

“Only one word –only one,” a man’s voice uttered.

I could see the image of a man talking about something important. But *where* had those words been said? *How* loudly and *how* intensely? Did he mean it? Who was *he* anyway?

“One word...” he had said.

“Do remember, please,” the woman pleaded again.

I tried to remember almost in desperation, travelling further into my deepest memories. And in the midst of everything a word showed up, it seemed unimportant at first. It sounded more like the conclusion of a debate than a sentence said randomly. Yes, the clearest thing was what a man had uttered in the course of the only conversation I was able to recall.

“There’s only one word: slaughter!”

I distinctly remembered that a man’s final utterance had been the word *slaughter*, delivered casually but with a stirring intonation. Who could blame him since it is a strong and commanding word? One cannot say the word *slaughter* as a passing remark. It is a sentence passed, not hastily of course. A route to take, a reply to incitement. It could even be a way of life.

“Slaughter!”

The word I remembered was unquestionably *slaughter*. I felt a stinging sensation across my limbs, as would befit a word like that. Or was I imagining the sting, the word, a possible provocation, the slaughter itself?

“Slaughter!” I tried to say out loud; it was the only memory I could come up with.

The woman alongside me was right. Remembering was the only thing left for me to do. And with some luck, from remembering a single word I would arrive at a

story, and from there I might just be able to construct a person as a whole and that person's truths and untruths, likes and dislikes, facts and fictions. And from those few renderings, a complete life would emerge.

"Slaughter!" I tried to say in the loudest possible voice, but I could not bring myself to perform such a feat.

A few memories came back, disappeared, and were back again; and after that they were gone, maybe forever. Such memories appeared like flashes of yellow lightning and subsequent thunder; sound followed image, the two not yet synchronized as if each one responded to different physicalities. Any such memories were nothing but shadows of events that had once occurred and had become distorted along the way, some of them probably not based on facts but on stories of my own making. Or they could be based on dreams, whether daydreams or nightmares. Or they could simply be true.

"Slaughter!" I heard a man's voice say again.

Visions appeared in my mind in tiny fragments, the bigger picture not necessarily a more precise representation. What I saw or thought I saw was a jumbled depiction of facts, if they were facts, like a puzzle still in the box; but all those pieces had nothing printed on them and were of the same yellow shade.

"A little effort, and it'll all be over," said the woman. "As soon as you remember one episode, the rest of your life will flow. Like water, yes think of the whole process in terms of water. Like the sea itself."

And somehow, the image of the sea worked for me and brought things back momentarily. I could see the tides and the oceans, I breathed in their scent, heard the unremitting rolling waves.

“The sea,” I recalled.

Right there in front of me, I could smell the sea. What a great memory it was, the sea. The same sea, in my mind and for real. Yes, I remember the sea only too well. A sea of the deepest colour, waves quivering with spots of white, the coastline fraught with holidaymakers. In my mind, the sea was possibly a darker shade of blue and the breeze not as gentle but a little aggressive. Would I ever get to admire the natural, real sea again? Could my imaginary sea not wash away my troubles like the actual sea used to do back then, making all bad things disappear and bringing with it hopes and promises?

And as I taking comfort in my thoughts, the words I feared were heard once again. First, a woman’s voice.

“Remember!”

And then a man’s voice.

“Slaughter!”

After a while, I recalled how the man had avoided looking at me, his tightened mouth, his hand still pointing at me but now a fist, the tension in his back against a wall as if holding it in place, both of us surrounded by a yellow haze.

It all came rushing back in detail.

“Slaughter!”

And the whole episode appeared in front of my eyes. What had been said but also what had been silenced. What had happened to him and to me that day (had it been a distant day or the day before?) and how it had all come to be (had anything substantial occurred or was this just my daydreaming?). As to how it all ended, I was not entirely sure. Perhaps the story had not yet reached its closing stages and what I

experienced was an ongoing bloody episode. Yes, a veritable slaughter must have taken place; I was almost sure of that. But in the course of those events, had the man been slaughtered or was it I who had been forever crushed?

“I remember now!” I shouted triumphantly, but only in my mind.

I could not accurately remember that particular instance of slaughter, and yet I did hazily recall other instances from long ago. Yes, all those moments when the word *slaughter* could have been aptly chosen to describe the horror of what was taking place.

“To think that *slaughter* is the one word that may bring it all back...”

And as I was rejoicing in the fact that I had found a solution to my predicament, I realised that victory was ever so brief. That intense awareness of the whole picture –with or without slaughter– lasted but a few seconds and then faded away. The void was once more.

“Can you please remember?” asked the woman in the room.

“Give me some time, a week maybe, or two or three. I’m sure that by then I’ll be back to normal!”

I made the suggestion and waited for an answer, but none came. The woman doubtless thought that I was unable to hear her, whereas I was under the impression that I could utter words clearly and distinctly. We each had our own confused story to tell.

“Come on, brave up, just a single word!” urged the woman.

“A word?”

“Just a word, any word will do.”

Then a flash of memory hit me. I recalled that words had been a sort of infatuation with me somewhere, far away from where I was.

“Words –any word!”

And I began to think of words, vast quantities of them and the nicer qualities of each one, the thumping rhythm of some, the euphonic quality of others, the many colours that they shone with, the flavours they triggered, the caresses that exquisite words produced and the painful blows that the darkest words brought about. I realised that the word *slaughter* had played an important role in my life.

“I think you need another dose of medication,” said the woman’s voice.

I remembered other things too: a hazy but intense yellow light, the feel of someone’s skin against mine, maybe a passionate kiss.

“There!” said the woman.

I felt the prick of a needle on my arm, and then it was total darkness once again.

Chapter 4

“It’s a topsy-turvy world,” he said.

After what happened in Barcelona, those were the first words I was able to physically respond to. I could hear a man’s voice, but more importantly it appeared that he could hear mine.

“Yes?” I whispered.

“Hello, Iona!”

“Hello, Mr Taras.”

There was Mr Taras in front of me, wearing one of his many hats. I wanted to scream and kick the bedclothes in what I supposed was a hospital bed, but I did not have the strength or even the willpower. At least I managed to produce a predictable question.

“Where am I?” I said and yawned in anticipation.

“I just told you.”

“Do you mean... do you mean the world? Am I still here? Alive?”

“You’re the same old girl!”

I had never enjoyed his attempts at familiarity.

“I... I don’t feel the same as before,” I replied.

“Recovery takes time, and more so with your particular set of conditions.”

I tried to explain what had happened to me.

“It was like this,” I said in a faint voice. “First I remembered words, a particular word, and then I recalled the taste of strawberries...”

Mr Taras cleared his throat several times and spoke to the point. I remembered that he had always preferred facts to musings.

“The strawberry capsule could’ve been fatal,” he explained, “but we managed to save you. As to the yellow light, it wasn’t a nerve agent as we thought at first, but nothing more than a gaseous concoction to calm you down before the final blow. The doctors explained all that, though they gave it a more procedural name. In the end, it was all cute but innocuous.”

I recalled how he always used words indiscriminately, more for the sound than for the sense.

“Yes, a yellow light...” I said.

And it all kept coming back. I started joining the dots and narrating the story with nothing but a handful of memories.

“How long have I been here?” I asked, and yawned again.

“Oh, ages and ages and ages and ages and...” he said and would have continued had I not interrupted him.

“As long as all that?”

“We’ve missed you at the Agency!” he said, trying to instil warmth into his words but his lips were rigid.

My voice was now closer to what it used to be, a slight shrillness in the top notes.

“I... I suppose...” I tried to reply in kind but I was not sure I missed them equally, particularly Mr Taras.

No, I was not sure. Something had gone terribly wrong in Barcelona, and someone had to be responsible whether outside the Agency or, maybe, within.

“And you’re back!” he said.

“It was touch and go at one point.”

I felt both happy and so very distraught. Happy to be able to interact, but distraught because... well, because I did not know what awaited me.

"I cannot return to what I did before!" I tried to say, but the faintest voice came out of my throat.

He tut-tutted me.

"Oh, you'll very soon be fighting fit and back to being yourself."

I could not manage more than a whisper.

"I don't want to... to do what I did before."

He shook his head, as if dismissing my words.

"And whyever not? It's who you are. And you're remarkably good at it."

I finally found my bearings.

"Look where it got me!" I replied as loudly as I possibly could, and even I had trouble hearing my voice.

He came closer and took off his hat. It was the first time I had seen him without a hat; underneath, he was glowingly bald.

"You look fine," he said, placing the hat at the foot of the bed. "And from what the nurse told me, your stitches seem to be healing well."

"Do you really think so?"

I was not convinced he was telling me the truth without having seen myself in a mirror. The bandages were still holding everything in place; I caressed them to make sure they would not give way. I desperately wanted to know how much damage had been inflicted, and at the same time I was trying to postpone the encounter with what I presumed would be serious scarring.

"Well, at least you managed to get back to the land of the living."

"I don't feel that I'm fully alive..."

I ran my hands along the blanket covering me.

“What happened is inevitable, almost typical in the profession, part of a long and successful run. There’s nothing new here. It’s all old wine.”

He spoke mechanically, as if reading from our manual. He would always quote from the manual when he was caught out. But I also resorted to facts.

“What I don’t understand is...”

“What?”

“How they knew I would go to the room in the hotel and...”

Mr Taras frowned. He never liked to be told about mistakes.

“We still need to find out more, but it appears that the Organisation was one step ahead and...”

“Or is it that we were several steps behind?”

He did not reply.

“And what about...?” I added but said no more; he knew what I was referring to.

“Yes, that ex-husband of yours!”

“You did force me to marry him, didn’t you, Mr Taras?”

“The call of duty, Iona, the call of duty.”

“Bill... Bill probably didn’t want me to resist so that he... he could... he could...”

“Administer the fatal dose?” Mr Taras said, completing my sentence.

“What happened to him?”

“We still don’t have complete information.”

“I want to know what happened so as not to repeat mistakes. Just in case there’s a...”

“There is a what?”

“A next time...”

He nodded.

“Iona, if I play your cards right, then...”

I was startled.

“What do you mean if *you* play *my* cards right?” I asked, trying to sit up.

“Don’t get so agitated. It’s bad for business.”

I took another long breath, it seemed interminable.

“As I said, I... I don’t think I can go back to what I did before.”

He burst into sudden laughter.

“We’ll give you something easy to start with.”

I shook my head in disagreement.

“I’m no longer game for even the easiest task.”

“You’re one of our best staff, Iona. Unique and indispensable. You’re indeed a *rara avis*. And because of your expertise and dedication, we’ve always assigned you some of the most important and elusive cases.”

“Elusive?”

“I refer to the delicate, the sensitive, the complex...”

I had another surge of energy; I needed it to say what I was about to say. I had been wanting to say it for a long time. And in my sorry state, it appeared to be the right moment.

“Like what? Infiltrating official bodies? Embarking on shady operations in time-honoured democracies? Cuddling up to despots, in politics or business? Using bots and fabricating evidence? Conducting covert missions on all our warfronts? Operating undercover in trade unions, student unions, unions of any sort, even matrimonial ones? And worst of all, using my body to tempt and lure and... and seduce?”

I was out of breath yet continued a little more.

“Destabilising, sabotaging, disrupting, subverting the course of anything and everything...? I’m trying to describe the situation with as many words as possible as you always do, Mr Taras, and I can give you a few more examples if you like...”

After exerting myself like that I was drained of energy. But I was also shocked by my reaction; no, I had never spoken to Mr Taras in that way.

“All of that and more!” I finally added.

I would have laughed if it had not been because what I had detailed to Mr Taras was so utterly catastrophic. I was aware that the tightness of the stitches along my face would not allow me to produce any kind of expression except what was probably a despondent grimace; luckily that side of my face was bandaged up and nothing showed. All that time, Mr Taras had only listened. When he finally spoke, he would not accept grievances of any sort.

“That’s a very long list, Iona. I’ve never heard you complain so extensively,” he said, smiling to conceal the anger in his eyes. “Occasionally you’ve commented on this or that, but that was it. We know you to be, if I may say so, a bit of a grumbler sometimes. But I wouldn’t call what you said on those occasions as complaints, or even objections to our projects, but only comments about making improvements. Bear in mind that none of our operations can be proved, and they can all be denied. In other words, they never took place. Plausible deniability...”

“I was close to getting killed, Mr Taras!”

I wanted to say *slaughtered*, but I could not make myself utter the word. I sank into the pillows in desperation.

“Killed!” I repeated.

From my hospital bed I could see the bare branches of trees stirring in the wind, all of them framed in the window.

“We don’t want you to worry about anything unnecessary. Just recover, Iona.”

By his standards, he was being condescending. Usually, he would expedite issues with a few sentences and a couple of categorical orders. I finally managed to muster some strength.

“If I’m to stay at... at the Agency, I’d want to do things differently. I’ve been with you long enough to be entitled to make a personal request.”

Instead of anger he showed surprise, as if he had suddenly developed a soft spot for me.

“You’ve done most things at the Agency.”

“Except the most important one...”

“And what may that be?”

Mr Taras got up and looked towards the window as if he was expecting to find the answer there.

“Experiencing manifestations of... of life,” I replied.

“Of life?”

“Yes, as opposed to encounters and confrontations with death, like this most recent event...”

He turned his head towards me and put his black hat back on, as a judge would before passing a death sentence. I recalled the little I knew about him. I had heard that he started at the Agency when still very young. He was recruited as a freshman when they saw his potential but had already shown promise at high school, presumably in the shape of a deep intolerance and a cast-iron will. It appears that he ran a small operation obtaining payments from students in exchange for protection, the details of

which I had never wanted to enquire about, not that anyone at work would have known the full facts. That was why his expertise in extortion was second to none at the Agency.

“Life...” I repeated, sinking further into the pillows if that was possible.

“What a topsy-tur...”

“Your clichés don’t always work, Mr Taras,” I dared to say.

He gave me a new set of orders.

“You’ll be up and running within four weeks, Iona. And in another two, you’ll be cleared to resume fieldwork in readiness for any new tasks. Perhaps what has happened to you may be a real game changer, and you’ll produce even better work. In any case, returning to work won’t be that complicated, given your training and the fact that you’re recovering well. I’m sure there’s a silver bullet there somewhere and...”

I had to make him stop.

“Silver bullet? It was more of one of those old-fashioned copper-plated lead bullets, in the shape of some noxious substance tasting of strawberries. Yes, I have suffered a few attempts on my life before, but I was always lucky and managed to come out of them mostly unscathed, except for a few, fortunately discreet, scars. As to what the future holds for me, I wonder if it might not be a rotten, horrid destiny. And... and I have yet to see what I look like now...”

I tapped the bandages on my face.

“As I said, up and running within four weeks!” he repeated as if I had not said anything.

“Mr Taras, this time I’ve never been so close to death. I need to radically change what I’ve been doing until now. Otherwise, I would consider...”

“What?”

I was not sure I would have the courage to say it.

“Leaving...”

He blinked several times.

“That, Iona, would be a nuclear option!”

“Would it, Mr Taras?” I said, attempting a smile.

He tried to show understanding.

“You could do that if you wanted,” he suggested. “You should have pretty good savings by now; we pay you handsomely. Since our various fronts floated, our shares have risen spectacularly...”

He was always pragmatically calculating. And I briefly daydreamed.

“Yes, that’s it,” I said, “I could buy a little place by the sea, away from everything and everyone. The sea was what I loved most in the old days. The boarding school where I was raised was on the coast and...”

“Enough, Iona, enough.”

Yet I carried on. A remote and unknown *persona* had taken over and I could not stop her.

“And I’ll take up painting once again. Remember that I...”

“Yes?”

“That I wanted to be... to be an artist once.”

“But you *are* an artist of a different sort.”

“Yes, the art of the clandestine, the art of dishonesty, the art... the art of desolation!”

He smiled his other smile. He had two, this almost pleasant one and the one he used when torturing his staff. Yes, when he mentally tortured us. His experience in extortion could also be applied to extorting the truth from anyone. But there could have

been physical torments in certain cases of insubordination. Rumours were always rife regarding Mr Taras.

“I’ve got just the thing for you!” he said, almost triumphantly as if suddenly inspired.

He looked towards the window and then at me. He got up and walked several paces away from my bed, and then he walked several paces back.

“You were talking about the sea, about art, about being far away from everything, about going away.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I’ve something that might just be the ideal manoeuvre. It was put to me only recently and I was not sure how to go about it. But now it’s clear what the best way to proceed is.”

This time I laughed. The stitches pulled all over my face. My chin and cheeks had been dormant for far too long. It was a colossal effort to do anything minimally expressive.

“A new manoeuvre when I’m still convalescing?” I asked with disdain.

“You’ll like this one; it’s very different to what you’ve been doing up to now.”

There was no stopping him.

“Involving what?” I asked for the sake of asking.

“A missing person –not an unusual task for you– but in the shape of an unknown artist. In a far-away territory, in another country. Beside the sea. All about art!”

Hearing that last word, I sat up, my body as a perfect L. Mr Taras removed his hat again, but this time he held on to it tightly.

“And the purpose?”

“To find that artist and to *discover* him.”

He stressed the word *discover* as if his body hurt. I was not entirely uninterested in the case.

“A man?”

Mr Taras looked surprised.

“Well, yes. A man who’s an artist.”

“What’s his name? Where’s his work? Would I know about him?”

I was intrigued beyond what I could manage in my present state.

“We’ve no information whatsoever. But the fact that he’s a virtual unknown will add to the mystique of the whole enterprise, as well as creating huge interest in his work...”

“You mean huge revenue?” I suggested.

“Yes, it would be a great payday –if we succeed.”

I thought for a second.

“So, it’ll be a manoeuvre with no disposal and no deception, with nothing, shall we say, illicit?”

That last word was not something I readily used.

“We don’t think so.”

He failed to look at me straight in the eye. Without his hat, I could almost read his mind.

“And what would I have to do? For now, I’m just asking.”

“You’d need to get over there and have a look,” he said, opening his hands as if to show that there was not much to the job.

“And why go to all this trouble?”

“They think that...”

“Who is *they*?”

“Our clients. Experts in the field, curators, valuers, conservators, auctioneers... They seem to think that he’s potentially worth something big and would like to launch him stratospherically...”

“To outer space?” I insinuated.

“You must be getting better, Iona. Your sense of humour is back!”

I tried to shrug my shoulders but was unable to.

“You know what they say about humour, Mr Taras. It alleviates the pain...”

He carried on.

“What they want is to launch the artist in the art world. You know, exhibitions, viewings, private collections, auctions. Art can be a soft yet very powerful weapon. At the Agency we’ve dealt with most worlds on the planet until now, but never with the world of art. There are loads to be made, plus it will increase the Agency’s standing in the established world of art exhibitions and wholeheartedly embrace it.”

I tried to straighten up further.

“How did we find out about him?”

“One of our clients saw an image of one of his paintings. It was reproduced in the catalogue of an exhibition quite a few years ago.”

“I’d want to see that image.”

“I’ll send it to you when you’re better. But apart from that, there’s no other information. We’ve already done full preliminary checks, and there’s nothing. It’s as if...”

“As if what?”

He lowered his eyes until they almost closed.

“As if he didn’t exist.”

The concept of not existing made me uncomfortable. The fact that feeling and thinking could disappear just like that had always troubled me terribly. After I did what had to be done to whoever needed it to be done to, I had certainly witnessed the experience of non-existence many times in others.

“They’re even considering a biography,” he added.

“A biography?” I asked and could not hold my amusement. “We know nothing about him, and they want to write about his life. What life?”

Mr Taras paused for a second.

“That’ll be your task, Iona. Trying to find out about the events in his life and coming up with the goods. In a way you’d be hunting down a target... without the bloodshed, I hasten to add.”

“I trust that’ll be the case,” I said.

He took a long pause.

“But you’ll have to do it all in his time...”

“You said you didn’t know whether he was alive.”

“Well... let’s assume he *is* alive.”

“You’re not sure?” I asked.

“In our line of work, it’s sometimes necessary to assume when we don’t have all the facts. In any case, once you’re there, you’ll know how to act.”

“Will I, Mr Taras? I’m not sure I’m up to very much at present.”

“Just bring back the paintings or... whatever you can find,” he said, a hint of desperation in his voice.

I somehow could not see myself discovering an unknown artist whose state of existence was yet to be established.

“Wanted dead or alive?” I suggested.

He gave me an angry look.

“Look, Iona, don’t precipitate things!”

“This is not urgent then?” I asked.

“Oh, everything is urgent. But you, with your elegant expertise, will have to conveniently work in an unruffled way.”

“More than my usual?”

“Remember the tempo...” he recalled from the manual. “The tempo is the most important element in every manoeuvre.”

He moved his head softly sideways, as if keeping time himself.

“And as well as a biography, they’d like an exhibition,” he added.

“An exhibition of the artist’s works? That would be if his works are housed where I’m heading or are readily available somewhere.”

“We’ve information that there’ll be at least a few works at that location.”

“And how did you find out where he might live... or has lived?”

“Arduous research, I can tell you. It was down to Tony and his team, and they all...”

I interrupted him.

“Tony seems to have his hand in every...”

“He’s there to help, no more than that.”

I paused again.

“What about language?”

“What do you mean *language*?”

“You’re talking about going to another location. Will I speak what they speak there? I may know about various types of manoeuvres, and even various art forms, but sadly I’m limited to only one language.”

“Oh, you’ll have a gadget.”

“A language gadget?”

“We’ve created one in-house,” he said and laughed.

“You mean Lundy created it,” I said, remembering my gifted colleague.

“Yes, Lundy, our expert in everything technological, who else? We’ve called it the transadaptor.”

“What other name might you have called it?”

He did not look pleased.

“I would’ve preferred the linguistic converter, the decipherer, the decryptor, even the Babelian, but...”

“Yes, I understand,” I said, interrupting him.

“This is the future, Iona, or should I say the present. All of it contained in a little device: knowledge, thought, reason. But most importantly, inventiveness and creativity.”

“But Mr Taras, don’t you think that...”

He carried on.

“The transadaptor will come in handy for our operations abroad, not all of you speak as many languages as I do. It can translate, but it can also improve on whatever you say in your own language. It can take dictation like the most diligent clerk, and it can also provide you with all kinds of information and even, amazingly, write relevant commentary if prompted...”

“Like an editor in every sense?” I asked.

“It embellishes text, and it even creates text out of, basically, nothing. Your wish is my command sort of thing. But Lundy has warned that, like a human, when there is

an information overload or when the situation becomes too complex, the transadaptor might just get it wrong.”

“As in... in seeing things that do not exist?”

“Or they exist in its own mind, if we can call it a mind. It could even pick up your own, we could say, hallucinations...”

I tried to raise my voice.

“I don’t hallucinate, Mr Taras...”

He cleared his throat.

“When it comes to words, the transadaptor will do whatever you want it to do. In fact, the gadget was my idea and what happened was that...”

I needed to rest for a while and I stopped listening to him. I managed to nod from time to time so he would not suspect that I had long stopped taking in what he was saying. Finally, I asked a question as a way of concluding the conversation.

“So, this manoeuvre is about art... at a place beside the sea... far away?”

“Dreams do come true, Iona.”

He looked at me but seemed to be recalling something over and above me, something that I would probably never guess.

“As long as the dream doesn’t turn into a nightmare,” I concluded, and felt a shiver running down my spine.

The door to the room opened halfway, and we both looked up. It was the nurse who had been looking after me all that time.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, your visit has gone on for far too long. The patient needs to rest, and any agitation will only set her back and delay her return to operational status. I would respectfully ask you to leave right now.”

She opened the door fully.

“If you need me, I have an office upstairs,” Mr Taras said to me but facing the nurse, “so not too far away from you. I’ve worked in the building for a while until you were well enough to talk to me. I’ll be returning to HQ very soon, now that you’re almost sorted.”

He was still facing the nurse, as if reproaching her of something.

“You’ve made the place look like an ordinary hospital,” I commented, “but you didn’t stop there. It reminded me of home in many ways.”

“I hope you’ve been comfortable here during your stay,” he said. “We tried to mimic your apartment as much as possible to help with your memory processes, including your very bulky chandelier. That was a difficult one to reproduce...”

It was a good try at mimicking, but my chandelier was unique, hand-made especially for me, with the most spectacular vibrant crystals dangling from it like drops of multi-coloured dew. And suddenly I realised that no one in the office had ever been to my apartment, and I had certainly not described the décor or contents to anyone.

“How did you know about my chandelier?” I asked, almost in shock.

I remembered the event in Barcelona where things had gone so very wrong. Was there something else taking place that I did not know about? Mr Taras had an answer for everything.

“You’re panicking unnecessarily, Iona. You will recall that HR sends an inspector every few years to make sure that staff locations are secure. We sought information from them.”

Yes, I had forgotten about the five-year inspections. But I was still uneasy and became very homesick.

“I’d like to go home!”

“Very soon now, Iona,” he replied.

I managed to hold back my tears. It was not that difficult since I had not wept for, well, a very long time.

“Are there any others... in this hospital?” I asked.

He again looked at the nurse, and she nodded.

“Luckily, no others,” he said. “They were all successful in our latest roster of undertakings in Barcelona.”

“I seem to be the only one who failed then!”

Mr Taras brushed off my remarks by putting his hat back on and waving his left hand. He got up and shook the nurse’s hand, and then turned towards me.

“Look, Iona,” he whispered. “We’ve known each other all these years. We should be on first name terms.”

I was a little shocked that he would say that.

“What do you mean, Mr Taras? Would that not contravene our strict hierarchy?”

“There’s always an exception.”

“But I don’t know your first name.”

He removed his hat again. I wondered how many times he would put it on and remove it before he left.

“No one calls me by my first name, but I’ll tell you. It’s...”

What I least wanted was any kind of closeness with him.

“I think I’ll stick to *Mr Taras*, thank you.”

Chapter 5

I wanted to see the city for myself again, feel it on my skin, breathe it all the way in. For months I had been away from everything, having lost touch with who I was and the way I lived. I was finally back at home, and had been working hard at coming to terms with what had happened. At most times I avoided looking at myself in the mirror, but then I desperately wanted to find out if there had been any improvements. I had to pluck up untold courage, so much more than in some of my most terrifying manoeuvres.

“A total stranger...” I said, looking at my reflection.

No, not a single change in my facial features since the day before: my mouth and jaw badly scarred, the smoothness of my smile replaced by a hideous and almost frightening smirk. It was as if my face had a constant expression of dread, which in a way corresponded to how I felt. But there were other less unpleasant but similarly pitiable features: the darkest patches under my eyes, my cheeks heavily sunken, my black hair without shape or shine as if it had been burnt in a fire. And then the offensive scarring on my neck and shoulder, collarbone and upper torso. Yes, I had turned into someone I scarcely identified with. If I was to come to terms with this new set of physical circumstances, it would only be through sheer force of will.

The first time I saw my ravaged face while in hospital –the nurse initially refused to let me have access to any type of reflective surface– had left me distressed for days. At first, I barely recognised myself and I let out a piercing scream, with my distorted mouth producing unidentifiable sounds, and my eyes dramatically opening in horror. My perfect features, as I had been told many times before, were a thing of the past.

All that voluptuousness, so very useful as Mr Taras had always said, was gone. Non-existent. Caput. Nada. My seeking perfection in how I looked and presented myself was no longer required; any effort, however intense, would be to no avail. Doctors had implied that it would take several cosmetic procedures to achieve anything remotely resembling the person I had been in the past, and I told them that I would think about it.

“No, there’s nothing I can do, so get on with it, Iona!” I said to myself; it was an order that had to be immediately obeyed; even in my wretched state I behaved by the book, took charge and conformed.

About to leave home, I decided to shield my still raw scars from public viewing, covering my face with a bright flowery scarf. Mercifully, it gave me more than just a little confidence.

“There, there, Iona...” I said to the mirror.

Without anticipating it, I felt a strange kind of excitement; sudden surges of energy filled my lungs as if I would shortly take off into the wildest and most exciting spaces. For luck, I looked up at my radiant chandelier as I always did before leaving my apartment and hurriedly left, feeling more contented than I had felt since the incident in Barcelona. The previous night I had received temporary clearance from both the doctors who had attended me in hospital and the higher echelons at work.

“Tomorrow you can come over and visit,” someone phoned and said on behalf of Mr Taras.

It was early morning, and I set out with plenty of time. My walk would be on land and, you could well say, over water. The river was calm; the sun shone radiantly without hindrance. Elated as I was to be going out after so long, I embarked on a journey along the urban setting I knew so well; first I would cross Lambeth Bridge at a

reasonable pace and then I would go down Westminster Bridge at a faster one. I had crossed those two bridges so many times before that it was all down to instinct. In any case, for healing purposes both physical and mental I had been advised to walk at a fast pace; at least as fast as I could tolerate any type of exertion, given that I was still recovering. I was used to tolerating, extremes or otherwise, and it was no big deal for me. I had always wanted to go for the kill in more than one sense, completing assignments with one final grand gesture, whatever the cost. And now, having experienced such a life-and-death episode, I also wanted to go big in an attempt to recuperate quickly, salvaging whatever I could in the process. My reflexes were no longer what they had been, as confirmed by the doctors who examined me, but at least my geographical familiarity of the city was almost all there. I knew many of its central streets and roads by heart, used as I was to walking along them whenever I was not away on mission. I had always believed that cities are to be traversed and revered by their dwellers, at walking pace and with admiring eyes. Reluctantly I connected the navigator. And as if time had acquired another thrust after those months of recovery and anticipation –all that time I sought solace in art books, museum catalogues, memoirs of artists, the latest biographies of Georgia O’Keeffe, Frida Kahlo and Gwen John–, I realised that I had walked for quite a stretch without even realising.

“Good morning, Iona,” the navigator said in a jarring voice, so I set it to text instead of speech.

Rodin’s masterpiece appeared in front of me. At first, I did not realise I had reached the gardens surrounding Parliament. For a few moments I was convinced I was seeing the Burghers of Calais for the first time ever. Not immediately remembering was something that had been happening since I returned home from hospital, or at

least that pretend hospital: old things appeared as new until I realised that they had, in fact, been savoured by me many times before. Yes, those six astounding sculptures seemed so unlike what I remembered from seven or eight months earlier when I saw them last. I had to work hard at seeing them in the present moment and recall how I had admired them all those months ago –there were so many differences between what I saw in those two timespans. In the sunshine they now looked more melancholy still. Or was it maybe me capitulating to further darkness, I pondered out loud. I realised that my contentment from moments earlier seemed nowhere to be found.

“Such darkness!”

Since the event in Barcelona (I had decided that *event* was better than *accident* or *incident*, soothingly labelling what had happened as yet another of life’s many events), my perception of things seemed more disapproving as if challenging how I had interpreted things until then; in all, time itself had become so much faster, and space had narrowed down to fewer options. Emotions seemed to be steadily unleashing inside me, awakening memories that I was convinced I had forever suppressed. Yes, I thought it was all scrupulously under wraps, as it had always been, but something had given way. Being on the verge of losing your life gifts you with a sense of what is definitive and unchangeable, against which no fight can ever be won. But all this was too neat an explanation; it was clear that I was bewildered, with the past and the present merging hopelessly into each other as in a case of revolving doors, and with almost no distinguishing features between them. As to the future, it was anyone’s guess, but I anticipated it would be significantly different from what I had anticipated at the time or, more to the point, from what I had wanted back then.

“Nothing comes without a price,” one of the doctors had said when I asked whether it would get easier for me as time passed.

Those doctors sometimes resorted to banalities. Or even riddles.

“What’s both the beginning and the end of a particular stage in life?”

I said I had no idea. And that doctor called it *pupating*.

“Pupating?” I asked, not entirely sure of what I was turning into.

And when I asked if I would one day go back to what I had been, another doctor replied that the only option was to be true to yourself. Yes, clichés as well as riddles.

“True to... myself?” I said, clueless about what the sentence meant but thinking that perhaps it concealed something to savour despite the platitude.

“You were very close to your life ending,” was yet another of their medical explanations, as if I had not fully realised the enormity of the issue.

I was still recovering, so it was far too early to confront the tragic sculpture of the Burghers; their timeworn cast-bronze faces saddened me more than ever before; each one looking in a different direction, requiring a separate focal point from the viewer. I became more anxious than I had ever been when admiring those sculptures surging from a siege and expecting only death, their distorted hands and feet like those of giants.

“This is our truth!” I said in their name.

They resolutely appeared to be guarding the Parliament buildings; not that the buildings needed guarding because, as the rumour ran, they were temporarily in disuse.

“And what about my truth?” I asked.

There not being a cloud in the sky made no difference. Around me, even the sunshine turned dismal and murky; within me, anguish was raising its nasty head. I knew the feeling would not last, that much they had promised me in my hospital bed,

reinforcing that it would take only minutes at a time for despondency to dissipate. Then, they explained, I would recover until the next bout. No amount of training could help, they confirmed, and for the time being they did not want to take the medication route; it might not have gone down well at HQ. Too much or too little stimulating of my brain could well disrupt any sanctioned plans. Despite all, I was not as disconsolate as I had been in other situations. Remember, Iona, other countries, other cities, other missions. And just a few months ago, Barcelona.

I should have got away from the statues the moment I saw them, but I stopped to salute them out of familiarity as I had always done when passing by. I could not get away from them: nooses around necks, the keys to their beloved city in their hands, heroic gestures of the arms, the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of their people. No, not once had my causes been as worthy as theirs. Mine were, at best, so-so causes, some less treacherous than others, but for the most part you could describe them, by society's generally accepted and homogenised standards, as objectionable, even base. I admitted that much to myself, yet I never went around voicing any of those concerns. But such thoughts were now so much more formidable, and I asked whether my causes could one day, by some stroke of luck, become worthier, nobler, more dignified. Would there be something like redemption in the future was what I wanted to know, even though I had never cared much for such a suggestive word. Not that anyone had been aware of my occasional reluctance to perform assignments; such reluctance was more the result of inner turmoil than of any public scruples I cared to voice. I appeared to be impervious to ethical objections, aware as I was that what I did for a living impeded the life of others and generally went against societal norms. But then others in the name of officialdom –and we knew about this only too well at the

Agency— regularly embarked on similar if not unhealthier projects to the detriment of the common good, so who was I to be blamed. It was all down to the amount of training I had received, and which accounted for my aiming to disparage higher ideals. Should we not also be fighting for freedom from oppression, I once rhetorically asked someone in a position of authority at the Agency; I wanted to know what they thought was a good answer and how far I could dare go with my questions.

“Freedom,” they replied without looking at me, “isn’t for everyone.”

And it happened again, as expected. Fatalism appeared to be a good word to describe what was taking place. I had been reduced to a mere spectator as if my life had little to do with me, unable as I was to change a single comma of the narrative. Yes, I had always considered myself an outsider, but now that same feeling was directed inwards; I was an outsider towards myself, observing my reactions from afar and caring only as one would care about a next-door neighbour. I realised self-pity would abruptly make a new appearance if I did not keep an eye on things, and more so after the many long months of recovery. During those bouts of dejection, I would see myself as a woman doomed to suffer and carry on her shoulders intolerable and unjust burdens; I was a victim, in other words, unable to overcome the confines of a self-proclaimed victimhood. And then, as if by sheer magic, the vast black hole where everything melted to oblivion began to subside and I returned to what most people, especially at the Agency, believed to be my true self: someone with no devotion to anything but her work.

I finally managed to leave behind the Burghers, their nooses, their gigantic hands. And round the corner there was a solitary demonstrator, holding a large red and blue banner with white lettering: I WANT PEACE NOW!

It would be my first day back in the office, though I would not be working as such. I was to be a visitor for a day, or half a day because I had been advised not to overdo it. I watched the heavy flow of people crossing Westminster Bridge and walking in my direction. I had traversed the lengths of the river so many times. I liked going against the flow, the grain, the law; I mean, I had to. This was me, and they were them; my mission and their mission, each to their own. Most were frantically proceeding to their jobs on that side of the river; I was walking almost calmly, except for those brief bouts of darkness, in the opposite direction. Facing them, I was somehow expecting a morning greeting, as if I deserved it in view of the long and arduous path of my recovery. Maybe I should have cut through firm land and walked along the streets of Southwark, then crossed London Bridge. Staying still was not an option for now, I had experienced stillness and quiet for long enough. My body was chasing the exciting twists and turns of the route; my mind was trying hard to follow suit.

I had just ended long weeks of rehabilitation, online and in person, all of it neatly and stealthily arranged by the Agency. And the extensive monologues (they listened, I spoke) about who and what I was had thankfully come to a halt. No, I gave nothing away in those conditions, not even superfluous details like cities I knew or titles of books I had read. After all, I had taken an oath of allegiance to the Agency. The oath did not necessitate a short and symbolic shedding of blood, as in the case of other more traditional establishments in the trade; instead, it implied that, if you decided to go private, others would have to shed their blood on your behalf. In other words, if you behaved fittingly, those close to you could hang on to their full ten pints of blood.

“Treachery is punished with disposal, not limited to your disposal but including the disposal of others to whom you may be close,” I recalled one of the more threatening and restrictive clauses to which you had to swear an oath.

“I pledge my full, unstinting, unflinching, indefatigable, and unconditional allegiance to...” I began to recite the oath from memory but stopped mid-flow.

It was the sort of sentence to make you instantly blackhole; I was sure it had been composed by Mr Taras and his love of synonyms; a thesaurus of a man, occasionally misfiring and misjudging his words, embarking on selections of alternate expressions to prove that he had mastered the language into which he had not been born. His ambition was to be the best in the trade, he always told us during our training sessions; what he did not realise was that, in trying so badly to be the best himself he had failed, as we all said, in acknowledging the best in us.

I rubbed my itching face through the scarf. So much had happened to me during the recovery process: massage in the most recondite of places; bizarre exercises to get my limbs to rotate in every direction; intense workouts that left me longing for another berry-flavoured capsule, one that would not fail. From me: misgivings, uncertainties, anxiety; and from them: reassurance, encouragement, optimism; results: there were physical improvements on my part, though questioning my life became more intense than ever. My physiological and emotional responses were probably not what the experts had anticipated; they expected faster and more definitive results, especially from a highly trained specialist, as they categorised me.

“We’re sorry to disappoint you. But with certain things, you’ll probably have to start from scratch,” they suggested.

“Like what?” I asked, totally baffled.

“You may not be able to do what you did before, whether somatic or intellectual. Only time will tell, though there are several technologies in development that might just be able to help...”

During my stay in hospital, once I was out of the coma, I questioned what had occurred: if the strawberry capsule had failed to produce the required effect, could it possibly have re-programmed itself to prevent a full recovery or would it push me along another unforeseen yet more destructive path? After all, every strategy must have a plan B. I also wondered whether my recovery, or the lack of it, had also been part of a master plan by our archenemies to obliterate the Agency, beginning with the advocates –as we, the senior staff, were called– and ending with the lowest tier. In my weakened state I put a few of such ideas to the doctors –they were part of the Agency without really being aware of the full picture– but I only saw indulgent smiles around me. After all, I had asked them metaphorically how much more of a fight would I have to put up from then on. They were not used to upholding levels of deception, conspiracy, treachery, coercion, reign of terror, in that order. In my case, all of that was the air I breathed.

“We must tone you up,” the doctors replied as the best of immediate solutions, and I went on receiving every imaginable treatment.

Several of the less specialised cures were performed by the same nurse who kept asking me, during the initial stages of my recovery, to remember whatever it was I had to remember. Was it that they only had one employee who doubled up as a recovery nurse, physiotherapist, psychotherapist, an all-rounder, in a room that resembled my bedroom at home but in a make-believe hospital so that, at such a vulnerable time, I would not be outside the clutches of the Agency? I knew we had to multitask in our jobs, but the number of assignments in that nurse’s rota was going too

far. Cutting costs might have been the reason; we had been told that customer numbers were dwindling with so much competition around. It was a tough time for everyone, especially in the business world which, I suppose, we were part of. I assumed that was why they wanted to revamp the whole operation by moving into a new building: to attract new clients and maybe move into the world of Art as our new field of expertise.

“The world is a-changing!” was the sing-song explanation by Mr Taras.

But every era has had that exact phrase as its guiding motto; after all, it is the easiest explanation as to why things are not going your way. Change is always the given, without question, nothing is set, fixed, permanent. What became clear was that the Agency no longer ranked at the top, and there was indisputably less work coming our way. We needed to do better in adapting to the times, not for nothing had we had a series of calamities following our not-so-good planning. As a result, our best advocate, Jennifer, and her assistant Whittaker, had tragically lost not exactly their lives but their existence; in their case, the concept of life-changing injuries was an understatement, confined as they were to hospital beds for life. Or maybe our profession could one day disappear; that would be the day when our clients acquired other ways of resolving issues, possibly with their own dedicated mediators working in-house within a specialised department alongside HR or Financial Services or Recruitment, providing expert and insider attention regarding the most delicate matters that could never be made public, given the attendant risk of horrid scandals or major court cases. Or perhaps there would no longer be a need for any disruptive activity in order to “get our own back,” as some clients casually described what they wanted from us. Was the world becoming a better place?

“Dream on, Iona!”

It was a fact that the number of requests had declined, yet the demand for what I would call the ludicrous and the incongruous was increasing; personally, I had not yet overseen any of those, but some of my colleagues had (like looking for lost treasure, investigating properties assumed to be haunted, reopening archived cold cases from decades back, sightings of cryptids...). There was no denying that we faced significant competition in our field of work. Competitors like Bill and the organisation he worked for or should I say, Bill and the Organisation. If he was still alive, that is.

Ours had been a marriage of convenience and certainly the most expeditious way for the Agency to infiltrate our rivals. Bill could not conceivably have had any suspicions about me, especially as at the time I was not yet out fully in the field. In fact, our team made sure that I was virginal in every way possible, a complete unknown with a freshly written CV and textbook references to match. It was the perfect, most tantalising honeytrap. I learnt how to be the woman he wanted me to be, passive and caring, solicitous and giving. Bill, one of the more prominent hands at the Organisation, described himself to me as a *businessman*, a profession that can include anything from having a fruit stall down the road to importing blood diamonds. Yes, Bill and I had had a few good months: I was convincing enough by showing little yet sharp interest in his sham business operations in an attempt to decipher their true purpose, and in bed, performing with persuasive inexperience. The enemy and I could not have been closer, simply put. During our time together, we talked about his assumed legitimate dealings in various international financial markets. He introduced me to monetary and fiscal concepts in a series of conversations I privately despised. Because of his constant travelling, we would see each other a couple of nights a week for supper in celebrated restaurants enjoying the most excellent wines, which mercifully got me

through what followed: our intermittent yet entirely predictable sex sessions. Yes, sex became a performance to show my proficiency. I despised him with an enmity I had never experienced before, and towards the end of the relationship I could not conceal my dislike and so we regularly had heated exchanges, all of it nasty innuendo accompanied by a destructive kind of love language; it was for real and not only part of the planned ploy to accelerate a separation once it was established that I could be more effective elsewhere and, especially, when they realised at HQ that the relationship was affecting me emotionally beyond what had been anticipated. After that came to an end, I had to attend a number of what they called energising sessions so I could continue being the desirable female they wanted me to be. I began to despise the job itself, and especially those who had commissioned it, bearing in mind that it was my first proper manoeuvre. I was young, yes, I was very young. And yet the passing of time does things to us, distorting memories and making us forget what used to be important; once the marriage was over, I developed a kind of empathy in antipathy towards him, you could say. Had he tried to kill me in the hotel room in Barcelona because of leaving him all those years ago or because he had finally found out that I was nothing but an employee of the Agency? Judging by what happened in the hotel room –the yellow haze, the pea, the strawberry capsule– it looked like neither he nor I felt any pangs of guilt about trying to dispose of the other. I was sure about my own missing pangs, almost sure about his.

No, no one seemed to be following me along the route through the capital. In any case, I was probably unrecognisable. After what I had gone through, I could no longer boast the vigorous physique that had once defined me. The flowery scarf kept me unbearably warm in the height of that permanent summer, but it gratifyingly

concealed the scarring and damage to my mouth and cheek. I planned to remove it when I got to the office; it was to be the first time I would show the effects of the *event* in public. Anything that the strawberry-flavoured capsule had touched, it destroyed.

“Delicious but deadly!” I called out as I was walking, but who cared if someone said anything out loud in the middle of the street, especially about a strawberry.

I increased the pace just to prove I could. In no time, I reached Waterloo Bridge, where once again I felt contentment, even exhilaration; the earlier darkness had dispelled into the bright skies. More than overwhelmed, I was excited by all the new things that would take place that day. For one, I would be going to our new HQ. I would also meet up with my colleagues; we were all closer than we would have normally been in a normal office doing normal clerical work like normal people; having participated jointly in some very punishing and extremely hazardous manoeuvres had created an abiding bond between us. And finally, I was eager to learn more about the latest gadgets, particularly the new device to prevent tailing I had been told about. I had always enjoyed any novelties created by our team of experts; some gadgets we used in the field whilst others remained forever on the drawing board. Not everything or everyone can have a full run.

“It’s a kind of implant,” I had been told over the phone about the latest device.

A short surgical operation would be required. Nothing too invasive. Anaesthetic was to be used. I said that I did not want any more sleeping gas, I had had my share of it in previous months. Yes, a team of surgeons had fixed this and that: from the mouth to the oesophagus; between gums and molars; from one ear to the neck; up into my left eyebrow and down to the sternum; shoulder blade to shoulder blade; along

the chest, above the left upper arm and back again. Whether my face would end up lopsided, they were not able to immediately say.

“Might they have fixed something else whilst they had the chance?” I said, trying to distract myself.

I looked behind me, and there was no one following. In all likelihood, I was already a has-been.

“Not even a should-be!”

The river predictably took away all my apprehensions; it had always done so. There is a connection between water, in its many subtle forms, and the commonplace concept of worry: waves washing away unease, just like that; dew displacing disquiet, so very quickly; innocuous steam rising from trepidation. Its gentle rolling waves were glowing brightly, its waters packed with boats even at that hour. River cruises for early rising tourists, river buses, transport tugs. And as I left behind Blackfriars' Bridge, everything seemed busier down on the water than up on firm land, with endless police units, their sirens beeping the same piercing note and with the customary red and blue banner with white lettering: *WE'RE HERE TO PROTECT THE AVERAGE CITIZEN FROM THE THREAT OF INVASION.*

I was certainly not an average citizen; more importantly I did not need anyone to defend me from threats of any kind. At the Agency we had invaded, in our very own way, enough territories.

The next crossing was Millennium Bridge. Far too many people were rushing in both directions, with the bridge mildly swaying despite all the firming and fixing it had

been submitted to over many decades. I was getting dizzy; my feet wobbled briefly. Yes, too much walking, rushing, reeling.

“If I’m not careful, something serious might happen,” I said as I became aware of a long-forgotten memory.

Yes, memories were beginning to come and go at their pleasure, however tough my training and my resolve. The slender and seemingly unsteady Millennium Bridge made me recall its antithesis, a very different structure, unyielding and majestic. It all came back: Golden Gate Bridge. It was there that the man I had been relentlessly tracking for days let go of the railings, falling all the way to the turbulent waters flowing to the Pacific. A voluntary death. He plunged almost tenderly without visible distress, like a wearied angel; it was as if he had had enough of both his life and my persecution, and only in that descent could he rest. Luckily, I suppose, his fall from the bridge avoided me having to dispose of him.

“If you resort to cutting your life short by your own hand, then you should do it in style...” I could not help saying to myself, almost in remembrance of my dead target.

That memory gave way, and I was now enjoying the staggering views from the leanest bridge over the Thames: the gallery at one end and the cathedral at the other; on one side, imperious art for a predetermined and domineering purpose, now that the building was mostly a place where international meetings were held; and on the other, the type of art allowing for experimentation and discovery, despite rumours that the structure would soon be closing its doors. Before joining the Agency, I would have almost certainly given my life to work and exhibit there.

“Experimentation and discovery,” I read from the torn and frayed banner dangling from one side of the building, in red and blue with white lettering.

I wanted to stop a little more and cherish the view from the bridge, but I had to go on. I was afraid of stillness, a fissure in my path that could lead to fear and foreboding, yet another dark hole. I crossed the river once more, this time at Southwark Bridge, not as colourful as other riverside stretches. By then, I was becoming tired and I regretted my decision to walk all the way. It had been an unnecessary effort on my part when there was something called a taxi, I said to myself as my rationality briefly kicked in. Yet I went on. And on. That was how I did things, once committed: to the very end, on my own resources alone.

I walked alongside huge crowds proceeding to the city. Around me were the tallest buildings, blackened by the soot of time, with beeping traffic increasing by the minute and people shouting into their cellphones as if there was no one else around. It was all about numbers, as Mr Taras liked to say, their numbers as opposed to ours. Theirs were 9 to 5, and ours were 24/7. I was freely mingling with those who would never, in a thousand years, guess what I did for a living. But why they did what they did would be similarly perplexing to me, their worlds far removed from mine. All along the main avenue their comprehensive services were systematically and vividly advertised in red and blue banners with white lettering: LIGHTNING-FAST CRYPTO TRADING SOLUTIONS... SHARED AND IMMUTABLE LEDGERS... FINTECHS AND INSURTECHS... HYPER-PERSONALIZED AND CONVERSATIONAL BANKING... EMBEDDED YET OPEN BANKING... HYPERAUGMENTED BANKING... BANKING AS A PARADIGM FOR ENGAGEMENT... BANKING AS A VIRTUAL WONDERLAND... AVATAR BANKING... BANKING AS THE VANGUARD OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AT A CRITICAL TIME... BANKING DOUBLING AS PERSONAL DATA BANKS TO HOLD ALL YOUR INFORMATION

FREE OF CHARGE... OPEN A VIRTUAL ACCOUNT AND YOUR VERY OWN IHB
HERE...

Were they not all, or some, or even a few of the people walking alongside me, also possibly into coercion, bribery or fraud in the world of finance and business under the guise of respectability and competence? After all, money is not born from nothingness but from the profuse sweat of brows, and better still if it is from the brows of others. Unenthusiastically I had become acquainted with the basics of business dealings, not for personal reasons but because I occasionally needed to work with clients from those domains. But it was Bill who had introduced me to such subjects. How much I despised his tedious lectures on these matters and on many others, including what he liked best in intimate situations and, worse still, what I should be liking.

“I’m learning grudgingly, but I’m learning,” I remember I said to him, and he took it as a joke.

As it was, those walking alongside me on their way to the city’s financial soul – a paradox of sorts– all had a similar air, as if it was a much-demanded requirement at their place of work. And as I continued to walk beside them, I rephrased: they had the *same* air. It was not so evident in how they dressed, almost in agreement with the murky and lofty buildings, but in how they walked, holding their heads to one side as if they were about to give up and die.

And there it was in the distance. The heights of Tower Bridge, its cerulean turrets competing with the summery skies: an imposing bridge that could part in two like our very own Red Sea; the most discernible gateway to the city that lay not so much in waiting as in readiness; an escape route if we ever needed one. I quickly

walked towards the bridge, leaving behind the landmark Tower alongside it. I did not want to look back for a second. The Norman fortress, with all its architectural additions throughout history, always stirred in me far too many ideas about those I would have liked to lock up and about my choice of punishment for each one of them, putting a less than splendid end to their pitiless lives.

“For the crime of deception both by devious friends and by the most genuine foes, I condemn you to...”

There were reports that the magnificent historical building was back to what it had been used for just over a century earlier; but not even the Agency could confirm any such accounts.

“To the Tower!” I muttered.

I would have liked to stop on the bridge to contemplate the grand riverscapes on either side, but I decided against it. No, stillness is not good for me right now, I kept saying to myself. Another black hole might have forced me to do something from those heights that I could regret. By then, I was dog-tired, dragging my feet and out of breath, my dizziness had not completely gone. What was worse was that, with the exertion, the various scars pulled my skin in every direction. My head was bursting, and not with excitement anymore.

Without realising, I found myself in the large avenue that housed most major newspapers. From the various buildings hung red and blue banners with the latest headlines in white lettering, clearly not all of them verifiable: PEACE TALKS COMING SOON... NORTHERN FRONT CEASEFIRE ANNOUNCED... WARS OR TRADE WARS?... DISPUTED TERRITORIES WILL ALWAYS BE NON-NEGOTIABLE... NEW WARFRONT DECLARED... ARE YOU EQUIPPED FOR FOREIGN INVASION?... WEATHER CONSPIRACIES AND WAR INTRIGUES... SIGN UP HERE!

I can do it, I kept telling myself; of course, I can do it. Whatever it was and whatever the cost. And as I uttered those words once again –I can do it!– I was finally on the other side.

Chapter 6

I had not seen any images of our new HQ, and I wondered which of the surrounding buildings it would be. A long row of parallelepipeds appeared before me, so dark that they looked uninhabited. Was our new HQ the structure with stacks of steel and discernible pipework, or the one completely enclosed in grey glass? Most probably the one with no apparent windows: a giant black obelisk, with employees absorbed into its shadows the moment they entered through the doors. But the navigator was telling me to continue the journey, so our HQ was not one of them.

“Just a little further, Iona, press on...” were the words on its screen; the gadget had been made more human than necessary.

The buildings I left behind appeared to be the main offices of other corporations in the city, possibly not too far removed from what we ourselves did. Since business was now systematically carried out on two fronts, the very visible and the very dark, at the Agency we suspected –and in some cases knew for sure– that corporations moved similar lines as us. Mr Taras would have added a few more appellations along the lines of illegality, treachery and fraud.

The Agency’s plan to expand downwards had been a long-standing project; so deep that it would lead to a kind of underworld, if you happened to believe in such things. Beneath the foundations of our previous building, the land was seemingly too soft, too close to the river, too silty and gravelly, a stratum of sand and quicksand. Even with the latest tunnelling technology and the most potent boring machines, I had heard that it would be impossible to achieve what the Agency wanted: on the one

hand, to make the whole operation less discernible; and on the other, to expand underground, unsurpassed by anyone. What huge expenditure at a moment of crisis, we had commented at the office. We had been told that any monies would be coming from operations we could not even dream of; they had no idea how far our dreams could travel.

“How would we know how far down we can go,” I remember asking, ‘if we cannot tell how much others have excavated? Without the relevant reports, they’ll continue digging without anyone realising what’s going on.”

Excavating deeper than anyone else in the city almost became a matter of pride, though any serious reports on the subject never materialised. I anticipated that the new building probably rested on a nice bed of solid clay, the bluish one that pervades the capital and is part of its urban sprawl. How different would the new HQ be, I wondered. Our previous building boasted a flawless corporate look and a giant logo; more importantly, it was conveniently situated in the business heart –possibly a non-beating heart– of the city, where the real power was and where money ran nothing but supreme. Our old building certainly looked impressive; I abhorred it.

“Too much patina and no substance,” I once said to Mr Taras, and he threatened me with demotion to basic operations with the troopers, as he always did with anyone contradicting him; it was in jest, he added with a wink, but I had my doubts and from then on I stopped making any kind of derisory remark about the building.

And as I turned at the end of one road and went up another, I came to a flea market; it was the last one to exist in the city. Cheap clothing, cheaper jewellery, impractical household items; none of them essential anymore except for remembering the past. I could have stayed there for a long time, browsing and observing, pretending I had nothing else to do in the world –that sort of inconsequential activity was not

wasting time after all but gathering one's forces and gaining insights. And it was then that the navigator told me I had arrived.

"You'll be glad to hear that you're finally at HQ," such were the words displayed on its screen. "And remember it's called the Paranym!"

In front of me was the dullest building in the area, the one you would suspect to be nothing more than the premises of some worshipful association of a long-lost occupation or a county guild to protect local produce. Would there be firm ground under its foundations, a solid and gigantic lump of clay that would allow for the deepest excavation to reach where no one had ever reached?

I looked back; no one was tailing me, at least not today and not for now. I had checked along the route, and I was sure no one had been passing off a tail to the next one in tow. No vehicles in comparable situations, one taking the place of another after a mile or so, seldom identifiable by a tiny streamer or a radio antenna taller than a person or a silver star stuck to its windscreen. Tailing and identifying a tail had become second nature to me, although there were the occasional exceptions. I suppose the new gadget they had promised would come in handy because I had once failed to realise that I was being tracked and had got into some trouble; an exception to the rule. But this time I was convinced that no one had followed me on my first day back, they would not have recognised me anyway. The Agency had also made sure that rumours about my demise abounded. To the outside world, I was well and truly lifeless after the deadly kiss in a pink hotel; just like Bill, who was now presumably deceased because of a procedural pea. Dearly departed Bill.

“Is this the new HQ?” I defiantly asked as I saw two rusty metallic numbers perched on the wall opening a courtyard that was in serious need of repairs.

“Seventy-five,” I read.

They were both hanging from a single nail and about to fall off. I had to look twice, three times. It could not be the Agency’s new offices, but perhaps I was back to my momentary black holes. The unpredictable and the extraordinary were our unwritten motto. While the previous building had been predictable and extraordinary, this new one was wholly unpredictable yet entirely ordinary, downright shoddy. The formal name was the *Paranym*, and a paranym it certainly was. Nothing but a misrepresentation, the sort of activity we inexorably pursued. We misrepresented others and represented only ourselves, as we always said.

“The Paranym!”

The courtyard featured large, cracked paving stones, more apt for horses in a previous era than for today’s employees. As to the iron gates trying to keep visitors away, they were practically unhinged; I sincerely hoped this was not a reflection of what was going on inside.

“Is this the Paranym?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the man standing at the entrance.

He did not wear a uniform and, at first, did not even look at me.

“Thanks!” I replied.

And when the man raised his head and opened wide his lustrous eyes, it became obvious that he was not your average concierge. His gaze looked liquid, glittery, feigned. He seemed to be fully in charge though, despite his darned tweed jacket and torn jeans.

“And you are...? he asked in a commanding tone, prompting me to fill in the blank space.

I said nothing and instead showed him my silicone ID. He asked me to peer into a seascape of endless drifting waves on his cellphone, glinting as brightly as his eyes.

“Go ahead,” he said.

I crossed the courtyard and came to a barrier. Another concierge, this one a little neater. He looked up and I was at a loss. What have they done to their eyes, I wanted to ask. Yes, those eyes were almost mechanical in the way they followed you, in the brightness of the sclera, in the way the eyelids opened so very gradually.

“Am I in the right place?” I could not help asking.

He moved his head backwards, almost as far as it would go. I was not sure what that meant. I was supposed to understand signs, hints, gestures and motions of every sort and from a variety of cultures. Not only through my interest in art and symbols, but also in the field as I had dealt so many scenarios. They had forced me to attend several courses on the subject, claiming that it would help with interpreting the world –they did put everything so grandly sometimes. But that movement of the head by the second concierge was baffling; it could mean *yes*, and it could mean *no*. Or nothing at all. Or all things at once. It was a new language to me, and maybe I needed retraining.

“Thank you,” I replied to him, as his eyes flickered unnaturally.

The gates opened, and I was in. That courtyard appeared as a dilapidated structure. Builders were removing bricks and waiting for a rumbling cement mixer to end its operation. They all looked convincingly positioned, hands on hips, caps on heads. And yet when I crossed that space, through another set of gates and into

another courtyard, it all began to unravel: the bricks strategically placed in star-shaped patterns; unopened bags of cement with the price tag on; shiny brand-new spades. Nobody was repairing anything. That was it! The building looked purposefully distressed, artificially so, in the process of being revamped but remaining as it had probably been for the last hundred and fifty years.

I could hear footsteps, and I looked behind me.

“Follow me, please,” said a woman in a spotless uniform; her eyes did not shine unusually, unlike her two other colleagues, and she looked at me with an interesting mix of awe –probably because of the sections of my face showing around my flowery scarf– and arrogance –because I knew nothing of the new building and what it held, and she did. And as we entered through a couple of large and unimpressive wooden doors, also in serious need of repair, I told myself that what I saw could not be humanly possible. Was I again dreaming, blackholing? No, the inside of the building could not conceivably occupy the tiny space that the entrance appeared to announce.

“So small on the outside and so huge on the inside!” I uttered, realising that my words sounded like some facile slogan, but I got no response from the woman.

Inside, the building was far less lavish yet more striking than our previous HQ. Striking, though, was not a word that did justice to the setting. We could have spoken about a more intelligent structure and much less wastage. Or, if I had been inspired that day, I could have described it as an impossibility to behold and a marvel to admire. There was pure unadulterated technology all around me, with the sort of machinery you would find in a manufacturing enterprise, a seemingly unbroken assembly line of equipment that demanded no human involvement. Yes, the Agency was considerably more automated now. The entrance hall had walls of flickering screens, ceilings of

them; the floor was shiny and transparent with twinkling red and blue cables running through. In unison, all that technology made a dull bass buzz to remind us that we were not alone.

“Here!” the woman said, and she touched a glossy wall that immediately opened.

We entered a lift with mirrors on all four sides. I avoided mirrors if I could help it; I still had to come to terms with my new face, if I ever would.

“Bond Room,” she whispered into the side of the lift as it began to delicately move in directions I could not readily define.

Whether we travelled upwards or downwards, sideways, diagonally or in spirals, it was impossible to tell. After a few seconds and with the mildest bump, all movement ceased. The doors opened, and we came out into a windowless corridor lit by innumerable gilded wall lights. Halfway down, we entered a large meeting room, also windowless. It was dark inside, and the uniformed woman switched on the overhead neons. The light was stark and silvery, and I wondered whether my colleagues would be even more shocked by my new appearance in that harsh lighting. I tightened the scarf around my face with a double knot.

“You can read the papers while you wait,” she said, pointing at a small table with a few broadsheets.

“The news are not what they used to be,” I replied, knowing that my comment would get no response.

Having been away from everything for so long, I dreaded to get back into the flow of things. Had the wars ended, would rain be coming back in full flow, might the Agency carry on with its traditional role or would it instead be involved in new lines of business?

“All done!” the uniformed woman said, speaking into the right sleeve of her jacket.

Closing the door behind her, she left and I was on my own.

And within the highest tech building, the classical look; I was sure Mr Taras had had everything to do with the décor; he was one for contradictions.

“What on earth...” I blurted.

Before me was the longest mahogany table, almost as far as the eye could see. In a previous life, it had probably been custom-made as the banqueting table for a now abandoned royal palace or as a meeting table for the praesidium of some dictatorial regime. Its many legs, holding the table in place roughly every two metres, were exquisitely sculpted like a lion’s head, ending in a single lion’s paw; the tongue of the feline stuck out well beyond what was natural to an animal and appropriate to the setting; large powerful wings sprouted from its neck. Around its outer edge, the table had tiny incrustations of mother of pearl in the shape of flowers and butterflies and birds of paradise, as well as arcs made with brass inlay. All of it was impressive unless you decided to zoom in: some of the birds had lost their wings, many of the lion tongues were only partly there. It must have come at a reasonable hammer price. Mr Taras always liked a good bargain, a view which at times he applied to staff depending on the urgency of the recruitment process—that was probably why a few staff members were not the cream of anything, we whispered amongst ourselves. Alongside the table were an inordinate number of the cheapest white plastic chairs, many of them stacked up against one of the walls. Probably they were still decorating the place, or at least I hoped they were. In the absence of windows of any size, a dozen or so large and

particularly vivid paintings hung on the wall as if the bearers of light. It could only have been Mr Taras who had chosen this sort of art, if it could be called art.

All those paintings were clearly by the same amateurish hand, depicting the scales from a large reptile in great detail. Here was a section of the abdomen in pink, and there was a bit of tail in green. Left and right, relief representations of scales of different tones and shapes covered the walls of the room. They were more collages than paintings, though the term *collage* was qualifying the works well above their station. I approached one of them and I saw for myself that it included authentic skin torn from a reptile; it had been mechanically stretched and chemically distressed to increase the size of the scales, and then glued together along a piece of canvas, and finally covered in varnish and paint. The assemblage of elements was far from rigorous, with visible flecks of dried white glue and brush strokes that included a few sable hairs. But despite the tackiness, the effect was undoubtedly stimulating; surrounded by so many depictions of reptilian skin, for a moment I was someplace else or in some other era.

“A zoo, a jungle, the Mesozoic!”

By then I felt unbearably fatigued. And as I was about to sit on one of those hardly appealing plastic chairs, in stark white and for sunny backyards, the door opened and my colleagues poured into the room, led by my assistant Rudge; after a spell in the army, he had joined the Agency some months before the incident in Barcelona. Several of them brought bouquets of bright red roses as well as envelopes most probably containing greeting cards. For staff who would show no clemency in the field, in the office we could be courteous to a fault.

“Just a little something to welcome you back!” someone said as they made an inelegant pile with their gifts on the vast table.

I was concerned about the flowers going to waste, but I did not say a word in case they took it as yet another of my complaints. I was known for being a bit of a killjoy; in fact, Mr Taras had referred to me as such.

“Iona’s a killjoy. You may think that what she says is one of her jokes, but it’s no more than just a good whinge,” he had apparently once said, and it had reached my ears.

At the Agency you could not trust any such quoted comments to be reliable. By the time you heard a quote doing the rounds, it would have probably been altered several times over, as in a game of broken telephone. Sometimes comments were purposefully modified to stir things up. I had done it myself.

“More than once,” I uttered.

And the procession into the Bond Room continued. One after the other, all my colleagues approached me. My very own squadron.

“Hello,” I said, but no one replied as such, instead producing little bouts of laughter or quick nods of the head as if unable to acknowledge me fully.

Most of them avoided looking at me, my face covered with my very flowery scarf concealing both my scars and my trembling lips.

Chapter 7

Mr Taras entered the Bond Room wearing one of his signature hats, this time in sky-blue and embellished with tiny pheasant feathers and rather convincing fresh ivy. He was known to come to the office directly from his assignments –only the most challenging and exquisite assignments, of course– without going home to change. His sporty attire made him look as if he had just arrived from an out-of-season shooting spree to kill pheasants. Or he could have been disposing of other creatures, lesser or greater. I wondered whether those red spots on his cream suede jacket were something to be concerned about.

“Hello!” I said, as loudly as I could manage, tightening my scarf.

Mr Taras was followed by Miss Pilkington, or Miss P as we normally condensed her. Before her retirement, she was the first in command of our squadron. She had been called back temporarily and had become the second in charge after Mr Taras. This made us think that the situation at the Agency was not considered to be so good under him, and so our squadron needed an injection of good old-fashioned leadership; in other words, we could not do without her.

“Hello!” I greeted her, and she acknowledged me with a nod.

She appeared as tall as ever, her spectacles covering over half of her very high cheekbones, her hair tightened into her customary silver bun. She had a more clearly defined jawline than I remembered from last time, maybe it had been newly chiselled.

“Hello!” I repeated, this time in the direction of Rudge.

He looked more perplexed than when I had last seen him, rubbing his hands as if unsure of whether to approach me. I considered him more of an apprentice than

an assistant for he still had much to learn at the Agency, despite his military background; special operations on several fronts, from what he had told me. He greeted me by briefly touching his right temple with his right hand in a soldierly fashion. Perhaps I should have taken him with me to Barcelona; despite his many pleas, I chose not to in the end. I always wanted to prove myself in every task I performed, which was another issue of mine that I still needed to work on. Had Rudge been with me in the pink hotel, he could have possibly saved me from the serious injuries I incurred. But you never know: with him by my side, I might have returned in a body bag. I believed he was not well-honed in either debating skills or distrust, and you required both in spades in our line of business; as the ex-soldier that he was, combat skills were expectedly his forte. With patience and guidance on my part, in due course he would develop into a steady hand. But then he might have to run a very long course; certain gaps could not be filled with age.

“Hello,” several people finally said, some with a degree of enthusiasm.

Mr Taras was eyeing the pictures hanging from the walls in the room and seemed to be enjoying them. I now learnt from what others were saying that he had picked them out himself from a colour-coded catalogue.

“What do you think of the art around us, Iona?” he asked. “You know more about these things than most people.”

I gestured with my head in a way that was purposefully impossible to decipher, not unlike the concierges at the entrance of the building.

“Well?” he repeated, but he looked at Miss P this time.

As if the question had been meant to her, she briefly turned her head toward the paintings around us and then towards the neon light.

“Mmm...” she said.

Miss P would never comment unless directly asked. She once said to us that she had enough in her head as it was and did not need to rely on printed or screen information, which in any case might have been falsified. With years of experience in charge of Strategy and dealing with both the most delicate situations requiring superior diplomatic finesse and the most physically demanding cases (after all, she had been an Olympian in her youth), all the things she knew, and they were considerable, were neatly packed in the mazes of her mind. She would repeat “It’s with myself that I have the most instructive discussions!” whenever listening to what we had to say.

“Interesting...” I finally said to Mr Taras in reply to his question about the paintings; it was best to use the most innocuous of terms.

Rudge was still rubbing his hands and hesitating. Beside him were two experts, Pratt and Robinson; three specialists; and finally, one of the scribes, as Mr Taras called them.

Absent were those other bosses that we never got to meet. As far as we were concerned, Mr Taras and Miss Pilkington ran the show, at least on the ground. But there were others who were into decision-making and policy design, as we were told. Or as we liked to describe them, above good and evil yet under the radar. They were the Trustees, though their existence, just like godly creatures, could not be readily proven. No one had seen them, met them, engaged with them. I had the impression that they abided by the same principles as those of a bygone system of medicine where the more diluted the medication, to the point of non-existence, the greater its potency and the more significant its role. But that was just my impression, and lately I even distrusted my impressions. I recalled Miss P’s view on the Agency: “We may be

structured like any army, but we're so much more intimidating for the simple reason that, in some cases, we are nowhere to be seen..."

"Welcome back, Iona. And welcome to the Agency's new HQ, the Paranyrn!"
Mr Taras said.

"Thank you," I replied.

"In keeping with the Agency's official motto, you're certainly a heroine."

I recalled the often-quoted motto and especially the three nouns that supposedly motivated and defined us: staunchness, dependability, heroism. And as I was about to respond that my latest mission had failed and so I was no heroine, the door opened again, and two more people joined us. First, it was one of the troopers, who dithered, turned around, thought for a second and then turned again and entered the room. Yes, he had a long way to go. And then Tony, the usual latecomer, his eyes as wandering as always, his goatee gone. He came over and patted me on the shoulder. And as he did that, I decided that I would remove my scarf. I even surprised myself at the speed with which I did it. It was best to carry out important things quickly and without giving it another thought.

"Oh!" he said, without commenting further on my facial scarring.

Others looked up, but no one said anything. I became painfully self-conscious, as if it had all been my fault. Despite my embarrassment, there was nothing I could do to hide who I now was. No, it finally dawned on me and almost made me jump: there was no way back and I would not be able to revert to the alluring female I had been until so very recently. That person did not exist any longer, and I had become someone else.

When I first applied for a job at the Agency, I had not agreed to them exploiting any physical appeal, though I had openly acquiesced to performing other duties demanding involvement in, we could say, the downright proscribed. I had my own set of values, contradictions and denials, so there was no point trying to make sense of what my messed-up mind stood for. The requirement on using sex as a tool –it would be more accurate to describe it as a generally infallible weapon– was included in the contract as a last-minute stipulation, carefully drafted by Mr Taras under the relevant clause.

“Sexual attraction, sexual gratification and sexual encounters are to be part of the job!” he said when he noticed my reticence just before signing the contract, a pen vibrating in my hand.

“But...” I said, wanting to object.

“Think of yourself as a facilitator, even as a delivery system,” he said.

“Yes, that’s what you suggested when I was being recruited, but I didn’t know then that...”

Mr Taras stopped me from going on.

“In this profession, we simply make use of everything we have.”

He then got up and went towards the door, insinuating what his answer would be if I refused. I duly signed.

Back in the Bond Room of the new HQ, with my facial features out in the open, I realised that, from that moment onwards, my life would be divided into two very distinct periods: pre-event in Barcelona and post-event. Before, fastidiousness about my physical appearance had got in the way of most things, for I had persistently pursued beauty at any cost. But after the *event*, I still had to find out how others would

respond to a woman who had not only lost her looks but appeared as downright scary. Yes, scary was the word.

“The Agency,” Mr Taras used to regularly explain to our female contingent, “takes advantage of any societal flaws for the benefit of all involved. And whyever not?”

No longer would I have to pursue that agonising regime of trying to make myself as appealing as possible. It may have been a demand from my superiors, but it had become an obsession with me; my seeking perfection was probably also the culprit. There was a blessing: my previous and constant concern about my looks had also vanished and, if I now had any worries, they were not about trying to appear suitably attractive and come-hither but about the reverse; I did not want to be looked at anymore, let alone approached, touched, penetrated.

“The new me!” I announced, and they all gazed intently at my scars in silence.

Then, and only then, Mr Taras removed his hat and this time he placed it on the table, his bare shiny head visible to all; he had done the same when he visited me in hospital. Perhaps he wanted to emulate what I had just done by removing my scarf moments earlier to show everyone who I had become. We were, in a way, *en famille*. But removing his hat could have been a prelude to what came next; perhaps he did not want to sweat too much during his short speech. Everyone looked at him in surprise, for he had never removed his hat before in our meetings.

“So, how did you get here?” he asked me.

“I walked,” I replied in a matter-of-fact way.

He raised his bald head as far as it would go.

“Ah, Iona. Toing and froing. Walking in circles. Circumventing, skirting, side-stepping. Turning here and turning there. Dodging and equivocating. Ducking and vacillating. Evading, eluding, escaping...” he said, looking directly into my eyes.

He went on. How many more synonyms was he going to come up with? He loved proving that he could speak the language better than anyone. It was not his first language, but almost. He was willing to do anything to dispose of that *almost*.

“Yes,” I replied succinctly, for enough words had been said already.

When either silence or a single word would suffice, Mr Taras became even more unstoppable. He would use any occasion to speak interminably to put staff down or reprimand others for their mistakes. In reply, I would have liked to state a few qualifiers about him and his manner of treating us: overbearing, domineering, stifling. Dictatorial too. Instead, I smiled, even if it was more of a distorted smirk.

“You like that sort of thing, Iona. It’s how you work, round and round and round you go,” he said.

He did not nod in a circular way but left that for the other attendees, which they duly did.

“Of course!” I said, trying to instil enthusiasm into my exasperation.

He then raised his arms as if greeting me.

“I know you suffered a mighty wound, but you’ve moved on, and you’ll naturally...” he continued speaking; there seemed to be no way of stopping him.

“I certainly did!” I said, almost reprimanding him. “Thank you for the flowers and cards, everyone! I’m happy to be back. As you all know, I almost didn’t make it.”

Mr Taras moved his arms briefly, and we all sat down. Someone, probably the trooper, had placed the white plastic chairs around the mahogany table. Combining the old and invaluable with the new and cut-rate was offensive to the eyes, but I kept

any such ideas to myself; I began to think that there was no point in complaining as much as I used to before the *event*. Things had already begun to be pointless in my eyes.

“We brought you back, Iona!” Mr Taras declared.

I thought of the yellow haze, a jittery telephone conversation with Tony in a hotel room, the flavour of strawberries, Bill’s likely loss. I was also trying to avoid sinking into yet another black hole. I clenched my fists.

“You mean you brought me back from the land of the dead,” I said, remembering what the nurse had said.

They all smiled politely, except Rudge. He got up and removed the packaging from the various bouquets of roses and began arranging them in a vase that was on a shelf. He then tried squeezing all of them into place, but a few stems snapped and he scratched his fingers on a couple of thorns. Finally, he brought the vase to where I was sitting, placing it in front of me so that I could smell the roses.

“There’s no water!” someone shouted from the other end of the room, but Rudge did not reply.

The trooper left the room in a hurry.

“Well, you’re here now. Bye, bye death!” said Mr Taras.

“I came close,” I replied, trying to smell the very red roses but they were entirely devoid of scent.

The trooper returned to the room, holding a large tray with glasses and a jug of water. He placed it on one side of the table and apologised.

“Sorry, I forgot.”

He took the jug and brought it towards where I was.

“Shall I water the roses?” he asked without waiting for my reply and trying to pour water into the vase.

There was only room for the finest trickle.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Too many roses!” he explained.

“There can never be too many roses!” I said.

With everyone sitting down, Mr Taras began the meeting.

“Well, now that we’re all here, we’ll get started. We must discuss our next piece of auditing.”

He stood up, as if what he was about to say was frightfully important.

“As I always announce at the beginning of our meetings, remember we’ve got a great brand. So, let’s try to take back our market share for good this time. We owe it to our shareholders.”

Mr Taras always spoke about the brand, our market share and our shareholders, whoever and however many they were. Such were the words embedded in the manual: every meeting must begin by referring to the Agency as a brand.

“I’m going to briefly introduce our new set of projects and...” he said.

Miss P coughed. He looked at her, opening his eyes widely.

“Yes, we must proceed at speed as some of us need to meet up with the heads of the Fourth Squadron shortly and...” Mr Taras added.

“In fact, in fifteen minutes!” Miss P said looking into the neon lights.

She had always had the last say, and even in retirement she was still commanding our squadron.

“Fifteen minutes!” she repeated, louder this time.

Chapter 8

Everyone had left after the brief meeting, except for Tony and me. I was too slow to get up and walk out, and he waited until I was ready. He asked me to go with him to something called the club.

“The *club*?”

“Yes, we now have our own place to drink at the Agency for after hours. They call it a club, but it’s not even a home-pub. Just a few doors down the corridor...”

The club was nothing more than a dark room with a single wall light. It had a small but well-stocked bar on one side and a few chairs and tables against the walls. Luckily there were no white plastic chairs but comfortable black ones, though far too many chairs for such a reduced space; we had to squeeze between them. No one was there except us; Tony had probably arranged this.

“Take a seat,” he said, moving one of the chairs.

I sat down and opened up to Tony just a little.

“Since I left hospital, I’ve found it difficult to be around others, but more so here. Yes, they all greeted me with flowers, but no one seems to be too interested in what happened to me,” I said, thinking that perhaps he might be sympathetic.

“Oh...”

“I suppose we don’t like losers at the Agency,” I suggested.

“Well, you know that I don’t enjoy showing what I feel,” he said.

“I only meant that...”

“But I can show sympathy now that we’re alone. I’m sorry that you’ve gone through so much...”

I was not convinced that he meant it. Hypocrisy was a word out of fashion at the Agency, mostly because it did not do justice to what we were up to; the more accurate word was *duplicity*. It served us well, both at the office and in the field.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re sorry,” I said, but I did not mean that either.

Tony poured me a glass of wine. I found it so difficult to drink; the liquid dribbled down my chin. I had been told that the muscles around my mouth would improve, but nobody had specified when exactly. I drank with the tiniest of sips.

“It looks and tastes watered down. Are they cutting down on the wine as well?” I said raising my glass, more to inspect the contents than to make a toast.

“Pale straw, deary,” he said. “It’s the only one available at present. The Agency is expecting new stock with a little more variety, but it’s difficult to get it delivered...”

He showed me the bottle. I was unimpressed, yet reminisced.

“With my recovery and your stay in the gun lobby, we haven’t seen each other for a long time”

“A very, very long time,” he commented, and sat down in one of the many black chairs.

“How was it?”

“Oh, you know how these things are, the same old story. An assumed name and a false personality to go with it. Secretly recording endless meetings, taking pictures with concealed cameras, feigning that I enjoyed their plans and dictates. And the like.”

“I heard they did a documentary with your material.”

“Yes, shown last year. Controversial stuff. The producers had to go into hiding.”

“But not you, presumably.”

He laughed.

“Me? I know my make-up well. These new cosmetic procedures require no surgery, and I was back to the familiar face in no time.”

He turned sideways to show me his profile.

“No goatee?”

“Not for now.”

I thought for a second.

“My procedures are permanent,” I said, also turning my head and showing him my bad side. “Should I try yours?”

Sarcasm was the usual between us. He poured some more wine into his glass and went back to the subject we were discussing.

“Yes, the documentary...”

But I wanted to talk about something else.

“Now and again, our manoeuvres do involve some kind of... moral choice.”

And as I said those words, I understood that, before the *event* in Barcelona, I would never have spoken like that. I recalled the many years when choices, whether moral or not, had not been an issue. I carried out my manoeuvres without asking questions, whoever met with disaster, plummeted downhill, flatlined, lost life or limb. I had had a long experience with diverse methods, chiefly weapons: the older rifles, handguns, bazookas and stuns, and the more recent meds, biometrics and anything autonomous. Yes, I would use whatever was available and at my disposal; myself included, an irresistibly inviting woman.

“You’re talking about morality?” he said and smiled. “We work for the highest bidder, Iona. This time the gun control lobby happened to pay us more. But don’t forget that we’ve previously worked for gun lobbies and had to infiltrate the relevant gun control groups. We work in all directions...”

I tried to nod in agreement but could not manage more than a couple of times, my chin and cheek pulled painfully. I resorted to another question, putting it formally so as not to delve into the failure of my last manoeuvre.

“Did you accomplish everything you needed to in Barcelona?”

You would not get answers if you did not ask.

“Kind of,” he replied, lowering his voice as if playing down what had happened.

“The first part, supporting you, was supposedly accomplished, although... although you suffered some serious punishment.”

I rubbed my scars.

“And did we dispose of Bill?”

“We’re still not sure, but some reports claim he’s out.”

I did not want to think about Bill.

“And the second part?” I asked.

“That second part was my own mission. I fought and won!”

“You called it a war back there,” I recalled and sipped the tiniest amount of wine.

He was trying to squeeze out of the tight spot between a chair and a table without success, looking as if he was trying to avoid me, firmly closing his eyes and mouth; perhaps he did not like my new look, or was sorry for me, or missed the *pretty face* as he always used to describe me. But nothing is permanent, I wanted to tell him; least of all beauty and its biases.

“Yes, a war with our competitors,” he finally said, opening his eyes wide but still unable to get out of the tight space.

“We forever seem to be at war with someone on every front!”

“It’s the game we play,” he said, dismissing his words by rolling his eyes.

“Hardly a game, when so much is at stake...”

He finally managed to get up; emptying this glass in one gulp, he served himself some more wine. I covered the top of my glass with my hand.

“What, no extra wine?”

My glass was almost full.

“Please don’t insist.”

He looked at me as if he did not recognise who I was.

“In your case, Iona, the war’s always with yourself,” he said, putting the bottle on the counter and holding my hand, which was still covering the glass.

“Whatever gave you that idea, Tony.”

He held my hand tighter still. Whether it was because he wanted me to remove it from the glass or as a show of endearment, it was hard to say.

“And who did you dispose of?”

He coughed as a way of replying and let go of my hand.

“You can’t tell me?” I persisted.

He pushed his way out into the open area of the room.

“Perhaps I can tell you what happened, if you keep quiet. It was a rushed manoeuvre, so it wasn’t easy to lure him anywhere.”

“A man?”

“Yes.”

“In a public space?”

“Under the vaults of the cathedral,” he said moving his arms upwards.

He looked up and blinked. He was seeing something I could not see.

“The stained glass shone on him at the moment of death...”

“A colourful corpse, like one of their martyrs?” I coldly suggested.

“Yes, just like a saint under the glory of the church, I pushed him into a pit that was being excavated.”

“Was there a religious celebration going on? I heard they’ve been reinstated.”

“Yes, it happened during the *Venite, venite, exultemus*. No one saw a thing.”

“And you...” I began to say.

“You know I never do things half-heartedly. I always go all the way.”

I pretended there was no ulterior meaning to his words.

“And who was he?” I asked.

“A high executive.”

“Like Bill used to be,” I said, “or still is, maybe?”

“As I said, we don’t have enough data about Bill yet.”

I could not help my next question.

“Was that disposal also via... via the kiss of death,” I asked, trying hard to smile, “as in Bill and me?”

I had dared to make fun of him and his mission.

“No, Iona, not a kiss,” he said, shaking his head in annoyance at my suggestion, “but a few good old stabs in the back. I wanted to emulate what he was doing to us, but in a very real sense, and I dispatched the bastard with no regrets.”

“A stabbing?” I asked, stunned.

“More of a deadly slashing!”

“Did you have a green light from Mr Taras for that sort of thing? You know he hates wetwork.”

Tony grimaced. He was still standing in the middle of the room.

“And more importantly, were you able to bring a memento?” I asked. “A little trophy of your success, as Mr Taras likes to get?”

“Yes, an automatic switchblade with the handle in the shape of a snake, rather appealing. The man tried to use it against my old implacable machete. His other weapons were out of reach because of the speed of my attack.”

“A switchblade? A machete? You certainly live in the past, Tony!”

“For memory’s sake, Iona. You know I can be nostalgic...”

He blinked several times.

“Tell me about what happened,” I asked, knowing that he would make a big thing out of it.

“The switchblade was covered in his blood as it trickled down his arm. I almost scythed him down with my machete. It’s more a talisman than a weapon, but for quite some time I’d been wanting to use it for a fatal blow. Another success in my book!”

No, Tony had not changed. His goatee would come and go, but his conceit was intact.

“And, you didn’t have a disposal kit with you?”

“We’ve been taught to improvise, haven’t we?”

“You mean you’d kill with your bare hands if necessary.”

“Haven’t you done that sort of thing, Iona?” he asked with a brief smile.

“No, that particular technique I’ve never used... until now.”

He stopped smiling.

“Well, on this occasion, there was no time for perfection,” he continued. “He was about to expose several of our folk in the city, and I had seconds to put an end to the matter.”

“Perhaps what they want is our business,” I suggested.

Tony was intently looking at my mouth and jaw, and I placed my hand on both, pretending to think. He sat down on a different chair, not too close to me.

“They’ve bigger and better business than we have, so that’s not the case. More important clients, further covert operations, taking more risks and exerting themselves well beyond what’s expected. Perhaps what they ultimately want is to go for one of those takeovers. And hostile would be the perfect adjective here...”

He was growing impatient.

“So why did you shave your goatee, Tony?”

He put the glass down on a table and touched his chin with both hands.

“A new start, I suppose,” he said looking directly at my eyes. “I wanted to forget the man I used to be...”

I realised that the conversation could turn personal; I was not interested in whoever he wanted to change into.

“What I’d like to know is when are we getting new chairs for the Bond Room,” I said trying to wrongfoot him.

“Don’t you like those?” he asked; it seemed like a genuine question with no irony to it. “Everyone does!”

“Our colleagues will agree with anything thrown their way, down to the bloody chairs!” I replied.

Chapter 9

The dark, terrifying black hole. A path that could only lead to dejection. A well of darkness from which there was no way out. Since the event, I had managed to leave behind any discouraging memories, but it had been a superhuman effort to get back on track and return to daily life. Once out of that black hole, you had to delude yourself into thinking that along the route you would not encounter another, even darker one.

“I must not think. I did more than enough thinking in that hospital room...” I said in the loudest voice back at home.

I got up from my bed and walked around my apartment aimlessly, not really wanting to do very much. Art everywhere: paintings and collages depicting the human body, but also the human condition that inextricably goes with it, sad and withered, desolate and painfully unsmiling. Close-up and from far away, sections of bodies and whole bodies and groups of human bodies, death masks and casts of hands. I had been a collector of the human form in art –particularly when it appeared in distress or under duress—for quite some time, and there was not a section of my yellow walls however small, that was not covered with artwork depicting heads, arms, legs, torsos.

I went out to my large terrace with 360-degree views of the city, and from these dizzying heights I gazed at the streets down below, the meandering river and its bridges, the splendid surrounding buildings, some as tall as mine. Far away stood Parliament, still the same from the outside, but what went on inside we could only guess. As always, rumours abounded; we heard unconfirmed reports about takeovers or buyouts or acquisitions, as if the State was one big company. From where I was, the old and the new stood side by side, the latter gradually taking over with much

demolition happening at all times. I had walked along most of the routes I could see from here, I knew my city well. But it was far too windy out on the terrace, and I went back inside; doing my morning workout there was out of the question, so I continued going from room to room, desperately needing a different setting or a change of scenery. Yes, that was it: I was feeling like a caged animal. I walked faster and faster through the apartment, hitting the walls along the corridor, brushing against the furniture and the doors, hurting my arms and legs. I drew the curtains on every window, all of them in shades of pink. I seemed to be looking for something, but I was not sure what it was; the search had to be carried out as quickly as possible before something terrible could happen to me, maybe immersion in another black hole. I ended up in the central room in the apartment and came to a halt.

“My chandelier!” I said, as I switched it on.

It was a dark mid-morning, and the lights brought me back to my senses. All those coloured crystal drops dangling from the five tiers, sumptuously ornate with crystal flowers and luscious verdure, seemed to fully awaken me. A blaze of colours, with over twenty lights, glowing like sunshine. It was an extravagant piece of lighting for my taste; I had always preferred the subdued tones and shapes of the décor in all the other rooms, not sombre or dull but eminently sensible. Yet one day, after a week of particularly sickening manoeuvres, I decided I needed something that would bring some colour into the apartment. I designed the chandelier myself, emulating the style of a Marie Thérèse yet with brilliant tints and exciting contours. It had been made exclusively for me by hand and had cost me a large chunk from my savings. My wish was to own something unique and breath-taking. There was no other like it in the whole world, that was for sure, and it was a much-needed feel-good factor. Beyond all the

colours of the rainbow, there were also amber to grey prisms, with teardrops hanging from each *bobèche*, not to catch the dripping wax as chandeliers had in the old days but to add warmth to the radiant sconces, with endless strings of cut-glass crystals shining dizzyingly in every direction, interspersed with lustrous glass beads and droplets. Even the candle lights were overdressed with further tiny crystals almost concealing the faux wax. And suspended from the end of the chandelier, a single faceted crystal ball hanging so low that I could touch it with the tips of my fingers, tempting me to taste it for it looked irresistible; I pushed it ever so slightly and the reflections from the chandelier moved lazily around the room and made jingling sounds, submerging me in a glowing unreality and colourfully encircling everything in their path. Yes, in such fanciful splendour I could escape from all things real, and this room became the only place where I could get away from the hapless existence I had led in previous months. I was aware that what I needed was an actual escape instead of replacing the raw and the crude with handsome images and vibrant fantasies, but for now bathing in that multicoloured brightness made me feel better instantly. If only my emotions could sparkle in the same way.

“This is not real, but it helps. But isn’t all this light also shining on the truth, forcing it out of its hiding place?”

I admitted that I would not recognize the truth if I saw it. As to the truth itself, would it justly look me in the eye and say I have been here beside you for such a long time, always your companion, your one and only friend, why is it that you do not dare for once to look at me, have you stooped so low that you cannot face me anymore?

I had two visitors in the morning. One was my physiotherapist, submitting me to further ordeals: exercises with my tongue and along my face, making me produce

bizarre grimaces whilst claiming that I would get my range of expressions back to normal in no time. I did not believe him but I nodded to make him feel better and get him to go away sooner. The second visitor was the person I called the conversationalist; so much did she converse that she ended up telling me more about herself and commenting less about me.

“Yes, interesting that you should say that. It reminds me of when I was let down by those I held close, and what happened was...” she said and went on.

That afternoon, I received a phone call from the Agency to discuss the way forward.

“Forward? I still can’t see myself going anywhere,” I said to the person on the phone.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” she replied.

It was wrong of me to burden her with my concerns. No, she would not know a thing about me. She was an official of some kind who did not even suspect what we were up to at the Agency. I had heard that the lower echelons took their work as a purely administrative task with no further curiosity in our activities; in other words, they worked solely for their monthly salary. It was as if they did not exist in our overpowering hierarchy, and in consequence were plainly addressed as *you*.

“You?”

“Yes?”

We could not call people by their first name in some instances, one of the simple rules at the Agency. We had to address each other according to a set of rules that someone, without an iota of logic but with plentiful scheming, had one day made up. In a squadron, you were a *mister* or *miss* at the top; these were the *high officials*. Then the mid-rank or advocates were referred to by their first name, like me, Iona; we were

senior officials. In the rank below you were known by your surname, as in the case of my assistant Rudge; these were specialists or assistants or both, their category described as plain *official*. Under that ranking were the *general services*, dealing with a variety of subjects and assignments: the hirelings, as Mr Taras called them, were in charge of soft-core activities like mobilisation, ordnance and safeguarding, though sometimes, in extreme situations, they were first line of assault; as to the troopers, we used to say that their job was to assist whoever needed assisting for anything that required assistance; and finally, the administrative staff dealing with any tedious desk work were the scribes, again a name chosen by Mr Taras, as in the case of the female administrator who had phoned me to advise me of a meeting. Yes, hierarchy was strict; our organic structure was firmly embedded in our minds; we abided meekly by the rules; everyone accepted the existing chain of command without any questions asked. Mr Taras had attempted to break the rule when he had visited me in hospital and suggested that I call him by his first name, but I had refused; he would always be Mr Taras for me.

“Our hierarchy is a different way of understanding civilization,” I was told several times by him when I first joined.

I had wanted to talk about wasteland and savagery instead of civilization, but in due course I began to think that he was probably right.

“Civilization?”

Yes, how very civilised we were at our meetings in the Agency: well-dressed, well-heeled, impeccable deportment. Such blissful, domestic scenes had little to do with getting mud-spattered and drenched, battered and hurt. Into battles, out of battles. In conflicts that were either unjust or very unjust, and in encounters where deception was the language spoken and fraudulence the aim pursued. In fragrant moments of

peace and harmony, all staged, and in harrowing scenes of utter hell and devastation. And those scenes seemed even further away from the imposing setting of the Bond Room, around the new mahogany table that had probably been tattered and spoiled after decades at the service of the rich and powerful, sitting as we were on those cheap plastic chairs and surrounded by even tawdrier paintings of lizard hide. Did lizards not grow out of their skins and leave them behind as wholly useless? Yes, each one of us there had had quite a few skins to help with survival, not always of the fittest; in character and out of character, that was how we usually led our lives. In most instances, several *personas* were required for our engagements. The difference was that we did not outgrow or shed any of those skins but kept them close by for any eventuality. I could be sweet, courageous, vile, suffocating. Even buffoonish if I needed to, in order to get out of a situation quickly. I suppose I had already started to leave behind what had served me well until then: the radiantly beautiful skin I had worn for my many manoeuvres was no longer there.

I knew what I had to do. I had avoided doing it because it would not help, but I gave in. I went to my bedroom and opened the bottom drawer of the *chiffonier*. Yes, there it was, in its pink box. I took the item out ever so carefully and smelt the soft wool. I brushed it around my face; the tiny, knitted hat in pink. And then I heard a key accessing the front door of the apartment, and I put the item back in the drawer and went to the central room.

“Jack?”

But of course, it was Jack. He entered the apartment and smiled profusely. I must have looked a little shocked.

“Hello, Iona. Were you not expecting me?”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t realise it was already Wednesday.”

He came to the central room and stood under the lit chandelier. It shone on him like a midday sun.

“Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays?”

“Yes, yes,” I replied. “We did agree on those days after I returned from hospital, it’s just that there’s been a lot on my mind lately”.

“I hope you’ve kept well since last time,” he said.

He always used the same words when greeting me.

“Yes, I’m much better, thank you.”

“Shall I start with the kitchen, then?” he asked.

“Yes, please do. As always, you’ll find everything you need inside the large cupboard in the corridor.”

Jack smiled; in fact, he had not stopped smiling since the day he arrived. It was as if everything was easy and joyful. He was a little too young, but then he could run a home and any homely errands so much better than I could. As my factotum, he dealt with everything in the apartment, especially during all those months that I had been away in hospital. He had no idea about what I did for a living; I had mentioned to him that I was into import-export. Once he asked about the sort of products I dealt with – the only time he asked me anything to do with my work– and I looked up at my chandelier and said nothing as if the answer was in the crystals.

“Ah, lovely!” Jack said, looking up at the bright and colourful lights and smiling even more.

He was good with the cleaning and tidying up, but he also dealt with both running my flat and contracting any repair work that needed to be done. He basically ran the show of my public life, that part I could not deal with as I was busy with my

many manoeuvres and, mostly, because of my total disinterest in all things homely. And if I was not qualified to embark on those sorts of chores, he was overqualified. I had found him on the best head-hunter's books and paid him the salary of a lesser CEO. My demands were complicated, though not entirely impossible: discretion, dedication, enthusiasm. Such were also the needs at the Agency; thus, I demanded what I was prepared to give myself. So bright and resourceful was he that, at times, I thought I should recruit him as my second assistant at work, alongside Rudge. But I did not want to ruin yet another life.

"Any special requirements today?" he asked.

"No, only the usual."

"Thank you, Iona."

I went towards the door and took my bag.

"I'm leaving now to go to the office. See you on Friday, Jack."

Chapter 10

I decided that going by foot to HQ was too much of a risk for my well-being. I hailed a taxi and was able to enjoy the route at speed.

“Hello!” I said, giving the driver the address.

I could sense that he was desperate to chat. Halfway to our destination, he finally made a comment.

“Too hot this weather, isn’t, miss?”

I really did not want to enter into any kind of discussion with him.

“Too hot to be true,” I said, hoping he would keep quiet.

“And what do you think about what’s happening in the world?”

“The world’s a big word,” I replied succinctly.

“Well, if not the world, then us, here in this city,” he went on. “What are we going to do with all the endless problems we have. It looks like they’re not going to go away any time soon...”

“Problems?” I said dismissively, knowing about the many problems only too well but hoping my question would put an end to the conversation.

He coughed several times as if to prepare for what he was going to say next.

“Well, you know, what I mean. The war on several fronts, or should I say wars... the threat of invasion which everyone seems to be talking about, especially along the river... and most importantly, the fact that we don’t really know who’s in charge...”

“Can you go faster?” I asked the driver, tightening my scarf around my head.

He finally understood.

“Yes, miss,” he said, accelerating.

He remained silent until the end of the journey, and we arrived at the Paranyrn in no time at all.

“Thank you!” I said, giving him a tip larger than the actual fare.

Everyone was sitting around the table in the Bond Room. I looked at no one, my eyes fixed solely at the vase with the roses. They were almost completely dry, no longer red but brown, tightly packed into the vase, their texture fading as if made of the finest paper. No one had bothered to change the cloudy water, nor trim the stems. In despair, I looked at the roses but said nothing, nor did anyone else. It was our way of moving forward, pretending that all was well when it was not. And there we sat, with a large folder in front of each one of us. I was bare faced; and as I looked up, the others looked down. It was to be a meeting of staff without any senior bosses; it could be that they wanted us to practice for the future.

A little *tour de table* of our squadron. Rudge to my left; Tony to my right, with a large red box in front of him, whatever it held. All the others, shoulder to shoulder. Pratt and Robinson, inseparable as always: she, the expert in Forensics; and he, the authority in Cyber Security and Logistics. Criminology specialists Ogden and Foley, like reflections in a pond, both blondes, one spoke while the other nodded yet did the thinking; in every sense, an item. Lundy was also there, our very own technology expert in the squadron; she dealt with all innovations, from designing drones of all sizes and purposes to adapting autonomous vehicles to our needs, from coordinating intercontinental communications to creating devices the size of a pea, which I was only too familiar with; and recently she had even created a linguistic gadget, as I had been told by Mr Taras, which could deal with anything and everything relating to

language. Only one of the troopers was missing; apparently, he had been attacked and later found almost lifeless. An investigation was underway.

“The Organisation?” I asked.

“Who else?” someone said.

It was a new approach of theirs: starting high up, with me almost killed via a strawberry capsule; and finishing at the other end, with a non-descript trooper.

“Hello, everyone,” Tony irrupted. “Today Miss Pilkington and Mr Taras aren’t able to join us, and I’ll lead the proceedings.”

Yes, he had assumed the mantle of command; it showed in the overconfident way he lifted his eyebrows and looked into the empty space above the table, not at any of us. He was in charge and, for my part, I was far too run down to complain.

“Before we begin, just a brief announcement about implants and grafts. Robinson?”

Robinson was an older colleague who would never quite make it to the next echelon. He was too timorous and pusillanimous, as Mr Taras had once put it in front of our squadron and in his presence; from Robinson’s smile we could tell that he had not understood the meaning of those words.

“We have a new tracking device, and you’ll all receive the relevant training shortly,” he said. “Just a brief surgical procedure is required.”

“Only tracking implants, or are there... or are there others?” I asked, remembering the two concierges.

Robinson looked at me as if he had not understood the question.

“We’re researching various options and...” he said.

“But are we to... to remain intact?” I asked, voicing a suspicion.

“Thank you, Robinson,” Tony said. “We must now move to the day's main topic. Any questions?”

No one said anything. It was clear that Tony did not want to divulge any further information about implants, especially if I had so many questions. I would have to enquire elsewhere.

“So, our next set of cases,” Tony announced.

I looked at my colleagues. They all had an air of anticipation.

“Iona?” he said.

“Yes?”

“I understand that you'll be involved in one of our most imminent tasks.”

I remembered what Mr Taras and I had discussed.

“Are you referring to an unknown artist, his art, the seaside, an exhibition, a biography...?” I asked and, as I was speaking, I realised all those things sounded like child's play as compared to the perilous assignments we regularly dealt with.

“Nothing of the sort. What you're mentioning will come later. At present, we have a pretty serious mission requiring immediate action. As in *now!*”

“A mission for whom?”

“For you, of course.”

I was shocked.

“What? I wasn't told about this, and I'm certainly in no condition to...” I began to say.

“That's not a problem, Iona,” Tony said, “we've already prepared the background work for you.”

I almost got up from the chair. That plastic, unnerving chair, in stark white.

“But...”

He opened the folder in front of him.

“This is a light case, Iona, and I’m sure you can do it with your eyes closed.”

I could not help closing my eyes briefly.

“You mean I’ll be engaged in a new manoeuvre?” I asked. “Back in action? So soon after my discharge from hospital?”

Tony shook his hand in the air to stop my complaints.

“It’s a simple enough task. You’ve done dozens of these.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, a disposal.”

I pointed at my face.

“But look at me! There’s no way I can undertake anything.”

I wanted to leave. I would go back along the same route, following the river, erratically crossing bridges, turning into streets as I pleased, passing by the statues of the Burghers without once looking at them, and then returning to my apartment where I was safe, seeking solace in the vibrant colours of my chandelier and overlooking the city from afar. Anything but being commissioned to take on another disposal when I was still very much shaken by recent events.

“But I’m recovering, and I certainly don’t have the stamina required for something like that at present...”

My protestations were useless.

“Whether you want to carry it out or not, that’s for the head of our squadron to decide,” Tony said.

I was incensed, but then curiosity got the best of me.

“And what role, if I may ask, will I be playing in that supposed disposal?”

Yes, I had played many roles during my long career at the Agency. From a beauty queen to an aristocrat, from a temptress to an escort; whilst the transformation and dressing up could be amusing in the preparatory stages, the effects never were. Indisputably, the vilest role was playing the part of the dutiful wife of a despicable enemy representative called Bill.

“This time...” Tony said and stopped.

My colleagues around the table held their breath.

“Yes, Tony?” I asked.

“This time you’ll be playing only yourself.”

I held my breath too.

“You mean, as... as I am?” I said, again pointing at my scars.

The others lowered their gaze. Tony batted his eyes a couple of times.

“Yes, exactly as you are.”

I took several very long breaths before speaking.

“What you’re saying is that, in this case and for once, there’d be no make-believe. It would be just me, with purple lines running from my mouth downwards and upwards and sideways, and with the ugly creasy scarring on either side, all of it the product of the most accomplished maxillo-facial surgery available and...”

People sitting at the table looked agitated, eyelids fluttered, hands rubbed. I had the feeling that the lions on the legs of the table had closed their mouths and their tongues had disappeared into the darkness of the wood. I then spoke slowly and calmly.

“I outright refuse to accept this job.”

My reply took Tony by surprise. He looked at me as if we had never met. With some apprehension, he opened the red box in front of him.

“If you like, I can tell you about what else is on offer.”

I gazed intently at the box. It looked like a sizeable governmental briefcase holding world-class documents that could change the course of history, and perhaps it was.

“Would you like me to delve into our vast collection of recently pending commissions or the really cold ones?” he asked, opening the box, looking at me as if having guessed the punchline of some obscure joke.

I did not reply, mesmerised as I was by the box in that deep red colour, like a remnant from a previous era. Since the *event* in Barcelona, red was not only the colour of blood spilled and strawberries but of failure.

“Remember that, in a way, we deal with many of the things that the authorities used to do back in the old days. But then we do it so much more professionally...”

“At the same time,” I said and smiled to make the statement sound a little less sombre, “we commit the type of crimes they should be fighting against.”

There was a long silence from everyone. I could almost hear the echo of what I had just said.

“Here we are,” Tony said, taking out a pile of documents and quickly shuffling them like a pack of cards.

Yes, it was the first time we had seen that red box. Mr Taras had never brought anything of the sort to our meetings.

“Why the red box, Tony?”

I looked at my colleagues and they all seemed to agree with me by briefly shaking their heads.

“Just another prop, Iona. I asked for it and I was given the go ahead.”

I could tell he was getting exasperated with me; his eyes rolled from side to side as if about to spin and he smacked his lips. Yes, I had seen that occasionally in moments of intimacy.

“If you don’t want any of the almost historic cases from the old playbook but still in vogue, then you might be interested in the brand-new ones.”

He placed a few of the documents on the table and took a deep breath. His eyes travelled at speed from one document to the next.

“What would you prefer? Dishing dirt on remaining politicians or royalty? What about stirring violence in universities or factories or environmental groups or elite units? Or agitating the masses in demonstrations further afield, in countries with which our clients do not sympathise with... you’ve done a few of those already? A little reconnaissance and shooting practice in remote lands? A bit of state sanctioned criminality, in remoter places? Even arranging for organ harvesting or trafficking? Online scams for cash or love? Or if you want something more cinematic, what about organising exchanges of prisoners between enemy countries in no-man’s land, now that we have so many open fronts? Or...”

I stopped him with a kind of shriek. It could have also been a word that refused to leave my throat and had become distorted in the process. My colleagues looked troubled, as if the tasks Tony was mentioning would be their next cases.

“From the very elegant to the downright filthy, we do everything, anything,” he said. “Not so much in this squadron, but in the more junior ones. We may deride those colleagues for doing lesser tasks, but they do carry out their jobs rather well and there’s no need for us to interfere. Yet we can always get involved in that sort of thing in our squadron, if need be. What about some identity management, helping Ogden and

Foley with passports for fictitious applicants, all those with criminal convictions for corruption in international trade operations, all blacklisted in their own countries..."

Ogden and Foley, cryptologists *cum* coiners, looked at each other as if they did not understand what Tony was saying.

"But what we do is entirely..." Ogden tried to explain, while Foley nodded.

"You're getting very impassioned, Tony," I said, trying to be both mocking and bold.

If Tony aspired to increase his profile in the Agency, his show of arrogance in front of staff would not help; unless, of course, he had been asked to take that approach. Orders from Mr Taras were fierce.

"There's no sensationalism here, Iona," he said, almost out of breath, "Many of these are just routine tasks that need to be done."

"But..." I began to say, turning my head towards my colleagues sitting around the mahogany table as if seeking their support.

Tony went on rummaging through the documents on the table.

"Infiltrate a clan if you like!" he suggested.

"A clan?"

"A clan, a union, a fraternity, a brotherhood, a gang, even a cartel!"

Yes, the years serving under Mr Taras had left their linguistic imprint in Tony.

"A cartel?" I said, thinking that those endless items in the to-do list could not all be real; some had probably been included for effect by Mr Taras himself.

At least I hoped that was the case.

"Yes, even a cartel. As well as..." Tony began again.

I wanted to bring some sense where there was none.

“Infiltration’s your specialism, isn’t it?” I retorted. “I wouldn’t dare step on your territory, Tony.”

He paid no attention to my sarcasm.

“And there are other pending commissions like...”

“Such are the ills of the world,” I said, trying to put an end to his tirade, “all straight out of Pandora’s box and...”

Tony carried on relentlessly.

“Or what about nastier things?”

No, I did not want him going along that path. I knew what he was about to describe.

“You’ve given us enough examples, Tony!” I said and placed both palms on the table.

But there was no stopping him. The others cleared their throats as if that might allay any fears.

“Dealing with captives,” Tony went on. “You’re aware of what I’m hinting at.”

I coughed several times.

“You’re not insinuating that we, here in our squadron...” I began to say.

“Yes, even that. There are times when we need to get hold of intelligence at any cost. And one good example is, as you’re well aware, what we refer to as *roses*, all twenty-one of them. And I’m not talking about the roses on this table...”

We all looked toward the heavily piled and dry roses in the vase, all of them fighting for a space to survive. More than twenty-one, for sure.

“Twenty-one!” Tony said, repeating the hideous number, while the whole Bond Room appeared to shake.

“I... I saw this performed once,” I recalled, strongly rubbing my scarred face. “If there are things that I would like to unsee, this is definitely one of them...”

No, torture was never discussed, at least by us, here in the mid-ranking echelons of power. Yes, some of us had ended lives countless times, but that was considered a quick and relatively easy task; if you're good at it, causing death is generally a straightforward operation, one small intervention and it's the end of a life. That was as far as we would go, nothing more than death and the dead. We called it disposal instead of murder –the word made it sound more like an endorsed task ordered from above and less of a crime. In any case, death might not be the ultimate penalty to inflict on someone, there were far worse penalties. Such were the punishments that would come before inflicting death and were conducive to it, caused by another human for maximum effect or for acquiring information at any price or for teaching a lesson or for simply practising one's killer skills. That other stuff Tony was talking about was for delinquents, certainly not for advocates. It would have been beneath our dignity to inflict such punishments. Such tasks were assigned to a lesser squadron; we called them rankers. We knew they engaged in that kind of activity for major clients who required expeditious and definitive action, but we did not mix with them –in fact, we shunned them and they were excluded from our organic structure. No, what they did had nothing to do with us.

“Shall I go on?” Tony asked.

His handling of the meeting revealed a side of him I had not seen before, almost brutal. Perhaps he had matured into a fearsome creature during his time away pretending to be someone else in a gun lobby and deceiving them all to perfection. It occurred to me that he was using the meeting as an opportunity to excel and impress,

as the next Taras maybe. Certainly, in our squadron Mr Taras was getting on, and Miss Pilkington had been brought in after retirement; we liked to think that she was irreplaceable, but we knew she was clearly on the way out. But for the Trustees, as we were reminded constantly, no one was irreplaceable at the Agency; some staff had even been replaced well before it was their time to go, and there was talk of a few having been expeditiously eliminated. Yes, succession was a common subject among staff, always discreetly discussed and causing a little anxiety in most. It was officially based on seniority, and the date of joining the Agency was the point from which all succession calculations were made; this was the case of many other organizations we knew of. But like all rules, it could be discarded if those in charge looked the other way and particularly if staff members were willing to give more than was requested, so much more. Yes, at that meeting chaired by Tony I realised that, despite my seniority and after the failed episode in Barcelona, I would not succeed Mr Taras.

“I’ve never... been involved in that sort of thing,” I said to Tony. “Not at that level you’re mentioning. I leave those things to... to others.”

“There’s always a first time for imposing the twenty-one roses sentence on someone...” he suggested.

I shivered at the sound of it.

“Not if I can avoid it!”

Our colleagues around the mahogany table seemed to acquiesce with what I was saying by slowly closing and opening their eyes, as if they wanted it all to go away.

“And I plan to completely avoid it,” I added.

Tony came to a conclusion, in a way. He smiled briefly, trying to trivialise the whole dramatic encounter he had sparked so gratuitously. When all else failed, resorting to sarcasm was also mentioned in our manual.

“If you don’t want to be involved in any of the cases I’ve just mentioned,” he said, “and neither in the case of a straightforward disposal, then you could perhaps attend yet another improv course to further advance your already excellent role-play skills, Iona.”

“Thank you, Tony, but I’ve done enough of those.”

Chapter 11

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Mr Taras said as I entered his office.

Today’s black hat –the same one he wore when visiting me in hospital– was sitting tightly on his head, as if anticipating the mood of the meeting.

“Sir,” I said as a greeting.

Prompted by him, I sat on a chair in front of his desk. He remained standing. This was his brand-new office in our brand-new HQ. With no windows, the setting was far too dark, made worse by the colour of the furniture, walls and carpeted floor, all in storm grey. When visiting me in my hospital room he had shown a rather more human side, something I had never seen in him before; whether it had been for real or merely another make-believe front, it was difficult to say. But now in his office, he spoke as if he were reading from a rule book, detached and impassive.

“We’ve received the medical report from your doctors. You’re fit to work and carry on as before, with a few exceptions as expected. The new task we’re asking you to deal with now is not excruciatingly difficult. It involves little physical effort on your part. And you’ll have Rudge to help you out if required.”

“But...” I said.

“It’s just a disposal, Iona, only a disposal.”

I felt unable to say anything. Mr Taras went on.

“And we expect all this to be done immediately. It’s urgent. We need to act before the person leaves the country.”

I looked left and right, as if trying to find an escape route.

“You mean it has to be done in... in the next few days?” I ended up asking.

“No, Iona, today. Today’s the day.”

“Today?”

I protested to no avail.

“It’ll be a great way to get you ready for action and back on your feet again,” he said, taking a deep breath, “and it’ll help with oiling the coils and returning to the grindstone, and...”

“Yes, I understand.”

“It all boils down to the fact that we need to use you, and soon,” he said and then sat down on his all-powerful leather armchair, as black as his hat.

He would always say the same thing. Using me, using us. I had to be used again, and quickly. I had been used –utilised and exploited were better words– so many times before that I was well trained for surprises. Worse still, it was pointless to show my displeasure since any such reactions produced no effect; even less did they trigger commiseration or pity.

“Used...” I said.

I would be used once again without complaint or objection on my part; yes, used all the way until there was nothing inside me but the saddest emptiness. That was how we were supposed to behave, even exist; running on empty and living in a kind of void, as was specified in the contract with those exact words: *Your life will be lived in a void*. No, not legal jargon but dire drafting.

“Mr Taras, I can’t stop thinking about what happened in Barcelona and everything that went wrong there,” I said, imagining a void in which all was lost, not too dissimilar from the black holes I had been experiencing when crossing the city by foot.

“Don’t despair, Iona, joy comes to all of us eventually.”

I was not sure whether he knew what I was thinking or understood what he was saying.

“I don’t think I’ve ever experienced joy...” I said, looking at the dark carpeted floor.

“Forget about everything!” he said, raising his voice as if he had been stung by a bee. “Forget Barcelona, the yellow cloud, the strawberry capsule, and especially Bill.”

Mentioning the name brought it all back.

“First, you ask me to marry him, and then you ask me to kill him! Both involved a death in a way. Initially my death in a way; a young woman used unspeakably to the point of destruction. And then... and then his own death, in a hotel room in Barcelona. It was so much worse than my manoeuvres, because this time I was on the verge of losing my life. In a way, I have lost my life, and the person I used to be is no longer here...”

He looked away from me.

“It was just a marriage of convenience with Bill,” he said. “You knew when you signed up to the Agency that you could be asked to do anything, including putting up with a bit of Eve-teasing.”

I was stunned by his choice of words.

“You shouldn’t be using that expression!”

“Why not? It depicts what the sex game is all about. What’s more, it’s officially accepted by the highest in the land.”

I needed to get so much angrier in response, but I was too tired, too distraught.

“I’d like to... to know,” I said, “what happened to the enemy, so as not to repeat mistakes.”

He opened his eyes wide.

“May I remind you that I’m the one deciding who gets any information, when and how. I’m the one running the show; you’ve always known that’s rule number one. And if you’ve any questions about rule number one, let me tell you that there’s no rule number two. In a nutshell, Iona, we’ve no firm news about Bill yet, and I assume that’s whom you’re referring to.”

Mr Taras had been mildly pacified by quoting one of his favourite home-spun rules, but it was my turn to lose my temper. I briefly touched my scarred face.

“After the terrible and... and traumatic experience I’ve suffered, perhaps I could think about writing my... my own rules!”

He was back to his old self, fully and despicably in control.

“If leaving the Agency is what you’re implying, as you suggested in your hospital bed, you know that without our protection you’ll be singled out by the Organization, among others. More importantly, as an outsider you’ll be taken by them and reduced to less than nothing. Most probably downloaded, and not gently, and then disposed of in the most wicked way. You’re well aware about all of this. It has happened before, though only in a couple of recent cases, I’m glad to say. But my, do we miss Jennifer and Whittaker. Useless now as our officers, and certainly as human beings, spending their lives in a hospital bed. Both destroyed forever, horribly...”

“Destroyed? That couldn’t happen to me. Jennifer was so much more esteemed as an advocate. She would’ve succeeded you, Mr Taras, and very capably. I’m less prominent than she ever was.”

“You’re a data silo, Iona!”

“As always, you tend to exaggerate, Mr. Taras.”

He looked at me without blinking once, and then spoke.

“This isn’t a profession you can leave and move into something more, shall we say, meaningful, as outsiders do. You could retire, but bear in mind that retirees end up begging to come back on short contracts, like in the case of Miss Pilkington. Retirement is always discreet at the Agency, in case your services may be required once again. Have you ever signed any good-luck-for-the-future cards for one of the advocates or attended their farewell do’s? Things may change, and so may our commissions. But we always offer the same excellent degree of service, forever to the best of our ability. Granted that, after what happened in Barcelona, we won’t be able to send you on missions of a certain kind, but definitely on others. We’ll have to forget about assignments involving you and your...”

“My what?”

Mr Taras lowered his voice.

“Charms...” he said and produced a brief yet complicit smile.

“My charms?” I shouted, pointing at my face. “All gone in a flash!”

“We used them when they were available and...”

“And what?”

“... and in any case, I don’t think you were ever *virgo intacta*...”

He smiled openly. I was outraged.

“How... how can you say that?”

Mr Taras could say anything to anyone, whenever he pleased, for however long he wanted. We knew it well in our squadron; he had said much worse to many of us, on any subject however painful or destructive. He went on with his discourse.

“And from now on we’ll simply have to assign you to other enterprises.”

It was pointless to complain about his language, but I did anyway.

“In a strange way, maybe what happened to me in Barcelona was a blessing, so that I would not have to abide any longer by your rules. You know very well how I felt about the Agency exploiting me in that way. It was wrong!”

His tone turned falsely soothing.

“Iona. The word *wrong* is barred in our discussions. The end justifies it all. I’m not talking about strangling babies, but...”

“But almost!” I said and felt a shiver along my body.

Mr Taras could be careless with his examples.

“This isn’t a competition, Iona, but don’t let me remind you about your many assignments.”

“Surely my CV cannot be more, shall we say, committed than yours.”

His head straightened as if he had suddenly woken up.

“I never commission tasks that I wouldn’t be prepared to do myself. In your case, from now on it’ll be what people in the business call a garden-fresh start.”

“That’s your advice?”

“That’s my command!”

We were both out of breath. It had been our first-ever confrontation, I had certainly never gone as far with him. I needed to remind him of something.

“But what about... about the case you mentioned when I was in hospital. You spoke of a manoeuvre that had to do with... with art.”

The tone of his voice softened suddenly. Perhaps the word *art* did things to people.

“Yes, that project,” he said. “It’s the next important project you’ll be undertaking... after this new disposal, that is.”

“But this new... this new disposal would be a disruption...”

I said that as a statement, but it was an objection. He shook his hands as if freeing them from some invisible strings.

“It might or it might not. Nothing’s ever a disruption. A new task always helps with the next task; it may provide invaluable experience, or bring different viewpoints, or help with perceptions, or make you stronger, or give you insights that will change your life, or...”

He went on and I stopped listening. I wanted to laugh, but humour was tough to sustain all over my facial features. In the case of sarcasm, though, you only needed one side of your face.

“Really, Mr Taras?”

But he carried on.

“... or provide new ideas or techniques, or make you understand human nature, or...”

When hearing anything about human nature I wanted any discussions to end.

“I understand, Mr Taras, I understand perfectly,” I said.

He removed his hat and scratched his shiny head as if he could not fathom what he was about to say.

“So, Iona, before that manoeuvre about art and an artist,” he explained, “we have this urgent case to deal with. A case of *double-entendre*.”

I knew what he meant. Not only did I understand what he said, but also what he did not say but meant, and even what his wrong usage of language really referred to.

“You mean double-crossing, Mr Taras.”

“Both!”

Mr Taras used words as he pleased, without too many concessions to the rules, in context or out of it. He was never lost for words, whether the wrong ones or the entirely superfluous. More interested in the sound than in the meaning, he sometimes stopped to listen to what he had said as if an echo might be heard. As to the expression he had just used, I took a guess and I was right, for the simple reason that I had heard it all before. We had suffered traitors on a few occasions at the Agency, and he had used that same term to refer to any such staff.

“You mean there’s a traitor... among us?”

“Yes, an apostate!”

That was what traitors were for him –all those renouncing the faith of the Agency. Yet I could not think of anyone who could have conspired against us from within, certainly not in our squadron.

“I cannot believe that someone would...”

“Well, it’s true.”

“And why should I be involved?”

He arranged the papers on his desk, played with a pen. And after a while, he spoke.

“Because I want you to dispose of her.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.”

I then asked the question that I did not want answered.

“And how?”

He now messed his papers around, turning the pen quickly in his hand.

“In the usual way. Nothing traceable must be left behind. We don’t want a single mark on the body. It must lead to an inconclusive post-mortem. And as Tony explained, you will be there as yourself, no role-play this time.”

“But... but I don’t feel that I’m ready for this sort of thing just yet and...”

He interrupted me.

“Stop! We must deal with this matter straightaway, especially now that we have signed the death warrant...”

Once approved and signed, there was no way to revoke the death warrant. Even a change of mind from a client was a complicated process, requiring several signatures high-up and a couple of meetings to review the case.

“A death warrant!” I echoed.

As well as the name of the victim and a list of accusations, the death warrant included the name of the person who was to execute the deed. And now that both the victim and the perpetrator had been named, I was helpless.

“A full death-warrant!” he repeated in case I had not understood the seriousness of the case.

He shook his hands in the air as if he had not been involved in the decision. I shivered but felt compelled to ask.

“Who is it... this time?”

He then rested his hands on his desk. His eyes were almost shut when he showed me the photograph of the supposed traitor.

“Oh, Mr Taras!” I said, my voice trembling.

“Yes, Iona, yes.”

“It can’t be!”

“Yes, Iona, she’s an apostate.”

I tried to negotiate.

“But don’t you think that, in this case, disposal would be too much. Couldn’t we just...”

He put the photograph away.

“Iona, you make so much of disposal. There’s nothing to it. Blood ceases to flow; organs stop processing; eyes cannot see. It’s simply one more stage in a life.”

“I just can’t, I can’t, I can’t...” I said and became dizzy, almost sick.

Disposal, death, demise. I remembered the man who fell like an angel of his own accord from the most magnificent bridge. But I also remembered others who had fallen far less dramatically from speeding trains and moving vehicles, in hotel rooms and in public spaces, either in town or the countryside, by land or sea, burial or pyre. I would always decide on the most expedient way by choosing for disposal one of the four elements as befitted the target and, naturally, the circumstances. I suppose each of us at our squadron had a method, but more importantly a preference as to how to go about it. I could not deny that I was proud of how I had accomplished those manoeuvres for they showed considerable imagination and flair on my part. Such incidents had been as creative as they had been spectacular. Like works of art, I speculated. Yes, art was a word permanently at the back of my mind; I considered that all things had to be done as if they were art, with dedication, devotion and integrity, though the latter might be debatable in the larger context. If disposing of someone were to be considered an art, then I would have to be seen as a committed artist. Developing my skills into a fine art was what I pursued.

“Are you okay?” Mr Taras asked.

“No, not well. Too many things on my mind,” I replied with total sincerity.

He gave me a glass of water. It was the worst thing to do. I could not drink without spilling most of the contents, so I sipped slowly with my tongue, just like a cat would.

“You know what you must do when you have too much on your plate. Put those worries in the right box so they don’t get muddled.”

“Yes, you’ve said that many times.”

“A box for this, and a box for that, and a box for something else, and a box for...”

“Yes, I appreciate what you’re saying, Mr Taras.”

I wanted him to keep quiet and say nothing else about commissioning yet another disposal or about compartmentalising my life in boxes or about asking me how I was.

“So, what’s it to be then regarding this disposal?” he asked, looking at his watch.

I could say neither yes or no, so I remained silent.

“After this mission, it’s seaside all the way,” he added and grinned.

He was giving me the green light for the future. But he was taking away, yet again, a piece of my present life.

“It’s forecast to be an even hotter day,” he said. “You’ll find her in that café they’ve opened beside the river. They claim to have most drinks available on the market, alcoholic and non-alcoholic, present and past. And she won’t suspect you, obviously. She’ll be dressed in white, with a white cap.”

“As expected, white,” I repeated.

“Thank you and good luck,” he said, leading me to the door of his office.

“Goodbye, Mr Taras,” I replied.

And as I was leaving his office, he called out.

“Iona...”

“Yes?” I said, looking back.

He had a downbeat look about him but did not elaborate further.

Chapter 12

I wrapped my scarf over my face, and Rudge and I left the building. The two concierges paid no attention to us as if they had seen it all before. Luckily the open-air café was a relatively short walk away, and we were there in no time. The urgency of the job had been impressed upon me only too strongly.

“I’ll sit on a nearby bench and read a book,” Rudge suggested.

“Make sure it isn’t upside down...” I said to him.

We walked alongside each other without exchanging further words. As we approached the café, Rudge stopped until I was five metres away from him, and then he continued walking for a few more steps and sat down on a bench. The café was packed with noisy customers, drinking and chatting loudly; the words *EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN* were written on a red and blue banner with white lettering across the outside seating area. Sure enough, at one end a woman was sitting at a table with her back turned. She was dressed in white and had a white cap on, hardly a fashion item. And as I approached her, she showed me her face.

“Oh, how lovely to see you again,” she said, but her eyes looked elsewhere.

“What a coincidence!” I said, trying to be casual.

“Yes, a coincidence,” she replied, looking left and right.

“May I sit down?” I asked.

“I was expecting someone, but they haven’t shown up yet.”

She blushed.

“I’ll leave when they arrive,” I replied. “Naturally!”

“Thank you!”

“Perhaps I should not stay?” I suggested.

“Oh, please do. It’s lovely to have met after all this time.”

As I sat down, her eyes seemed to be looking for something or someone in the street or at the other tables. I could not stop thinking that, for once, Mr Taras was wrong; she could not possibly be what he claimed she was, an apostate.

“Another very warm autumn,” I said to her, resorting to the usual repertoire.

“Yes,” she replied, “that’s another way of referring to our everlasting summer.”

I started on the script I had prepared.

“I... I never got to thank you for all your care and attention when I was in hospital,” I commented.

“I was just doing my job,” she said, still looking left and right.

“Yes, a nurse’s job,” I echoed, and tried to produce half a smile.

She was sipping a coffee, and I called out to the waitress and asked for another one.

“How are the scars?” she asked.

I decided to show her. After all, she had looked after me, changing the gauzes, disinfecting the wounds, removing the staples. And not allowing me to use a mirror for a long time.

“Here they are!” I said, as I removed my scarf.

She batted her eyes several times.

“The scars appear to be good,” she said untruthfully.

“Thank you!” I said and wrapped the scarf around my head again.

I looked up to see whether Rudge was there. Yes, he was still sitting on a bench, in the sun, reading his book.

“I remember what a difficult time it was for you,” she said.

“You remember well,” I echoed.

Remember. It was the word that she had repeated *ad nauseam*, every day, at almost every hour.

“Do remember! Please, please, please!”

I recalled how she would constantly ask me to remember.

“Even if it’s only one word!”

I recalled how insistently she had said that, possibly waiting for me to give something away in my soporiferous state.

“It was difficult for me to remember in that hospital bed,” I went on saying to her, opening my eyes widely whilst she lowered hers.

We talked for a long time; perhaps I was trying to postpone the inevitable. And then, for the first time ever in my manoeuvres, I questioned whether I should end her life.

“Well, my recovery was...”

We spoke about how she had patiently helped me to recover, and I recalled both the generalities –the many aspects that she had had to deal with regarding my stay in that pretend-hospital– and the anecdotal, like the piece of apple that she gave me to awaken my senses, almost my first interaction with the outside world since I could not make myself heard. We discussed the various operations and the medication I was taking. She said that she was now employed at another private clinic, albeit temporarily, and that she was seeking a position abroad. In fact, she was about to leave the country.

“Across the ocean?” I asked, thinking that she would continue with her deceit in a different setting.

“More or less,” she replied.

She most probably wanted to get away from the locations where she was known.

“A new beginning!” she added.

I discreetly looked towards Rudge, and he nodded from where he was.

“How exciting to be going away!” I said, knowing that she would never be going anywhere.

The sun was setting. We had long finished our innocuous beverages. I had been very careful sipping my coffee so as not to spill it, but mostly to gain time; but perhaps she would run away from where we were or I would fall into one of my temporary blackouts.

“Let’s drink to your health and to your new beginnings,” I suggested. “I’ll order something more substantial. It’s on me. To thank you for everything.”

She looked intensely at the marble-topped table as if her destiny were written on those grey streaks and smudges, coldly and silently waiting for her.

“How kind,” she said.

I called the waitress.

“What’s it to be?” I asked.

“Something sweet,” the nurse replied.

“The lady wants something sweet to drink, and so do I.”

“Something like ouzo, Pernod, raki?” the waitress asked unenthusiastically.

“It’s all the same to me,” the nurse replied, “as long as it has lots of sugar.”

“Naturally!” I replied.

To sweeten the final blow, I thought. Perhaps she knew what was about to happen to her. But then I also needed a little reassurance.

“You seem to have everything in this place,” I commented to the waitress.

“Yes, we do have everything under the sun,” she said, looking up at the red and blue banner as if she had read those words out loud a thousand times before, “although it would be more accurate to say *almost* everything. And as you would expect, many of the drinks we stock are not made any more.”

“Would you have any anisette liqueurs?”

“Yes, all the brands. We haven’t run out of any of those yet.”

“Then, I would like two Brizards on the rocks,” I said, looking at the nurse.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it,” the waitress said to her.

“I’m sure we will,” I replied, and as I spoke the scarf became undone and it fell to the floor.

The waitress was writing down the order and when she looked up her eyes revealed her shock. I felt I had to provide an explanation, however outlandish.

“The war...” I began to explain, trying to smile with my good side.

The waitress nodded in pity, and then spoke.

“There are so many wars, now!” she asked with great interest, picking up my scarf and handing it back to me. “Which one?”

“Does it matter?” I replied.

Drinks were brought to the table, and the nurse and I drank and reminisced a little more. Her childhood in the countryside, her dreams of becoming a nurse, her many holidays abroad.

“I also collect semi-precious stones,” she added to her list of interests.

“Not fully precious?”

She looked shocked.

“Oh, I could never afford those.”

“Cheers!” we both said at the same time.

And we continued drinking in silence for a while; I did it as slowly as possible, she took it in gulps.

“Your friend never showed up,” I commented.

“That’s true. I wonder what happened.”

“Yes, I wonder too,” I replied, looking towards Rudge and his book.

It was getting dark; surely, he could not read in that light. I saw him getting up from the bench and coming towards us.

“But I need to go now,” the nurse said.

“So do I.”

We finished our drinks, and I called the waitress to pay. We both got up.

“I’m going in that direction,” she announced and began to walk.

“So am I,” I responded and followed her.

The river was just there, at its lowest ever level. The water was turning black now that the sun had set.

“Did you know,” I said to her, feeling a little unsteady, “that garnets can be found at the bottom of the Thames? It’s one of those strange occurrences in the city.”

“Real garnets?” the nurse asked.

“Naturally!” I replied, my voice shaking.

“How... how lovely!” she said, her voice shaking even more.

“Yes, let’s go down these steps,” I suggested. “I can see something shining.”

We had to walk down quite a few steps as the river level was so low, but it would do for my purpose. The waves lapped the pebbles on the riverbank, and I knelt and touched the water. Something like a garnet appeared to be just there, washed up from the riverbed. Or maybe dusk was playing tricks on all of us.

“My, the water’s cold...” she whispered.

“Time’s up!” I said.

Chapter 13

As soon as I returned to HQ, Miss P summoned me to her office. There was not enough space for her full surname on the door, and it said MISS P in a red and blue sign with white lettering. I don't think she knew that we all called her that.

"Enter," she said when I knocked.

"Miss Pilkington," I greeted her.

Under a veneer of exquisite manners lay what we all called her scheming soul. Most times the deceit was scarcely noticeable; we were aware because we had known her for a long time, but for outsiders she was as good as gold.

"I hope we didn't burden you too much, but we needed you back in operations. This latest assignment was a gentle way to get you into the flow of things. And now that you've had a few days' rest, all should be well."

She smiled but I did not.

"I wasn't expecting anything so soon," I replied, unsure of my words. "And particularly having to deal with someone I knew... someone I had... had interacted with. I desperately needed to take some days off."

"Oh, the word *desperately*. As you know, we avoid it at the Agency."

"Well then, *urgently*."

"That's better."

She made me sit and then sat herself in her armchair, not as big or as black as Mr Taras' chair.

"And now to your next manoeuvre. I think Mr Taras mentioned it briefly when he visited you in hospital."

“Yes, something to do with art.”

“Well, it’s to be expected since you’re our resident art expert.”

I rubbed my scars. By then, it had become a kind of nervous tic.

“I’m not one bit an expert. Just barely interested in art, that’s all.”

She looked directly at me.

“I hadn’t checked your background for a long time. And now that I have, I can see that you certainly know your trade.”

“*This* is my trade,” I said, and without realising I was scratching my scars again.

“But you did study art.”

“Yes, I believe I did,” I said, trying hopelessly to smile.

“And you were good at it,” she commented and lowered her eyes.

“You mean I was expelled from Art School,” I said, spelling it out.

She now looked at me head on.

“But... but not because your work was lacking in quality.”

I felt I had to provide a detailed explanation.

“No, perhaps not because of that. But what’s quality, we should ask. It all depends on the here and the now, mostly on where you were born and when. When judging artists from another age or place, the quality principle we now sustain might have not applied in those cases at the time. In a different setting, an established artist might be considered... well, crap.”

Miss P was not expecting a lengthy explanation or any rude remarks. She was from the old school, with exquisite manners and the fastest and cruellest of reactions. And I suppose I wanted to shock her.

“I agree that the term *quality* is subjective,” she said disdainfully.

Miss P was not into speculative thought.

“*Transience* is a better word to explain this,” I commented. “Everything comes to an end. Quality, art movements, style...”

She cleared her throat and carried on talking.

“Mr Taras mentioned your *pictorial* style once,” she said, emphasising the word *pictorial* by saying it a perfect fifth higher.

I was not sure whether she was being sarcastic or not. You could never be too sure with anything Miss P said or did. For my part, I turned on my self-deprecating mode.

“My style? If I ever had one.”

“But you liked to draw and paint...”

“Yes.”

“You seemed to like to paint certain things...”

“Yes?”

“Dark subjects.”

“Subjects can never be dark enough,” I said, again pulling at my scars.

“And I understand that you would draw and paint certain things like...”

I knew what she was getting at, and I decided that I would give it to her in full.

“Yes, Miss Pilkington, I used to paint portraits of cadavers. That type of representation is not only about anatomical depictions for medical purposes but, if I may point out, it also constitutes a time-hallowed artistic expression. From Michelangelo and Becerra to Magalhães and Yedidia, the dead body has always been a source of creative inspiration. A particular veneration of death is the art of the corpse, a genre called *kusōzu*, which would include several depictions of a carcass gradually decaying. All of these are acknowledgements of death instead of its negation since upholding beauty is the ultimate paradigm in art. You see, everything can be art, all of

it governed by the technique applied, especially that which we hold closest: our own bodies. From the representation of corpses, whether saints or sinners, to the use of body parts, tissues and fluids. The tradition goes back a long way, ever since we, as humans, became aware that one day you existed and the next day you didn't. The art of death, you could call it, allows us a much deeper awareness of our vulnerability and mortality than portrayals of living things ever can. At the time, I solely depicted still lifes of body parts, whether internal or external, in my painting. But casts of body parts have also been used by certain artists; others took body parts in representational form to give faithful expression to our human nature. From posing beside the freshly deceased to embedding precious stones into what remains of us once flesh has dissipated. From taking photographs of the dead, all dressed up and bejewelled, to making them pose as if doing everyday chores, and to bravely leading soldiers into battle in death. In fact, I know an artist whose performance is to bleed almost to the point of death, and that is when he stops; a few months later, he is back at it. After all, the body is the first blank canvas we have on which to experiment, by piercing, tattooing, branding, stigmatising. And let's not forget the religious veneration of body parts, those relics were held to be proof that saints once existed and yet at the same time confirm that they were as mortal and perishable as we are... from a highly regarded relic like the holy prepuce to a third-class relic like sacred breast-milk embedded in limestone, as well as tongues or fingers or full heads embellished with rubies, emeralds, pearls and enamels. And as you would expect, what some plainly call art, others might call *degenerate art*; it is all subject to the period of history in which you live and the political party in power, however abominable. What the body is and holds can be recycled as raw material for the artistic representation of our endless emotional states; and whyever not, since nothing can be closer to our identity than our own corporeality. The

purpose of it all, I would say, is to transcend our biology. But then that's what we aim for in most of our human endeavours..."

Miss P looked a little dazed for she was probably not expecting such a lengthy explanation. Her perfect bun was now off-centre; a few strands of hair were out of place. She retouched her hairdo, doubtless for reassurance. I was happy I had spoken; it was not every day that I could talk about what I loved best.

"You know your subject, Iona."

"Yes, it's my subject, and I get carried away..."

She looked at me and then at the black lamp on her desk and then at me again. The problem with the new HQ was that we were always underground and so things were much darker than strictly necessary.

"I recall... yes, I recall that you used similar arguments when you defended your case in Art School at the time," she said, almost a whisper.

"Yes, Miss Pilkington. In order to defend myself when I was threatened with expulsion, I said that I was merely following an artistic tradition with full dedication and commitment."

"That's... that's how... how it should be," she said, mumbling her words.

"We've seen something similar in the Bond Room with those, shall we call them, paintings."

"They're not human parts, surely!" she said, raising her voice yet still under control.

I refrained from laughing.

"No, certainly not. Reptiles, not humans. But those creatures had once been alive, and in death they were used for art... or for what someone called art."

"Yes, thought-provoking works, I'd say," she suggested noncommittally.

I decided that I would not enter into a discussion about the merits of the atrocious reptile collages with Miss P.

“So, is there a problem with using dead body parts in art?” I asked her, a little defiantly.

“Not at all!” she replied, opening her slate grey eyes widely.

I stopped to take the longest breath, as if relieved now that I had spoken what had been on my mind for so long.

“But that’s all in the past,” I said, trying to move the conversation on.

We all knew that she was an expert interrogator, relentless and charming. But then I had been trained thoroughly by her in the art of interrogation, for it was an art.

“But they found you in...”

Again, there was no point in trying to get away from the subject. Yes, I would give her what she wanted and with the finest detail I could manage.

“Using a fake ID, I would visit the local morgue and various hospitals. I used to rummage through discarded organs and human waste...”

I stopped to gauge her reaction to what I had just said. She showed no expression whatsoever. Yes, she was the perfect interrogator. I went on.

“I depicted what I saw, copying autopsied bodies that had been sewn up carelessly and from which blood had seeped through sectioned blood vessels. I preferred such imperfect samples to those that were ready for embalming.”

“The imperfect... bodies?” she asked, but she was still expressionless.

“Yes, I purposefully chose the more menacing and less dainty ones, and rejected all those other cadavers the venous blood of which had been removed and replaced with formaldehyde, alcohol and water injected intra-arterially, especially in

the carotid arteries to make their visage less of a death mask and more of a sample of the deepest slumber.”

“Interesting that you call death the deepest slumber,” she commented forcefully, as if compelled to say something, anything.

“You see, Miss Pilkington,” I continued, “even in the realm of the dead there is a hierarchy, and some dead bodies are unashamedly discarded and considered inferior. And I chose those lesser and imperfect ones, the least pretty and the more terrifying, so that they would be remarkable *pictorially*...”

I stressed that last word, as she had done earlier.

“Of course!” she said, as if what I was explaining was the most natural thing in the world.

“Is there any other information you would like, more particulars, more colour, more... intensity?”

She was quiet for a while. Perhaps I had gone too far, but you could never go too far with her. She had told us many times that she had seen it all and lived through it all; and mostly, she had done it all.

“Just one question, Iona?”

I looked towards the ceiling of neon lights.

“What happened to your paintings from back then?”

I hesitated briefly.

“All burnt. Some by the school, at my request. And some by me. Nothing remains...”

I stopped completing the sentence, but within a beat or two I added the qualifier.

“...sadly.”

“And you never went back to...”

“No, Miss Pilkington, I never went back to painting,” I said. “I don’t like returning to things that didn’t quite work out for me. Anything that fails is entirely discarded.”

“I understand,” she said but, from her expression, that did not appear to be the case.

“I suppose it’s... it’s impossible to live all the lives you want to live...” I added, but I was not saying what I really thought.

“Of course,” she said indifferently, as if the idea had never crossed her mind.

No, I was not convinced that it was impossible to live the life you truly wanted. Maybe one day I would recover the person I had been before joining the Agency. Yes, maybe I could be the artist I had always wished, and through my craft I would represent the world as I saw it, mysterious and dark but also beautiful and exhilarating. After all, it was a world that made no sense but for its mystery and its beauty.

“But I do collect art,” I said, feeling that I had to explain at least some of the truth. “In fact, along the same lines as what I used to depict in my own work.”

She looked just a little fazed.

“You mean the human body in dead form?” she asked, almost reluctantly.

“Not that you haven’t seen in real life the things I’m describing... or maybe you’re familiar with a few of the art depictions I mentioned...” I suggested, immediately realising that I might have dared to say too much to her.

Miss P got up from her armchair and looked at the ceiling; maybe she was remembering all the things she had seen over her long career. Almost immediately, she sat down again, perfectly calm. She was known for quickly moving from one extreme to another, and could completely switch her reactions in the blink of an eye. In our training sessions, she called this sort of response, literally, absolute willpower. I had always been wary of any expressions that included the word *absolute*.

“No, I’m not in any way squeamish, Iona,” she said, and laughed as if dismissing any doubts on my part. “It’s just that once a scene however beastly is over, I totally forget about it. In your case, it looks like you wanted to make the scene last, almost... almost immortalise it.”

“That’s the aim of art, I suppose. To make things last much longer than they’re supposed to.”

With her expertise, I doubted that the subject was unsettling her. But discussing my most private life was unsettling me. I felt obliged to explain, albeit briefly.

“At the time, what I wanted was to... was to show human nature, its intricacies, its pitfalls, its limits.”

“And its horrors,” she added.

“Yes, such horrors we find everywhere, and not only in art...” I said, hoping to elicit a reply from her on the subject, but she asked me something else instead.

“And you brought certain... certain things to your classroom at Art School?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Like what?”

And I saw it all clearly in my mind.

“A skull, a leg, a hand...”

“Yes?”

“A heart, a kidney, a uterus...”

I swallowed hard.

“Yes, I understand,” she said again.

I paused my long list. She was looking at me as if trying to find an answer to a question she was reluctant to ask.

“And then?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“As expected, I was expelled for stealing all those body parts.”

“Yes, we’ve information on that. You were expelled from Art School, and that’s when...”

She was prompting me to go in a certain direction.

“That’s when I was approached by...”

“It was me, remember.”

“Yes, it was you, Miss Pilkington. Such a long time ago. You were told about me by someone you knew at the school, and you thought that I was... I was the perfect fit for this place.”

I laughed with one side of my face, the good side, the less acerbic one. She nodded.

“I wasn’t interested so much in the art you produced as in the way you defended yourself, as I said before, and how you justified your actions, how you had no regrets or misgivings. It was as if you saw cold-heartedness as a way of life.”

I took a deep breath.

“I wouldn’t put it as strongly as that, Miss Pilkington. But I can empathise with what you’re trying to say.”

I did not want to think, at least for the time being, about the extent of the accusation. To be called cold-hearted was unquestionably an accusation, even if that sort of feature was one of my more noticeable and, in certain situations, invaluable traits. I preferred the term cold-blooded, but if Miss P wanted to refer to me as cold-hearted, I would not stand in her way. What both qualifiers shared was an unfriendly word that described anything from the dismissive and even contemptuous to an iciness that could effortlessly turn hope into hopelessness and delight into resentment.

Coldness; the noun itself gave you the shivers. Yes, there had been a dimension of cold-heartedness in my life, coming from outside and imposed on me; I suppose it was because other more appealing words had not entered the equation. Seemingly, any warmer, we could call them, feelings had never anchored me; this I had been told professionally a long time ago.

“Cold-heartedness,” she repeated, and she said it in such a detached way that it made me reminisce.

Yes, I had been coldly adrift, you could reasonably say, both as the subject of abandonment and as the object of rejection. More than once I had been relinquished. First by whoever it was that had given birth to me, and then by those who had decided to take me on board. Yes, they gave up on me too and I was rejected, only to be brought back and then rejected again. This toing and froing from rejection to acceptance and back to rejection must have taken its toll, but I never had the time nor the inclination to consider the matter further; no, it did not bother me so much as to want to dedicate a part of my life to delving into the issue and finding the culprits, seeking explanations and subsequently taking revenge. I had more important things to do over the years, like excelling in my job at the Agency. I was going to explain further to Miss P that when they first wanted to recruit me, I felt I was the ideal rookie for the Agency, with the perfect predisposition to, shall we say, a dramatic way of life. After all, I was a reject. A total reject. Nothing but a reject. Rejected first by a set of humans, and then by another, and then again. And so, I behaved like a reject by, well, rejecting what might have seemed relevant in ordinary developmental settings. In any case, at the Agency they knew almost everything about me in terms of rejections and emotions. Luckily, there were still one or two things in my life that they were not aware

of. At least, I hoped they were not. And to protect that part of my life –sacred and inviolable– I had taken all adequate precautions and more.

Miss P looked at me as if she understood what was going through my mind, and so I began to speak.

“It’s a matter of regret that I should’ve lived the life I did. As if what happened to me initially marked my existence forever and imposed the type of person I was to become. As if I was doomed to live as I am now and in no other shape or form. As if I cannot get away from what was chosen for me by someone unrelenting and despicable and pitiless...”

I realised I was telling her things that I did not even tell myself. But was I getting carried away or was she getting more information out of me, as she normally would when she was in her element as an interrogator?

“And I’ll stop there,” I added.

“Yes,” she said, and did not seem to have taken offence.

The way she got up this time, so very laboriously, seemed to indicate that she was about to announce something of extreme importance and that I should keep quiet.

“At the Agency, Iona, we don’t believe in anything except in ourselves.”

She was now back on firm ground, and I was out of the muddy waters of my turmoil. I was not sure I was still the person she was talking about anymore, especially after a recovery period that had not yet seen me fully convalesced. I began to think that I was turning into someone else gradually and unawares, and at the same time I was speaking my mind without a care in the world. It was best to leave all that emotional quicksand behind and fast.

“You’re a model employee,” Miss P went on in the same vein. “You’ve strictly abided by the rules and have done everything with great professionalism. From time

to time, you're one to point out errors and blunders, which in a way is to be praised for your valour and openness. But in all, your manoeuvres have been excellent."

"Except... except my last but one mission," I replied dryly.

She walked around the room, went to the bookshelves, took out a book, opened it and then put it back as if needing time to prepare what she was about to say.

"That task in Barcelona was an exception. The only one in your, we could say, long and illustrious career."

I was glad that she had not mentioned my arranged marriage to Bill, which in some ways was a failed mission. Yes, my annual reviews were always outstanding, but hearing such praises from her made me feel good.

"I suppose it's because I'm fully committed to the Agency," I said with false modesty.

She came back to her desk and sat down in her plush armchair.

"In a way, you're like me. I've no other life."

I replied with another of those pseudolegalese clauses in the contract I had one day signed with such unease.

"Total dedication and nothing but."

She smiled.

"Well, the odd romance is allowed, with whoever and whenever, if it's kept at arm's length from your work. You can throw caution to the wind from time to time, if you're careful enough. And we think it's good for one's mind, so long as you don't allow it to flourish into anything more... more serious."

She said that as if embarrassed, lowering her eyes.

"Unquestionably!" I said, wondering whether she knew about Tony and our tempestuous relationship some time back.

I also wondered who had stolen Miss P's heart; that is, if there had been someone once and if she had a heart. There were no rumours whatsoever about her private life.

"But more important than that..." she began to say but stopped.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Remember the second half of the dictum: *There will be no children and no pets!*" she said, smiling unnecessarily.

I forced myself to smile with the good side of my face and again looked towards the ceiling.

"Yes, that's how it has to be: no pets and... and no children. We must avoid anything or anyone that can distract us from our mission at the Agency," I replied and swallowed hard.

I was surprised that she mentioned that point, yet another clause from the contract. Was there cause for concern, I asked myself. We were silent for a brief moment, and that's when I thought that the meeting was no more than a session of encouragement and support to make sure I would remain on the straight and narrow. It was probably one of Miss P's little pep talks, nothing more intrusive than that. She seemed to think staff needed that sort of thing from time to time –a review of past glories and a reminder of what must be left by the wayside at any cost. She got up again and went towards the door. And that's when she mentioned, ever so casually, what had been on her mind.

"Perhaps you were a little upset by the fact that Tony was... was in charge of your latest squadron meeting."

I finally realised this was the purpose of our conversation: to ensure that I bore no grudges against Tony for presiding over the meeting in anticipation of greater things for him, nor against her or Mr Taras for taking that decision.

“Not at all upset, just a little surprised,” I replied, resorting to my well-drilled skills of tact and discretion.

“You’ve gone through so much recently, and we thought it would help you if... if Tony took over certain chores, shall we say...”

“I understand,” I said, knowing that I did not understand and that any understanding on the subject could never, ever, be reached; as expected, I felt resentment and, worse, bitter rancour, especially as Tony had turned the latest staff meeting into a strenuous encounter, verging on the despicable.

She cleared her throat, opening a new chapter in the conversation.

“I think that perhaps a few more days off would do you good. You need rest, is how I see it. A bit of disconnection, as we call it.”

“Thank you for agreeing to my leave.”

“Where are you planning to go?”

I hesitated briefly.

“South. A place in the South.”

“Would you like to try the new tracking implant? You can have it fitted before you leave. We obviously need your full and conscious consent to this.”

A tracking implant was the last thing I wanted. I was about to make a little pun about tracking and hacking but decided to keep it simple.

“No, not now, thank you. I need to go immediately.”

Miss P did not ask further questions, and the interrogation ended but for one polite remark on her part and one hopeless reply on mine.

“And how are the wounds healing?” she asked at the very end of our meeting.

“Well,” I said, covering my mouth with my hand, “there are wounds that can never heal...”

I then exited the Agency and went home in a taxi. Jack had my suitcase ready; as always, no questions asked. He sent me off with the sweetest smile, and I left due South.

Chapter 14

“So how have you been, Joe?”

He could see me from the rear-view mirror, and I could watch a reflection of his glistening eyes. They had always been stunning, large and dark, absorbing everything around them. They were now fixed on the murky road.

“Oh, you know me, Iona. I get by.”

I sank into the seats at the back, all covered with blankets of the softest wool and with the smell of fresh mountain air.

“Have you gone anywhere interesting recently?” I asked.

We were now on the main route to the South, our headlights opening a bright path in the darkness.

“Yes, North.”

“I hope you avoided the...”

I did not have to finish my sentence.

“Yes, well away from the Northern front. There’s a woodland area I like to drive through. Woods and more woods.”

“Business?”

“No, this time I was on my own. I can occasionally take a couple of days off here and there. I needed the break anyway. Too many trips up and down the country lately...”

“Hence this lovely woodland scent back here!”

He laughed melodiously like an adolescent would, even though he was almost at retirement age.

I had been using Joe's services for a long time. He knew just a handful of things about me, but not enough to bring me down in any way. I had learnt a good deal about him, certainly enough to get him, well, killed. Any information came from the Agency, an invaluable depository of data about both our much-reviled foes and your average citizen. What I knew was safe with me, but it allowed me to make particular demands on him –total loyalty and, more importantly, complete silence. Not through threat or coercion, but via friendly association. And there I was, being driven by him to my secret destination. The journey required truly expert driving, first through long open roads and then cutting across miles of some horrendous terrain to avoid any type of surveillance; through his contacts, he was acquainted with location of minefields and areas with unexploded ordnance. Because of all this, it always took far longer than if we travelled in a straight line. I would not have had the stamina to drive on relentless for so long, particularly after the event in Barcelona.

“Thank you again, Joe. I'm aware that you had to cancel a couple of trips to fit me in your schedule.”

I saw his eyes flicker in the mirror.

“You know that I'll do anything for you.”

This was my very own mission, outside work. I had with me the cellphone I used solely for my private enterprises, MIL-Spec tested at a considerably higher level than those at the Agency. And as expected, my new UMP. I had been trained, both inside the Agency and outside, in a specialist corps and was more than familiar with the technology in place. I had even adapted my own app with some help from Joe, who had his dedicated associates. Thus, I had myself become an expert in tracking, alongside my colleague Robinson, yet was not officially known at the Agency for my

technical proficiency in this particular field; in fact, they thought I knew little about the subject, and it was better to keep it that way.

“No footprints at your end, Joe.”

“None whatsoever!” he replied with a chuckle.

“And none on my side either.”

Yes, I had made sure that there would be no footprints, travel or financial or digital, during my absence. It was not possible, in any way, to be traced. Except for Joe, no one knew where I was going.

“Thank you, Joe,” I said.

I would be out of reach for several days, and they knew it at the Agency. A brief absence was considered necessary respite for staff. I once managed to get away for a much longer period; I wanted to find my roots, I claimed, as if they were somewhere to be found. At the time, disconnection protocols were rigorously applied, and I was neither tracked nor trailed. I was probably deluding myself because they had more tools than I did to find out what my leaves of absence were about. I recalled another of those clauses in the contract: *We will know everything about you.* Maybe they did; but I knew quite a few things about them too.

“Did you manage to buy anything, Joe?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s all wrapped in coloured paper inside the trunk.”

“How long to get there?”

“Another five and a half hours.”

The car windows at the back had black blinds; I could see nothing outside.

“You must be tired,” Joe said.

There was no need to explain anything further to him. He had an excellent brain; a few words from me and he got the whole picture. And he certainly had good

intentions despite his miserable life. He had been involved in unseemly things well below board, for which he was still remorseful. Plus, he experienced a few years locked up. I managed to help him through my contacts in a couple of chambers and with various police informants close to me. When he was released, he reinvented himself as a driver with a luxury vehicle and managed to survive making these very private trips. Anywhere and at any time, no questions asked, no tracking and no trail. And when he did ask, it was not really a question.

“How’s it going, Iona?”

Oh, how amenable it was to speak openly with Joe, even if only for a little while and about the solely innocuous. I opened the floodgates and felt wonderfully unrestrained in that back seat, covered with those soft blankets that had the aroma of woodlands and forests. These rides helped to soothe me as nothing could back in the city. I was half-asleep when I spoke. Yes, I spoke though I did not say very much.

“The fuck of it all, Joe, is that I’ve not done too much for myself. I’ve lived alongside or within other parties, but never for myself. I mean that as in catering for my needs or as in nursing my grievances. There were times when I did carry out errands, you could call them, in my name or for my sake, but then they were few and far between. Most of what I’ve done has been for others or in their name. I suppose I conceded defeat from the start and refused to fight back. It was as if I knew there was no hope for me and no way out. What I’ve become is not what I’d once set out to be, and I’m only now beginning to understand the significance of it all. At least, there’s one thing that might be saved from all the things I’ve done, however you want to qualify them. Yes, only one thing can be saved...”

As always, when I got too personal, Joe would say nothing. This was so comforting. Giving me advice or showing pity or agreeing with me would have been the wrong thing to do. The realm of silence was best in those confessional moments.

“Oh, Joe, I’m falling asleep, sorry. I’m exhausted after all the many things I’ve had to deal with lately...”

Joe knew the headlines, but never the particulars.

“I’ll give you a nudge when we get there.”

And I dreamt. All the way to my destination, I dreamt.

It was a colourful and vibrant dream with plenty of bizarre characters and impossible situations. The subjects were death and destruction, with dead bodies everywhere and endless derelict buildings, large sections of which were deep underground. I witnessed a litany of crimes and transgressions, some of which I had already committed and others presumably not yet. The dream looked much like a trailer for the Agency, except that I was missing a tune, an unnerving one at that. If one day they decided to film a promotional trailer to advertise our work, it should look exactly like my dream. Yes, I dreamt about the deeds I had carried out and the words I had spoken. In real life, I would not call what I had done terrible, nor would I say that my words were unforgiving. But in dreamland, they were the most horrific deeds and the harshest words, for I was now calling things by any name I liked.

“Iona, we’ve arrived,” said Joe, softly applying the brakes.

And sure enough, there in front of me was the house. It was night-time when we got to our destination, yet the building was so well lit that I could distinguish the renovated brickwork on the walls, the new flowerbeds, and the freshly painted red entrance door.

The house was not exactly as I remembered it. They had changed quite a few things but failed to tell me they would. Oh, I lie. They had told me in a way. They did mention that several much-needed improvements had been made, which was another way of saying they wanted more money from me. I asked myself whether they would recognise me after all this time, mostly because of my scars. A more important question was whether *she* would recognise me.

Joe parked the car in the crunchy gravel driveway. There was no avoiding it, so you could not arrive unannounced. He got out and carried my case and the parcel to the entrance, then came back to open the car door on my side. As agreed, he would stay in the local pub for a couple of days or until I told him to collect me. I was not sure how long I would remain there. It all depended on how the situation evolved and whether I was liked or even wanted.

“Goodbye, Joe,” I said.

And as the car drove off, the door to the house opened.

“Iona, hello! So lovely to see you.”

Mr and Mrs Reese welcomed me with open arms. They were warm, very warm. Moreover, they were so friendly that I had to push them back politely because I found their embraces a little suffocating. They appeared to be very content; but then I regularly paid them a significant sum for the warmth and upkeep, and especially for the unswerving care they provided.

“You look well,” Mrs Reese said politely.

“Not with this,” I replied, pointing at my scars. “Do you think she’ll be scared?”

She smiled kindly.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Mrs Reese had a way of resolving problems by not giving too much importance to them. She had been taking the same approach ever since the day I met her and her husband. They said everything would turn out well, and for that I was grateful.

“You’ve changed a few things in the entrance,” I said, looking around me.

“Yes, and also in the house itself,” said Mr Reese.

We went inside. In that large entrance hall, the furniture was very different and much more lustrous, the staircase had a new red and very traditional carpet with *fleur-de-lis* motif, and on the walls cheerful wallpaper with bright poppies had replaced the previous drab and stripy one.

“You said you wanted the very best!” said Mrs Reese; she had rosy cheeks and dreamy eyes.

“Indeed, thank you for dealing with all this. I trust that the transferred amounts were sufficient.”

All that garnishing and trimming was not my style, but I did not have the time or disposition to deal with decorating the house. I paid them and they did it their way.

“Oh, yes. We’ve sent all the receipts via the usual channels. I assume they eventually reach your lawyers,” Mr Reese said.

“Each time under a different name and at a different address, as always?” I asked.

“Several times over,” said Mrs Reese, lowering her eyes.

She was a large maternal woman, bulky and soft as if she kept a litter in the next room.

“And the garden?” I asked.

“Oh, come and see it,” she said excitedly.

“It’s a little late and quite dark out there,” I objected as politely as I could.

“We’ve lights everywhere,” Mr Reese said. “For safety, clearly. There’s no need to be concerned.”

And we went out into the garden; it was not a particularly starry night.

“It’s more a collection of gardens,” Mrs Reese specified.

“Lovely,” I replied politely.

“All things lit and all things visible,” Mr Reese announced, pressing a switch on the outside wall, and it was as if the sun had just come out.

So much brightness in the dark was not something I was familiar with.

“There!” he said pointing ahead.

We crossed a rose garden and an orchard, a little Japanese garden and a small alpine section, several flower beds and a fern area. Hydrangeas alongside magnolia trees, competing for attention. I had not seen so many shrubs and flowering trees for a very long time.

“It’s all quite beautiful. How do you manage to...?”

“Well, this is the South,” Mr Reese said. “There’re still a few pockets where flowers will bloom. They need a lot of water though...”

“And here’s the herb garden,” Mrs Reese added, pointing to our left.

“What about...?” I asked.

They knew what I was referring to.

“Yes, as you requested.”

And behind the rose garden, there it was. A play area with a swing and a slide, a small roundabout and a seesaw.

“Wonderful!” I said, and Mr and Mrs Reese smiled proudly.

The next morning, I woke up early and went down to the kitchen. It smelt of freshly baked bread. I had the parcel with me and placed it on the side of the table.

“Coffee?” asked Mr Reese.

“Black, no sugar. Thank you.”

I sat on a very comfortable chair, with flowery cushions on the seat and back, as well as padded armrests. If only we could have chairs as snug as that in the Bond Room, I thought. The whole kitchen was decorated with a cottage feel to it. Against one wall, a blue Aga gleamed, giving the place an intimate and tranquil air. It all felt guiltless and welcoming; and I was not used to such basic comforts, so alien to me that I thought I would blackhole once again.

“You’ve changed the kitchen as well,” I said, biting my lip and managing to keep the strain under control.

This was all part of my life, and yet I had no say in it whatsoever. Mr Reese replied.

“New curtains, new flooring, new tiles on the walls. We wanted to make it as cosy as possible.”

I took several deep breaths.

“Yes, it’s becoming a beautiful place,” I said, attempting to smile.

“Thank you,” he said. “We’re trying our best.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe here, far away from everything that’s going on.”

“Yes, we’re definitely safe here.”

The Reeses were older than I would have liked, but they seemed to be doing everything so well.

“And Mrs Reese?” I asked.

“She’s gone to get her.”

I sipped my coffee carefully and looked out of the window, framed with pretty rose-patterned curtains. The bright blue sky shone over the gardens.

“It’s so lovely out there!” I commented, and this time I meant it.

And then I heard footsteps on the stairs. First, clunky steps; and then the softest, lightest steps. The door opened.

“Here she is!” said Mrs Reese.

And there she was.

“Hello!” I said.

The child came towards me. She was dressed in an exquisite pink organza dress, with her black hair reaching her shoulders. Her eyes were lowered, and she would not look at me. I could not deny that it was like seeing myself several decades earlier. She curtsied.

“There’s no need for...” I began to say but stopped, remembering that Mr and Mrs Reese were doing what they thought to be best.

I covered my scars with my arm, pretending I was flicking back my hair. Then I bent down and tried to kiss the child’s cheek, but she retreated. And when I gave her the parcel, it was far too big for her little hands and she handed it back.

“Thank you,” I said and put it back on the table.

She tried to smile but could not quite manage it.

“And how old are you?” I asked.

I was not sure about her age. Was she four or already five? I seemed to have forgotten her birthday.

“Four and a half,” she said quietly, looking at the floor.

I had not seen her for such a long time. Lately, because of my recovery, but before that, there had been manoeuvres, travel missions, commitments, relationships. So much had gone on in my life.

“And how is she developing?” I said, looking up at the Reeses.

“Oh, she’s very bright and alert,” they said. “She knows her colours, numbers and many letters, and...”

“And... and can she make up stories... full stories?”

“Almost there...”

I took a deep breath.

“So how long has it been since I last visited?”

Mr Reese looked at his wife and then at me. Mrs Reese looked at me, then at her husband.

“Possibly... let me guess a year,” he said.

“I think it’s more like a year and a half,” she added.

I smiled at the child, still covering my scars. She tried to smile back, but her lips trembled.

“That long!” I exclaimed. “That’s probably why she can’t remember me.”

“But we do show her your picture every night at bedtime,” said Mr Reese.

His wife extended her index finger in the air and explained.

“And we point at your face in the picture and say to her: *That’s your mummy!*”

Chapter 15

I returned to the Paranyrn the next day and met Mr Taras in the corridor by chance.

“I was going to take this to your office!” I said brusquely, and handed him a small padded envelope.

He took it from me and put it in his pocket without looking up.

“You need to open it, Mr Taras.”

“I’ll do that later,” he replied.

“Please, do it now. I want you to see it, and that concludes the manoeuvre.”

He always said he needed evidence of everything we did, like a little token of the tasks we had accomplished.

“Yes, I heard it was successful,” he replied.

He took out the envelope from his pocket, saw what it contained, and then put it back into the envelope.

“A nice, gleaming white cap,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied, looking at my hands.

“Thank you, Iona, for another job well done,” he said.

I would have liked more concern, more excitement, more appreciation. But he limited his response to touching his brown hat with his hand in salutation. It was all very casual; when it was down to serious business, Mr Taras liked it simple and to the point.

“But...” I began to say, remembering the café, the river, the garnet, the aniseed liqueur.

“There are no buts in this business, Iona,” he replied. “You were asked to do a job, and you did it to the best of your ability.”

We were still in the corridor. He was going one way and I another. I could not help reacting.

“I’ve damaged my life enough as it is!” I said, not immediately realising I had spoken.

Mr Taras shook his head as if not believing I had said that.

“Let’s not get personal. That’s the one thing we must never do at the Agency.”

I was still uneasy about the latest disposal. So many doubts had unexpectedly appeared in my mind. I resorted to my usual threat, knowing it was an impossibility.

“Perhaps it’s best that I leave!”

He sighed and rolled his eyes.

“You cannot leave, Iona.”

“I know too much?”

He opened a door in the corridor, and we went into a dark storage room. It was an empty office used for stacking boxes and filing cabinets.

“It has more to do with you knowing about certain things. Not quantity, but quality,” he said, shutting the door behind him and switching on a neon light that continuously buzzed.

“Quality? As if all those events had any quality to them!”

“Please, Iona...” he whispered.

“The nurse was a young woman,” I said. “She seemed so full of life and had so many dreams. Perhaps we were wrong in our assessment...”

“You’ve never given too much thought about anyone you had to dispose of. What’s come over you this time?”

In my sudden distressed state, my attention was drawn to the many boxes around us in that storage room. Identified alphabetically, stacks and stacks of information were piled against the walls.

“Why... why is all this not digitised?” I asked.

I had to talk about something else, instead of the terrible events we were discussing. It happened to me regularly, almost as a lifesaver: if I needed information, worrying things remained in the background and I could forget about them for a little while. Nothing was more important than the answer to a question.

“I suppose we need to keep certain things safe. A hard copy is sometimes the soundest way,” he answered obligingly. “This room is the only place where the originals are housed, though we have copies in another room and in a separate building. Perhaps even in another city or country, I cannot tell you for sure as it isn’t my remit. Otherwise, when information is up in the ether, it might all end up in someone’s hands. Sometimes what we did in the old days was best.”

“But surely our private networks can remain totally out of bounds. The other day, Lundy was telling me about...”

I stopped talking. I needed to go back to our discussion; my anxiety had been briefly appeased but was now back in full flow.

“Mr Taras, you’ve used me once again to take people to...”

He laughed.

“The place of their doom, Iona?”

“Perhaps the nurse was innocent,” I retorted.

“Ah, Iona. You need to watch your language. Innocent? We’re all guilty of something.”

I opened the door and was now out in the corridor yet kept my voice down.

“Murder, nothing but murder!” I said.

“Language, Iona, language! We call that sort of thing *disposal!*”

He shook his head.

“You’ve quite a few of those cases under your belt,” he added, “so no need to lament anything.”

I became even more agitated.

“I’m caught up in a loop, Mr Taras. Circling around the same subject, unable to move beyond this sequence of events. Always the same, again and again and again!”

Tears began to flow down my cheeks. They gathered on my scars and created a little puddle around my lips.

“There, there, there,” Mr Taras said.

He took out a handkerchief from his inside pocket and cleared the tears.

“It’s a spotless hanky. Immaculate, also. Almost sterile, you could say!”

I wiped my tears.

“And now, Iona, it’s finally time for you to go to the seaside.”

I was still shaking and weeping.

“The seaside!” I said, as if there was a faint light at the end of the tunnel.

“No more interruptions and no further stops along the way, but now full steam ahead...” he announced.

“I understand,” I said, trying to cut short a new list of endless descriptions.

“It’ll be a long and intense journey. And I’m not referring to getting there and back, but more about what you’ll have to do once you’re in the place itself.”

I took a deep breath.

“Is it... is it far away?”

“Yes, very far away.”

“You mean another, unknown world?”

I also liked playing with words sometimes.

“Yes, Iona, you’re going to the wilderness,” he said and laughed wholeheartedly. “Or almost!”

“The wilderness? Killer instincts required then?”

He pushed his head back and did not reply to my question.

“You’ll get a file with all the details very shortly: the place, the dates, and the tasks. You’ll be dealing with a curious case...”

I wiped a few more tears with the handkerchief and took several deep breaths.

“The word *curious* is non-descript, Mr Taras.”

“Then it’ll be a fascinating case, I’m sure.”

“It might yet be another of those ludicrous and incongruous cases which we’ve been getting recently. Probably because that’s the state of the world now!”

Mr Taras was not interested in the world nor in the state it was in.

“It’ll be a great experience, Iona,” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

“After all I’ve gone through, I’m not so sure I want to...” I said, and I had a brief dizzy spell.

“Your life is the Agency, isn’t it, Iona? You belong here. I could understand it if you had a personal life. But you don’t. You simply don’t, do you? Do you?”

“No, I definitely don’t,” I said, remembering that a part of my life was hidden away somewhere in the South.

“None of us at the Agency do. No personal lives fully allowed because our dedication is total and our commitment is nothing if not passionate.”

“As in the manual...” I recapped; yes, the Agency was the only true passion allowed us.

What I said prompted him to quote from its pages. He knew all those clauses by heart.

“Righting wrongs, reversing damage, rectifying errors, compensating for damages, correcting inaccuracies, repairing the harm done...”

And as he quoted all these equivocal words that could be applied to any situation, my dizziness intensified. I could not stop thinking about what had happened down South. I wondered whether the parcel left on the kitchen table had been opened, whatever was in it. I had left the stone house sooner than expected; no, I could not bear remaining there as a total stranger. I had phoned Joe, and he collected me with the car and brought me home. I suppose I felt bad about what the child’s future would be because of... of me and my needs.

“Here...” I said.

I gave Mr Taras his handkerchief and he put it back in his pocket; it now rested alongside the nurse’s white cap.

“No doubts, no hesitations, no dithering...” he suggested.

“I get it,” I said, wishing he had not put away the handkerchief because I felt another rush of tears.

“No delaying, no postponing...”

“Yes, I get all of that.”

“And most important of all, no stalling!” he said, touching his hat in salutation.

My tears reached my eyelids and thankfully stayed there.

“I said I understood, Mr Taras, no need to go on and on and...”

He seemed to remember something; most probably he wanted the encounter to end on a light note.

“It has been brought to my attention that you don’t like the plastic chairs in the Bond Room...”

“No, I don’t, to be perfectly sincere. I think those chairs are an eyesore. I’d prefer more comfortable ones, with flowery cushions on the seat and the back, with padded armrests...”

I reminisced about the house in the hands of the Reeses. Mr Taras cleared his throat.

“May I point out that those plastic chairs are temporary items, until the proper ones arrive. The new chairs are on their way, an ideal match for that imposing table. And I managed to get them at a bargain price, you wouldn’t believe it. I only paid...”

But it was not the time to talk about chairs, and much less about bargains. He always enjoyed engaging in small talk, but I wanted to know more about what was next.

“I’ve been wondering whether this new manoeuvre with an unknown artist couldn’t have been done more expeditiously?”

“Such as?”

“By any range of communication, phone, email, virtual encounter...”

“That’s far too sophisticated for the person we’re dealing with,” he said.

“Well then, by older methods like letter or even telegram?”

“You see, Iona, we’re talking about someone who lives away from any advancements. He’s been disconnected for decades. Forget technology, in other words.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to work with no technology!”

He looked up to the ceiling as if putting an end to the discussion on the subject.

“You’ll find all the details in the background documentation that Tony has prepared for you.”

The mention of Tony exasperated me even further.

"It must be a very thin file..." I said.

Mr Taras opened his eyes widely as if remembering something.

"And don't forget to take Rudge. You may need him, Iona."

"I don't need anyone!"

"And bear in mind the Trustees. They're in control of what goes on and they're particularly interested in this case."

"Will I have to deal with them as well?"

"Not for now, Iona, not for now."

He lowered his gaze.

"But..."

"You know," he said interrupting me, "sometimes there's nothing more thrilling than not knowing what's going to happen next."

His feeble attempts at cheering me up upset me even more. Tears now rushed from my eyes once again, but I did not want to ask him for his handkerchief back.

"Any news about the injured trooper?" I remembered.

Thinking kindly of someone else instead of obsessing with yourself helps to see things in perspective; it must have been something that Mrs Reese once said to me.

"He's on the mend. At least he did not give anything away or... or so we think."

"Goodbye, Mr Taras,"

And as I walked towards the end of the corridor, my cellphone pinged. It was an image of a painting. In the small screen, there stood a dark, hazy picture. I was confused as to what it represented, if anything, but it felt vaguely familiar, yet another depiction of a world I was acquainted with. I looked back, and Mr Taras lifted his cellphone in the air.

“I’ve just sent you an image of the only work of the artist we’ve seen so far,” he said, raising his voice in the distance. “Do you think it’s worth the effort?”

It was difficult to appreciate what was on the screen, yet the picture made me uneasy. I was baffled or, worse, disturbed by the subdued colours of human silhouettes that seemed to converse with each other yet looked helplessly at the viewer.

“I’d like to find out what those portrayed figures are implying,” I replied, but I knew that Mr Taras could not hear me from where he was.

PART TWO

THE SEASIDE

Chapter 16

The place I was looking for was nowhere to be found. There were no signposts or markings along the road. I saw nothing remotely resembling a striking property surrounded by extensive and lush gardens on four sides, as it had been described to me, but only endless sections of cultivated land with a crop variety I could not readily identify; it was green, fleecy, wilted. Nor did anything of interest show up in the folds of my map, such as landmarks of historical interest or scenic sights, just a long narrow road in dull red. All that while, the navigator proved useless; it produced no signal, however much I shook it in the air. It was getting far too hot under the midday sun, but I still held on to my headscarf. Barefaced, I would have frightened the locals, if there were any.

“The sea!” I said in a loud voice because I could pick up a mild briny scent from where I was, though there was no vision of blue or any steady cadence of waves just yet.

I should have taken a taxi to my destination from the nearby village, if you could call it a village because no activity seemed to be going on in its main square. In front of me a taxi rank, or what I took to be such a thing since there was only one taxi (a model not in production for decades, with homemade repairs to bodywork and wheels). I thought it best to nod in the negative to anything the driver suggested in his language, whatever it may have been. I struggled to convey to him that I wanted to find the place myself. I had been told the house was close to the village, and so I pointed strongly at my chest.

“Me... only me...”

The taxi driver did not seem to understand. We both tried to communicate with various convoluted gestures of arms from him and much polite smiling on my part, for neither knew each other's language. I would have wanted to use the new transadaptor, but I had been told to activate it solely for a worthwhile purpose and not for everyday exchanges.

"Use it only with the artist, Iona," Lundy had said when showing me how the device worked.

"You mean, if the artist exists?"

She blushed.

"Well, yes, if he exists."

"And what if I need it to communicate with others?"

"You see, Iona, I've programmed the transadaptor so it can recognise your voice and one other, that's all."

"Only two voices?"

"Well you know how these gadgets are. They need to be kept on a short leash, otherwise they can go on overdrive when they get too much information. It's still something I need to work on."

"Whatever you say, Lundy."

I was beginning to think that this new manoeuvre by the sea would be more a journey into the unknown for the simple reason that I could not even begin to anticipate what I might come across. It would be a first, because in previous manoeuvres I knew only too well what had to be done, to whom and by when. I had refused to bring Rudge with me; yes, he was loyal but I was always a little uneasy about him; he had witnessed

my actions with the nurse along the river, and whilst I had disposed of her with some well-rehearsed fancy footwork, Rudge looked somewhat shocked at the action taking place as though he was drowning himself; he had much to learn in our business, though it had been brought to my attention that he was highly trained and had experience “in battle”, as Mr Taras put it. Yes, travelling with Rudge looking over my shoulder would have disturbed my exploration. The plan was to develop a relationship with the artist (if he existed, was the proviso that I kept saying to myself) without external interference so that, with some luck, he would open up to me and, to put it simply, allow me to enter into his world. It was difficult enough being a dispassionate observer, but with Rudge beside me, the results would be the observations of an external viewer, me, being observed by an outsider, Rudge, at the same time as I was checking him over to make sure he was doing everything right; in other words, my inferences would have been several times removed. Yes, I was as self-conscious as all that when it came to my work.

I had been warned to avoid communicating with the locals at any cost. With my blatant refusal of the taxi-driver's offers of help, or what I took to be help, he eventually dismissed me with a quick wave of the hand, almost a slap in the air. I looked around the village square and realised that I was surrounded by several people who had not been there earlier. In no time, two or three had become a dozen or so –the taxi driver, several bystanders who had seen me arrive in the local bus minutes earlier, and some more elderly locals sitting lightly on the benches, as well as very young children playing in the street with a deflated ball. After my refusal to accept the taxi, they turned their backs, maybe signifying that they wanted nothing to do with me, a woman who seemed entirely out of place there. I looked around and could not see any shop signs; in fact,

the shops seemed closed, with their heavy metal shutters down. Apart from the few inhabitants, there was no sign of life. I just wanted to get away quickly, and so I walked away from the square, dragging, more than lifting, my suitcase without once looking back.

“Goodbye,” I said without waving.

So tiny was the village that in no time I was out in the open countryside. I followed the main road until it branched into several lesser lanes, knowing I had to head North. The house was very close by, just North of the village, so it said in one of the reports supposedly prepared by Tony; this was yet one more specialism he was trying out his hand with, probably in pursuit of ingratiating himself further at the Agency. After my disastrous experience in a pink hotel, I was convinced that I had lost my place in the hierarchy forever.

“Take the next left,” the navigator suddenly said, now fully functioning.

I put away the map and took the narrowest lane on the left, the northernmost of the three. No, there was no one to be seen along the route, not a single vehicle on the road and no one sowing or ploughing. Neither did I see birds or insects or hear buzzing or chirping, but it was to be expected in that part of the world. The only sound was a rhythmic whirring in the background, my strained breathing. My suitcase was getting heavier by the minute –this time, it did not have a single object, say, a pea, but as well as a few clothes it was packed with devices to collect images and sounds. I wanted to record the artist’s voice and film him in action in front of a canvas; despite Mr Taras’ protestations, I had brought along my equipment in full.

“If the artist exists...” I said once more.

It could have been my mind playing tricks after the long journey, with the heat scorching the land and the intense humidity rising from a stretch of sea in close proximity, but I was feeling increasingly apprehensive, on the verge of sinking into one of my dizzy spells.

“And what if I faint with no one around?” I said, putting the suitcase down and feeling my pulse.

I expected my heart to be jittery, but it felt as relaxed as if I had just woken up. There was something comforting in the place, not from the locals, who had unexpectedly unsettled me, but from the location under the brightest afternoon sun. What was possibly reassuring me, as well as guiding me, was the scent of the sea, something else I had read about the place in one of Tony’s reports. The house appeared, it said, to be close to a bay with abundant seaweed in waters of an intense blue; what I now heard in the distance was a soft yet pounding sound as the waves repeatedly struck against surrounding rocks. I walked along that long dusty lane for a while, following my nose and ears in anticipation of a highly fragranced, roaring sea. I had sensed the mild saline scent when getting off the bus, but now it was an all-powerful fragrance. Dragging my suitcase and occasionally lifting it awkwardly, I carried on under a blue sky without a single cloud, the heat intermittently appeased by the breeze travelling from sea to land. For a change, I thought of nothing whatsoever: no blackholing, no anticipation or regrets, no memories of the Agency.

“Nothing,” I said.

I said it several times along the route. Nothing, nothing, nothing. And I stopped saying it when I arrived where I was meant to arrive. The navigator was silent once again, but I took it to be my destination because the lane I was following came to an end. It had to be the place. I mean, what else could that outlandish dwelling be? I

would not call it striking, as Tony had described it in his report without seeing it, but it was certainly unusual. The building stood on the shores of a promontory facing a small section of sea with the shiniest waters in indigo specked with creamy foam, and with a pebble path leading to it from a small wood of undernourished pine trees. In the process of getting there, my suitcase had suffered heavy losses, with several tiny pebbles now incrusting into the leather, fashioning a series of clovers.

“For good luck!” I said in a loud voice.

No, the place had no name: not villa something or estate something or someone’s name something. No number, no identification, nothing that would give away who lived there. I stopped in front of a tall iron gate that was not much of a barrier. A high wall circumscribed a garden with mostly eucalyptus, a few lofty palms, pine trees, a large lawn. From this vantage point you could see the sea, bluer than I had ever known it, louder too. And as I turned a corner further into the garden, the large white stone house appeared –almost in ruins yet with the conceit of a mausoleum– seemingly inviting me to enter. It had to be an invitation, for the entrance door was half open, as were many of the windows; only the dormer windows at the top of the building were firmly shut, with all blinds drawn.

Standing in front of the house, I took a deep breath to dispel my fears and tried to view it all in perspective: a building, a large garden, a woman searching for something she might or might not find, and an artist that might or might not exist. It was then that I sank into yet another black hole, this time not inside my mind but outside of who I was. I could feel it and almost breathe it. A black hole gradually swallowing me. I knew what it was.

“There are options: keep the darkness at bay, dispel it, or... or you could even use it for your purposes...”

There was something appealing to be found in sinking further into such unfamiliar territory. Yes, I had to focus on why I was there, however dark my mission: that the almost derelict house appeared architecturally interesting, even picturesque, was unimportant; that I would finally meet the person I needed to meet if he were to be alive, did not seem to overwhelm me; that this was a journey into the unknown in every sense did not matter anymore, given my recent game-changer in Barcelona. No, I was not interested in a house, nor in a man who supposedly lived behind its walls and privately practised his art, nor in the tortuous journey that had taken me there. The unearthing of unchanneled and as yet unchallenged Art was ultimately what I pursued. Yes, the anticipation of Art was the black hole engulfing me; maybe it was not so black after all. I was sure that it would confront me but never destroy me.

“I won’t let anything stand in the way of Art.”

Chapter 17

There in front of me were overwhelming proofs of human presence. A fresh cigarette stub on the mat at the entrance of the house, was one. The second was a recently cut yellow rose carefully placed at the entrance. And number three, dusty traces of footsteps crossed the pavement of irregular slabs on one side of the garden, ending where I stood. And then I thought I saw the silhouette of a man framed in one of the windows of the ground floor. I picked up the rose expecting a burst of scent but there was none.

In better days, the house could have been a building that looked, if not majestic, then at least arresting. But the heat and humidity of the location would be difficult to endure. The decay showed in the mostly dilapidated walls of the house and, as I gently rubbed a section, small brick and mortar fragments disintegrated into my hand. Some of the windows had no panes, whilst many of the roof tiles were missing. Endless stretches of now dead ivy had taken over the building and its remaining branches conveniently concealed most of the damage inflicted on the brickwork. It was as though destruction had been allowed to happen, even encouraged –maybe time alone was not responsible for the distressed look of the building. I had the wild idea that it was the aim of the artist I was about to meet: to obliterate the surrounds for purely artistic purposes.

“The observer isn’t simply observing but judging and imposing their views,” I said, reprimanding myself.

The brass doorknob in the shape of a woman's hand hung slack like a piece of ripe fruit in the centre of the entrance door. Although the door was half-open, it was only appropriate to knock. I knocked and knocked; the woman's hand became warm with the heat from my hand, but I did not let go. I lost count of the knocks. Each of those clamorous beats must have resonated along the gardens and the house, echoing in the road and between the neighbouring pines, eucalyptus, and palm trees. I wondered whether they could hear my urgent knocking in the nearby village, with the unfriendly residents realising that I had finally reached my destination without their assistance.

And then it started. After my mostly hushed itinerary from the village to the house, with no sounds from Nature or vehicles or humans, I heard it in all its splendour. In yet another brief report by Tony, I had been warned that cicadas existed in these remote regions, more resilient as they were than other species; they were now appearing year after year, their dormant existence no more. I laughed when I remembered the warning: the sound of the cicadas will be so fierce that you will think you have lost your mind. Like an explosion, not outside but within, was how close the buzzing felt. There had to be hundreds, if not thousands, of those creatures on the trees around me. I left my suitcase on the ground and climbed onto a collapsed section of the adjacent wall. From that vantage point, I could see the eucalyptus trees, old and mangled olive trees, apple trees heavy with emerging fruit. Every tree was heaving with cicadas. It caught you unawares, blurring the nearby waves.

“Cicadas...”

I pushed the entrance door softly and there, just like that, was the man who had to be the artist. He was alive, he existed; the artist whom nobody knew about and

whose art could not be seen anywhere nor admired, if in any way it was worthy of admiration. And I, Iona, had found him. He looked calm, even welcoming. I then tightened my headscarf around my face and entered the house.

Chapter 18

I walked into a hall with heavy drapes around the crumbling windowpanes. Letting go of the suitcase, I held out a trembling hand.

“Hello,” I said.

The artist came over to where I was. As he approached me, he looked to one side and not at me; a headscarf could only be concealing something. He took my hand and pressed it gently but did not let go. In every way, he was more than I had anticipated. Older, more tired, more distrustful. But at the same time more unexciting; in other words, I was underwhelmed by his presence. No, his unimposing physicality and the dullness of his expression did not remotely match a supposedly artistic temperament.

“Hello!” I said again.

His eyes were hidden by heavy eyelids, but I could still see that he avoided my face. And there we were, holding hands for what seemed like an eternity.

“Welcome, please?” he finally muttered in an almost hoarse voice, and let go of my hand.

I was interested in how he spoke. Not a statement but a question. An unusual construction as he was not making a request; a heavy accent, viscous and unmusical, with unfamiliar consonants and perfectly rounded vowels. No, nothing like my language, full of difficult to identify diphthongs and consonants piling together without intermission. His question was all the more stilted, but not so much because of his intonation; it felt like prepared speech, and I was sure that he would have provided the same reply whatever my initial comment had been.

“I am Hassett,” he said, speaking very slowly and submitting me to some serious scrutiny for possibly artistic purposes. “I leave rose for you.”

He stared at my hands; the right was once again holding onto my suitcase, and my left was not letting go of the rose.

“There must be a rosebush close by or even a rose garden,” I stated as an icebreaker.

All he did was turn his head towards the still open entrance door.

“I’m surprised that...” I continued.

“Yes?” he said, still not looking at me.

“That you speak my language.”

“Very bad,” he replied.

“And you said that your name is Mr...” I prompted him.

“Hassett.”

“Mr Hassett.”

“No, Hassett.”

After all the searching that Mr Taras had mentioned, in front of me was supposedly the artist. The Artist. Yes, he was real. I could touch him, breathe in the air he expelled, and hear his jagged voice as loudly as I heard the cicadas singing in the garden. I now knew his name was Hassett, but what sort of name was that? What sort of artist was he? What sort of place was this? Did he practise his art in that wreck of a house? Was art what he ultimately did?

“And my name is Iona,” I said to him.

The space around me was filled with canvases, some hanging from the walls and others propped along the corridor, all of them covered with drapes.

“Your works?”

I wondered whether the canvases were covered for protection or for avoidance. I speculated: once the work was finished, he did not wish to look at it anymore.

“Yours?” I asked again, and again I got no reply.

With a sharp movement of his head, he invited me to follow him into a large sitting room, as tattered as the outside of the house. He pointed to a small sofa at the end of the room. I was sure it would disintegrate if I dared sit on it, its one-time flowers now only colourless outlines. I preferred to stand, and so did he. Above the sofa, there was a large mirror, and we both looked at our reflection. I turned my head to show only my good side, and he raised his head, making himself taller; I suspected that he was about to give me a set of instructions.

“No equipment...” he said, looking around the room, never at me.

“You mean...”

And he specified, now finally opening his almost hooded eyes.

“No camera, computer, recording... what do you call?”

“Devices?”

“Yes, devices. No phone.”

There was no singsong feel in his list. His was a deadpan delivery.

“You mean...”

“No devices!”

I was almost unable to speak. Without my equipment, the whole manoeuvre could not take place. I decided to negotiate, one piece of equipment after another.

“But... I would need to use my cellphone,” I complained, “to communicate with my office regularly. As to my other specialist equipment, I must record you when at work, both your voice and the images of your surrounds...”

“I keep phone, and return when you finish,” he said.

Mr Taras had warned me about this, but I could not be expected to abide by such impositions.

“So,” I asked, “what *am* I allowed to do in this place?” I asked.

He pointed at a large pine desk beside a large window overlooking the garden. On it were reams of paper and a number of freshly sharpened pencils.

“Pen and paper!” I shouted.

“Yes!”

“But no one works with pen and paper... unless you’re an artist.”

He paid no attention to my loud complaint; I was sure this could be negotiated later.

“You have something for... for translation?” he asked.

I took the gadget out of my pocket.

“The transadaptor,” I announced.

Lundy’s invention. A small, circular, metallic sphere. With two switches on the upper side and a little stand on the lower.

“Let’s test it,” I said.

As Lundy had mentioned, it was programmed for two voices only. It knew mine, and now it would hear Hasset’s voice.

“Please speak in your language, pressing this button. Say something about... about art...”

He took the gadget from my hand and smiled.

“El arte es inspiración, y si el artista hace arte es porque no sabe hacerlo de otra manera,” he said in his language, talking into the sphere of the transadaptor.

He was reciting more than improvising; perhaps another prepared speech. The transadaptor did what it was meant to do.

“Art is inspiration. And if the artist does art, it is because they do not know how to do it any other way,” said a metallic voice inside the device.

The voice was neutral, non-accented, sharp and even harsh, unidentifiable. Almost otherworldly. And while the words were clear and the message intelligible, the message sounded stilted and unfeeling, thoroughly uncolloquial. I would need to improve on that little speech by Hassett if I wanted to use his words for a purpose. I looked at the desk with the sheets of paper and the freshly sharpened pencils.

“So, what you’re saying is that... that I cannot use a single device, and therefore I’ll have to write on paper what I want to describe or record or reflect upon, and maybe even work on the text and edit it and embellish it and come up with something worthwhile...”

I said all that unhurriedly and the transadaptor translated accordingly.

“All of that with a pencil?” I added, still not quite believing that I would have to rely on that most ancient of implements.

“Y antes de ver mis obras, es preferible que yo esté presente...” Hassett added.

The transadaptor obliged.

“And before viewing my works, it is preferable that I am present...”

I shuddered at the thinly veiled prohibition, and then paraphrased.

“You mean that I cannot see any of your works if you’re not here?”

And he added another condition.

“Y ninguno de mis cuadros ha de salir de esta casa...”

“And none of my paintings must leave this house...” the transadaptor explained.

“But...” I protested, raising my voice.

“Y por si no está claro, no me interesan ni las exposiciones, ni las subastas, ni la fama ni el éxito. Ni siquiera el mundo fuera de esta casa...”

“And if it is not clear, I’m not interested in exhibitions, auctions, fame or success...” said the transadaptor. “Not even the world outside this house...”

“You mean...” I began to ask, but he barged in.

“How do you say in your language?” he asked. “Take or not take?”

“Take it or leave it?” I suggested.

“Yes!”

“And so how the hell will I depict what I see?”

I was annoyed and he looked lost.

“De-pict?” he asked.

“Describe, portray, signify, represent...” I suggested, remembering Mr Taras.

Hassett stopped me in mid-flow, shaking his hand. He tried to smile briefly, almost apologetically. He had somehow understood.

“Con tus propias palabras,” he spoke into the transadaptor.

“With your own words,” said the metallic voice.

“In your own words,” I stated, proposing a more appealing translation.

Chapter 19

Hassett asked me to open my suitcase, not with a smile but with a firm juddering of his hands in every direction to highlight either urgency or authority or both. Inside was all my highly professional equipment, I could not do without a single one of them. Two recording machines, two video cameras, two cellphones; in other words, two of everything in case one went wrong. Except for the deadly pea, when there was only one of its kind, technology in twos had always been the usual with me; sometimes in threes or fours, cautious as I was. The artist quickly removed the gadgets from the suitcase, leaving behind only a few items of clothing. I suppose I could have hidden one of the recording gadgets in my pocket and in retrospect I should have done so; but I needed to agree to his terms, that much had been impressed upon me by Mr Taras. Hassett then took all devices away without uttering a sound, while I was left to wait in that large room on the ground floor of the house. He would most probably lock the gadgets away, but I was sure I would find them sooner or later, wherever he had hidden them, however unfamiliar the setting. At the Agency I was known for my capacity to easily locate both the accidentally mislaid and the purposefully lost; I am not talking about using knives, credit cards or shoelaces but the hard stuff, well-practised as I was in making a lockpick or a tension wrench out of almost anything with my dainty fingers, mercifully not one bit damaged in the Barcelona event. But then I thought that if I did eventually find and recover my devices, the artist might refuse to collaborate. Our agreement was, I reminded myself, solely about pen and paper.

“¡No!” he uttered harshly when he returned, to a question I had not asked.

There was a determined, accusatory cadence in his tone of voice. I extended my arm with the transadaptor in my hand and could not conceal a half smile.

“No!” the device translated in an equally demanding tone into my language.

He walked towards the desk and took a ream of sheets and a couple of pencils.

“We go room,” he said, as he handed me my new set of writing implements.

He took hold of my now featherweight suitcase and led me up the staircase. A few steps were missing, and the ones still there creaked noisily under our feet. But Hassett held his head up high –I had expected reluctance on his part, and yet he showed an almost joyful willingness. The landing was long and dark, with many doors. He tried to open each of the doors to show me that they were locked. We finally stopped in front of one of them; it was a bright yellow door, the same tone as the rose I was still holding in my hand.

“My favourite colour,” I said, as he unlocked the door.

He placed my suitcase inside the room and handed me the key.

“Thank you.”

He left in a hurry. I had no time to ask about the particulars of the room, the intricacies of the house or the way I was to conduct my research. How and where would our discussions take place, was even more important. He did not provide basic household information like where the bathroom was or at what time he or someone else served breakfast or lunch; I wondered whether I would have to cook for myself, which would have been a first. Despite the house being almost derelict, the room was clean and the bed seemed comfortable, freshly made with fine cotton sheets under a generous cover as yellow as the door and the rose.

“And what now?”

With no technology, I was lost; I felt deprived of speech and hearing. I looked around me: there was a large window from which to gaze out into the gardens and a small table where I placed the sheets of paper and the two pencils. And as I turned towards the wall behind me, I saw a large canvas, leaning on the wall and covered with a fine but opaque tulle.

“This is my room, and I shall do whatever I wish here.”

I pulled a corner of the cover carefully until it dropped to the floor. And there in front of me was the painting which Mr Taras had relayed to my mobile. I recognised it immediately, no longer a minute and faded copy on a cellphone screen but a real and substantial scene that could well be taking place close to the house. As in a theatrical setting, those depicted humans against a background of a dusky countryside landscape with fields of corn swaying in the wind appeared suddenly in front of my eyes with such power that they seemed to fill the room.

I sat down and got hold of a pencil, an object I had not been familiar with for a very long time. It felt strange to the touch, so I was not immediately sure of what I had to do with it. I looked at it suspiciously as my fingers twitched and let go. After a few seconds, I picked it up again, this time holding on to it tightly.

“What I could do is...”

Yes, I thought of doing a quick sketch of the image, which would defy the artist and the warnings by Mr Taras. And about to start with an outline, I realised that a simple sketch could not do any kind of justice to the artwork I had in front of me. I would not do a bad job, but it occurred to me that words would, in a strange way, depict the image so much more accurately. Yes, a summary in writing, hopefully intense and

evocative, might just be a match. They would be my own words and impressions of what I saw, my own critique. The impossibility of taking a photograph or reel added to the spectacle of the whole operation, which was in keeping with the exhibition I had in mind; if we could not exhibit any of Hassett's works, then it would have to be presented as an art exhibition without art. What could be more stagey and dramatic than that? I laughed at the idea, aware that words instead of artworks would be the only way to carry out the project. And I began to write about that most heartless of paintings.

“Brush strokes are more the result of wiping the brush against the canvas than applying paint, possibly done to clean or prepare the brush for the next stage of the task at hand, maybe all for effect. Hence, the canvas seems to have been used more as a scrubbing cloth than a surface to depict what the artist had in front of him or in his mind; the latter seems the more likely, since the artist could not have painted both the inhabitants and the landscape from nature itself –such utter wretchedness without a hint of joy would be too much to bear in the flesh– but from the images only he could see. What is entirely natural, it seems, are the pigments: mineral dyes, earth, clay, dung, walnut. The paint is not smooth but contains foreign elements, tiny speckles of what was once a living plant or organic fluid or grated mineral. I cannot help recalling the image I had originally seen on my cellphone screen; the canvas in front of me is not only a blown-up, clearer, more detailed and impactful version of that tiny first picture, as to be expected, but despite its large size it strangely feels so much more intimate than its minor and mediated representation. In other words, the larger the picture the more private and secretive it becomes; size does not make art, at least this particular artwork, more universal. If anything, the inconclusive and the unresolved are the more obvious in the full-size painting. The characters, and there are many of them,

fill most of the canvas, and yet ploughed lands as background can still be admired in the many gaps between heads. All figures can be clearly placed into one of three groups: those who seem likely to be pursuing some major enterprise like revenge or forgiveness or even love, and you can presume this from their eager look towards others; those predisposed to disquiet, with shrugged shoulders or weeping eyes; and finally those about to die, and you can witness their predicament in their closed eyes and their pallor, their hands crossed over their chests. Despite their varying urges, they seemed to converse with one another open mouthed: their vacant grimaces as if asking, their raised eyebrows as if answering. And yet, as I understood the first time I saw the painting in its tiniest version on my cellphone screen, they seem to be directing gaze or hands towards their presumed companions on the other side of the canvas. Yes, me. They are seeking my assistance, in other words. What can the viewer do but talk to them silently, trying to decipher what they so desperately want to say and what they ultimately need? As in every relationship, you will trade this or that for that or this, so I wonder what those characters will give me in exchange; most likely a piece of advice or a warning, I hope it is not their indifference; maybe only their despair. As to the sky in the painting, it appears in bright layers of green, blue and pink yet does not provide answers; if anything, it asks more questions than are necessary in doing its job by affording a backdrop to conceal the hemp of the canvas. It is of no consequence then, the sky; furthermore, it is not helping the plight of the cast of characters because it adds darkness –not that it is a sky at dusk, but rather its darkness swells because of the surrounding nature (all those dark trees, I suppose). Oh, the many characters depicted, each one with their own private dilemma... their anxiety is at fever pitch. And yet there is hope, somewhat, for the landscape is filled with corn –this positively means that the seeds have taken, the crops have survived the harshest weather, there will be

nourishment for everyone. But such bountiful resolution to the story seems to make no difference to the characters themselves, likely survivors from indelible catastrophes and to whom the brightest news will make no difference. The aliveness, if there is any in that dreariest and unfeeling of compositions, comes solely from the wind: the corn dancing, a girl's brown hair lifted above her head, a man's overcoat floating on either side of him. The horizon is, yes, a black line running from left to right, but it has curves and twists, and in fuzzy stages moves upwards and downwards providing an outline to what at first glance appeared shapeless. On close inspection there are explanations to the plight, but only maybe. The silhouette of a house in the background, a fir tree without any sign of leaves, though an evergreen, a dark mound of what can only be manure in readiness to be worked into the earth. If you get closer, you might be able to smell the dung, lock arms with the man with the floating coat, comb the girl's hair, speak to those who seem to be wanting a conversation however tense, and call back the ones who probably wish to turn away and not be there a minute longer, looking as they are towards the house for a reason known only to them. No, this is not a public canvas as such, for it has no aim beyond what it utters –there is no further purpose, no meaning, no symbol, no metaphor, it is as dry as desert sand; and if the viewers pursue meaning, the artist seems to be saying, then they can provide it themselves. The painting appears to be no more than a reference point, a testimony of what happened far away on a remote day, under a dark noon sky, to an abandoned people and their paltry way of life. It could happen to anyone, that is what the painting suggests, if anything. Get closer still, touching the canvas almost with your nose, and you can see it all in the eyes of the, what, ten or fifteen figures there. In their pupils there is a part reproduction of the scene, like the scattered pieces of a puzzle. In this one's eyes the mound of manure; in that one's, the house; or a segment of sky, or a

tree, or their companions in oil. For they are stuck there, in time and place, and there is nothing they can do to get away from a scene that might look as yet unfinished. The spectator cannot even be a witness to the event because what happened in that place will not be judged or discussed further, and this is what the artist most undoubtedly wishes: it is nothing more than a piece of art, not a judgement made or a purpose to be pursuing. No, there is nothing anyone can do but wait. With any luck, those depicted characters will move on one day, though only if they wait long enough. Things do happen in due course, even in the static representation of a pitiless scene of some lost community where they all knew what was wrong but were unable to do a thing about it, expecting an outsider –me, the viewer, maybe?– to take the reins of the whole enterprise and sort things out.”

And then I thought there was something missing in the painting, but I could not define it or even name it.

Chapter 20

“Hello!” I shouted but got no response.

I seemed to be alone in the house. So far, I had learnt very little; Hassett had not confirmed who he was, truly and compellingly. He had just said his name, whatever that name was or meant, and then showed me the house but only in part, and had given me his strict conditions and demands. I genuinely thought I would be overwhelmed with the first painting I saw, the complete and blown-up version of a tiny image on my cellphone, but that had not been the case. As fascinating as it was if viewed as a local and dramatic scene, it lacked both artistic merit and the bravura I was expecting. Or let's put it another way: was I giving it its due conceptual depth or was its pictorial significance down to me? I had yet to be won over by him as an artist, which was what I pursued. With that darkest picture I had a few reservations, which turned into uncertainties as I reflected further. Almost without wanting to, I recalled works by others; it was not enough to talk of mimicking but solely of influence. I did not want to delve too much into which particular artists and which particular works until I had seen more of Hassett's paintings, and for the time being the feeling remained a vague misgiving. But there was something else amiss. Somehow, I could not imagine him depicting those saddest of figures and eeriest of landscapes during long days and longer nights, anything from weeks to months or even years; he did not appear as obsessive and driven as that particular painting seemed to demand of its creator. But then who was I to say what appearances ought to be, having been badly caught out a few times, and most recently as the result of an unexpected and poisonous kiss with my worst enemy. Could anyone guess from my looks that I used to paint viscera and cadavers? Perhaps with that newly distorted face of mine, such a guess

might not be too far-fetched. I concluded that what I had to do next was to find the place where it all happened. Yes, the artist's studio –most likely a huge space with stark and unembellished Northern light– in which this particular and darkest canvas had gestated to full term, born from nothing but an unlikely mind.

The corridor leading to that Northern section of the house looked fragile from where I was; even the next set of stairs were missing some treads and risers as well as sections of the handrail. No, I could not find Hassett anywhere. And I thought that if the artist was absent –he, the centre of attention and the reason for the whole project– there was no reason why I could not leave that ramshackle place myself, at least for a while. Revolving in my mind were endless thoughts of withdrawing, fleeing, resigning, though nothing more than my usual hesitations when starting on a fresh manoeuvre. But on this occasion, there were far too many challenges even for a seasoned maven like me, especially as I was unable to use any devices which would have made the whole project so much easier. Such were the characters: an artist who was making my task so very challenging, and me getting into such a state that even my fascination with art was being questioned.

“I dare not call it love just yet, just fascination,” I uttered.

But there could be more to the whole situation. Was I trying to discover who Hassett was and what he stood for, or was it that he, himself, wanted to find out more about me and my predicament? From the intense way he looked at me since my arrival –his eyes discreetly travelling from one facial feature to the next– I thought that he might be interested in depicting my distorted appearance on canvas. From now on I would turn my face sideways when speaking to him to show him only my good side, instead of the part of me forever wrecked. But as an artist, conceivably he would also perceive in me

what no one else could: those of my thoughts and desires that had been equally shattered.

Out in the garden, the setting seemed different from what I experienced when I first arrived. For one thing, the eucalyptus trees were shedding such copious streams of perfume that I began to breathe with difficulty; for another, the cicadas were even more relentless with their refrain and I thought, in my usual disparaging way, that deep-down they were nothing but sirens leading me to my utter destruction. However much drama I wanted to add to the scene, there seemed to be an element of authenticity, hardline and palpable, in those surrounds as if what I had lived until then was nothing but make-believe, with role-playing as a baseline; in that place by the sea I could oddly be myself, and something unknown was compelling me to see things for what they were. A shock to the system, I admit; the mind needed breaks from routine once in a while, and I had experienced very few of those. How different it all was from the urban locations where I typically carried out my work, under misting city lights and along dark alleyways, immersed as I always was in scenes of carnage and mayhem, an unwilling witness to the final facial expressions conveyed by those about to say goodbye to their sad existence –a smirk instead of a smile and a frown of profound sorrow instead of overwhelming surprise. I convinced myself that nothing like that could ever happen here, and I was sure that, in both the house and the gardens, I would be safe from adversaries, potential attacks and dangerous chemicals disfiguring my body. I rephrased: I was almost sure. And yet I had been told when I first embarked on this career –because it was a career after all, bloody and reckless but rewarding in so many different ways: you sometimes got your own back, you fulfilled someone else’s need for revenge or reparation, you did a competent job that was required if not for the whole of society then for a selected few– that cruelty can happen

at any time and in any setting; no, you cannot keep murderous tendencies pent up for too long.

“Hello!” I shouted again.

I wandered further along the garden; I was hoping to find the artist watering the trees or planting seedlings. Indeed, someone had to do it because the garden looked well looked-after, unlike the derelict house that nobody seemed to care about. Except for rain making me feel uneasy, I saw quirks of fate as plainly a coincidence, but as I walked along the gravel pathways, several things happened at the same time: the air around me glistening in the approaching dusk, the cicadas labouring away with their obsessive song, the rows of apple trees with their still unripe offerings rhythmically quivering, the wind blowing yellow rose petals over my face so forcefully that with luck they would cover my scars. Tears (of sorrow, of alarm, of foreboding, who knows?) streamed down my cheeks, both the good one and the badly damaged one. It must have been the result of my exultant expectations in a house where art had taken over; and it occurred to me, with some degree of hope, that art would reclaim me in the end.

Chapter 21

I could not see the artist anywhere. Again I felt alone in the house, a sole participant as if all of it had been created just for me: the lush scenery, the derelict building, a man who was more a mystery than an artist. And there I was, having admired one of his works, impressed yet with some serious doubts, even suspicions. Based on the artwork I had seen, I myself had created a painting in words, but I was not sure whether I was describing what I saw, plagiarising it, or crafting a different artwork.

“My own work in words...”

I was back in the house, but I could still hear the unrelenting song of the cicadas. And when they briefly stopped, instead of silence I heard something else.

“The sea...”

It sounded so close, yet I could not view it from where I was. I felt an unrestrained pleasure, not necessarily physical. It could have been the serenity that comes with being beside a body of water, away from the frantic events that I regularly experienced on land. The sound of breaking waves lasted far too little, the cicadas were back to their song.

“I’m going to forget about my manoeuvre for now. Or should I name it something else, for it’s so different from what I’ve done before. Not a scheme, not a plan, not a plot, not even a story; nothing of the sort, I’m sure. A calling, possibly, because I’m immersed in this setting not only as someone on a mission but more importantly as the artist I once wished to be. I will sink into this sofa and cover my head with those dusty velvet cushions until the singing of the cicadas comes to an end.”

Their singing had been so intense that, when it finally stopped, I could still hear it.

I must have fallen asleep; it had been far too long a day. I woke up energised with the thought of discovering other works by the artist. I had promised not to, or rather I had *bargained* I would not in his absence. But before more discoveries of the artist's work, I resolved that I had to write, or rewrite, his comment about Art; not that it said anything exciting or novel, and I would have to add to it a few words of my own. I was surprised by the fact that he was not as eloquent as I expected for someone who created artworks for himself alone and who rejected the outside world and all it stands for... exhibitions, catalogues, auctions, celebrity, fame, success. Yes, that person should really be expressing something either much darker or much brighter, but never commonplace.

"The usual judgments on your part, Iona. Things must always be how you want them to be, isn't that the case?"

I recalled the transadaptor had stated in translation what the artist had very plainly said: that artists make art because they do not know otherwise. I needed to rewrite his statement, or should I call it his innocuous remark. My rephrasing would serve two purposes, to find a way into the artist's mind through a reinterpretation of his words, and to prepare the material for the eventual exhibition we were hoping to organise.

"Let me improve this, adapt it to the purpose of my visit, give some substance to a long-held and overused viewpoint. Renew, refresh, replenish..." I said to myself, and the face of Mr Taras appeared briefly; it must have all been in my mind.

So I began to write a few notes, reinterpreting Hassett's words.

"Art is not imitation but representation, it does not embody but signifies of itself, it feeds off an object yet disseminates a new intention. Art's creative function is thus performed by wandering outside itself, as if the process were to be forsaken once the

artwork is complete. If we take Art as a form or sign of knowing, or better still, of knowledge (or a path to knowledge or an interpretation of knowledge), we must prove there is a desire for discovery, or its closest counterpart *awareness*. In the case of this particular artist, there is no pursuit of anything other than art itself, the raw canvas, the ill-depicted characters and the damning yet throwaway landscape. An artist's work may be about others (for others' sake) or entirely about their own dilemmas (for their sake alone and holding on to their work without further dissemination); the latter could well be conducive to a type of art against established art, opposing interaction, challenging classifications. After all, human expressions of inner life are there to be observed, heard or shared, and not kept as a secretive endeavour to satisfy the desire to avoid communication and aspiring to solitude; this seems to be the case with Hassett, as he fundamentally wants to be alone, away from everything, without the need to prove a thing. But as private as this artist is, he appears to owe nothing to anyone, having developed his work in a void and far removed from influences, schools of thought, artistic movements, or economic pressures on art creation. He could well be considered but an utterly discontent artist, devoid of setting and structure, having discarded art as a mere utterance and with no particular interest in how the world revolves. He is unique, undoubtedly, but we need to establish whether his work would need to be salvaged and thrust into the limelight or instead forgotten forever. In any case, his art did not exist all these years when he kept it to himself, and if he were to disappear no one would miss his particular and never divulged artistic observations. The unknown cannot be missed, merely speculated on. I would not qualify his works as private art, though it is a good descriptor. But private and introspective art is no less precious as a marker of our time..."

I agreed this was not what the artist had said, but he could have easily said it. There was an element of arrogance and condescension on my part, but I let it stand. And as I put the pencil on the desk (where on earth would I find a pencil sharpener?) and read through the text I had written (whether you could call it my text or Hasset's text, I did not fully know), someone knocked on the door.

"Yes?" I asked.

The artist opened his mouth and then after a second or two he closed it. It was clear that he wanted to say something, and I switched on the transadaptor. We were in my yellow room.

"Sobre mi arte, tengo tantas cosas que decir," he said, smiling without conviction, at the same time pointing at the window. "Y trato de explicar todo en mi carta..."

I lifted the transadaptor.

"About my art, I have so many things to say. And I try to explain everything in my letter..."

"Letter? What letter?" I asked in surprise.

But he shook his hand in the air; no questions were allowed, he seemed to be saying. He went on.

"Comprendo lo difícil que es llegar hasta aquí. La distancia, la mala comunicación, los muchos inconvenientes. Espero que al menos te gusten la casa, el jardín y este brazo de mar..."

Now it was my turn to wave my hand for him to stop. The transadaptor took over.

"I understand how difficult it is to get here. The distance, the bad communication, the many inconveniences. I hope that at least you like the house, the garden and this stretch of sea..."

As usual, the translation was not ideal.

“I haven’t seen the sea yet,” I said, “but I can sometimes hear the waves and...”

Hassett went on without waiting for the transadaptor to translate my sentence.

“Además, imagino que este lugar no... no reúne las condiciones a las que estarás acostumbrada.”

I let the transadaptor deal with his words.

“Also, I imagine that this place does not... does not... does not... not... not... not reunite... you, may be, may be not, not accustomed, you, those conditions, you... not... not... not...”

The device was vibrating ridiculously and I stopped it. It could not grasp what I thought had to be a simple sentence. What would happen then with the idiomatic, the colloquial, the mismatched? Was it going into overdrive, as Lundy had warned me?

Somehow, I construed what Hassett had said.

“You mean the house does not meet the... the conditions that... that I’m used to?”

“Yes,” he replied, with a sigh of relief.

“Oh, it’s all...” I began to say and hesitated as much as the transadaptor. “It’s all... quite... quite... quite... yes, quite lovely. Especially the garden.”

“Yes,” he said.

I asked him another question, hoping he would continue to acquiesce.

“Might I get my devices back?” I asked tentatively.

The transadaptor obliged.

“No!” Hassett replied raising his voice.

“What is the title of that painting?” I asked and pointed in the direction of the painting leaning against the wall in my room.

I realised I had given myself away.

“Sorry, I had a look at the painting,” I added, looking away from him. “It was just here, and I could not resist the temptation.”

“Yes?”

“What’s the title?” I asked.

He turned towards the door to leave.

“You make title.”

I quite liked the idea of giving titles to someone else’s works.

“Very well,” I said. “How about... the... the... the disconsolate,” I suggested. “Yes, *The Disconsolate.*”

The artist pointed at the transadaptor.

“Los desconsolados,” it said.

The artist frowned as if nothing could console him.

“Los desconsolados,” he repeated.

I was about to ask him why had he depicted such utterly dejected characters in such a distressing setting, when he remembered something.

“Bathroom, green door. Food in kitchen...”

I wanted to bring up more relevant issues.

“We need to discuss a number of things. I need details and background. I’d like to know how every single one of your artworks came about. And I’d also like to see more of your works so that I have a more comprehensive view of your art. And I’d like to be able to use all the devices I brought to the house...”

The transadaptor put it all to Hasset. And as he opened the yellow door to leave, he turned towards me.

“Mañana,” he said looking at his now uncovered painting, with the title provided by me, *The Disconsolate*.

This time there was no need for the transadaptor. I perfectly understood what he had just said.

“One more thing?” I asked.

He turned towards me.

“I have not seen you smoke.”

He moved his head from left to right.

“You don’t smoke?”

He did the same again.

“So, whose cigarette butt was it at the entrance of the house when I first arrived?” I asked, but I doubt he had understood what I said.

Chapter 22

Whether I was lightly going up or weightily going down, those perilous stairs were on the verge of collapsing and dragging me with them. Difficult to say at times in which direction I was moving, whether up or down, because I was blackholing again, disconcerted by a house that was fast deteriorating, with an artist who so far had been unable to convincingly justify or explain his work. That was my impression about him so far, a man mostly intent on not making concessions of any kind. But I had little to go by, barely a single artwork and some brief conversations in which I was never sure of what he said; any interpretations about him were my own, and I imposed on him what I thought an artist should be, what art had to reflect, and where the viewer stood. Where was he anyway that morning, I wondered. I should have called out his name throughout the house.

“Hassett!”

Our discussions to date had been brief and to the point, with him making a sole and far too commonplace remark which I had to embellish, giving it substance and particularly meaning where there was none. But then any meaning was in his work, was it not? Did he have to justify what he depicted on canvas? It could be that he had nothing else to say; he was being purposefully brief, expecting me to develop his scant words into consequential speech.

I thought all this as I mounted the stairs, doing it sedately and methodically; or it could have been that I was descending; at times I was not entirely aware of my movements. You could tell from the way the carriage curved that the stairs could not possibly end in a landing but had to continue necessarily; there was a pattern –tiny

beads and spears— in the balusters and handrail, creating a sense of anticipation; because of this I was convinced that the house had either a cellar or an attic, or both. Down below, there was probably darkness, with a murky door leading to what could only be some subterranean cavern, judging from the damp smell that arose from the place; and above, if anything, the steps had to lead to other flights of stairs, narrower and more insubstantial, dissolving into the shadows of those higher floors. But for the time being I had something more important to do. As I appeared to be alone, I decided I would look for my equipment; but then most rooms on the first floor were kept under lock and key. Except for the room with the yellow door, which was my room, and the one with the green door, the bathroom, I was not allowed anywhere else. I then went downstairs and opened cupboards and cabinets, all of them coming apart and strangely with nothing inside them.

“Not a thing...”

The task was not what I had expected or planned, unlike my many manoeuvres where everything had worked out like clockwork (except, of course, in Barcelona): injuries inflicted just on time; disposals taking place darkly yet efficiently; solutions imposed for maximum advantage and whatever the cost, human or otherwise. But in that remote house beside the sea, my mission was unpredictable. Perhaps I should have tried to emulate the type of task I was used to performing, not with any sense of finality or by putting an end to the life of an artist, but with the same degree of adeptness and detachment that I applied to all my work. Yes, I resolved that as soon I could get hold of him, I would establish a firm timetable and end the whole damn thing within days. I needed, what, another five or ten paintings to examine and comment on, as well as a few more of his verbal attempts at defining who he was and

what his art represented. But I suspected that all I would take back with me to the Agency would be solely my own words.

“Only my words.”

At least this was clear, words and only words. No, there were moments when I could not say for sure what was going on in that house by the sea. Let me repeat that: I was blackholing and off-centre every time I went up the stairs –perilously, you could say in order to get to my yellow bedroom where paper and pencil were waiting for me as my sole mode of expression– and every time I went downstairs to the kitchen for sustenance.

“Food!”

The kitchen was almost barren, but I managed to find various edible things in a cold-storage box. I left the kitchen and walked towards the large room facing the garden, musing about the weather –I had always been rather good at small talk, even with myself– when I suddenly stopped.

“Oh...” I muttered.

As I entered the large room on the ground floor, there it was. Just for me, with no gauze or covering concealing it. Displayed for my appreciation, even for my pleasure. Dark yet so very provoking. Placed at such an angle that I could not take my eyes off it. Entirely mine, at least for a little while. I approached it cautiously, one prolonged step after another.

In front of me was a large canvas depicting, at first glance, an unremarkable house; yet instead of shooing away the spectator, the canvas was inviting me to approach, possibly a mystery to unravel that required not only detecting but exposing. The image of a house, with such heavy traces of oil paint piling like puddles here and

there, was leaning against one of the walls. The depiction was from an altogether different place and indeed another time. Two sides of the house's façade were visible; the intersection pointing straight at the observer; with a stretch of sea on either side; three storeys, four chimney pots, brick and lime mortar. In all, nineteenth century or so-so emulation. Yes, the depicted house was very much a period property, with steep roofs, turrets, ornate gables, mansard, bay windows.

“Let me get closer,” I said.

It could not be, in any way, a typical house from that part of the world; from what we knew about the artist, he had never left the region. He had most likely worked from seeing the image in a catalogue or publication, or basically from imagination. The depicted house was, for sure, a traditional building encompassing all the features of the Victorian period, more ornamental than technically indispensable, an imposing asymmetrical construction but with an air of homeliness like one big dolls house. And yet, like with my own HQ, I reasoned that on the inside it was probably much more extensive than could be anticipated; I was sure that, whatever existed within that two-dimensional representation, it could barely be contained within those walls, and I fancied that serious drama with confrontations and squabbles must have gone on inside. But was it me interfering in the scrutiny process as the observer that I was? Maybe the fact that, in the real and ramshackle house where the artist lived, I did not feel able to go upstairs to higher and shadowy floors or descend into the darkness of some hidden basement made me conceive a space larger than it was. From the gardens, you could see that there certainly were additional floors to the house, the real house I mean, but from the inside it was possibly only a pretence. I would need to ask the artist if this was some optical illusion he had created, part of the overall experience of his craft and with total immersion by the viewer; in other words, an exhibit playing

with light and darkness, a kind of creative blur that made the impossible just about thinkable. But probably any such incongruities regarding the real house were all down to me and my recent erratic perceptions, for I was likely blackholing once again. And like the real house, the depicted structure in a Victorian style appeared nothing but death-defying. Blackholing just happened, I could not stop it.

“Blackholing!”

I concluded that any expectations regarding that particular artwork had more to do with my flawed insights: taking the blame was one of my more unpleasant traits that no amount of training at the Agency had managed to obliterate; it was an annoying conviction that led nowhere of substance, thinking as I would that things were better, bigger, more interesting or exciting than they really were, or even should be. And so, I wrote down a few impressions. My mind was far too busy with what I thought I should be feeling instead of what I felt, thus these were not wholly unprejudiced observations about a work of art.

“Windows overlooking the sea on the left, in front, and on the right-hand side. It is more an island than a house. Greyly depicted, more a photographic image than a painting, more a survey for a planning application or for tax purposes or for the groundwork required for restoration. It is sable grey, the house is. The sea, grey. The sky, grey. The windows indistinguishable from the greyness; only the windowpanes are a darker shade of iron grey. Or is it down to the viewer to feel unwelcome, rotten, famished, unkempt, sad, lonely, unresponsive to a piece of art, very much grey in feeling or approach? Is that how I myself feel? Or is it a combination of the two, portrayed house and bewildered viewer, we need to ask: on the one hand, the dreary and illusory house that cannot exist in an objective plane surrounded by the sea as it

is at present; and on the other, a spectator who wishes to enter the depicted house and somehow stay there so that the outside ceases to be visible and, for a while, we can hide from the intolerably grey and the desperately desolate of the surrounds? There is a problem, though. It is not that the façade with the dark and solid walls is preventing anyone from accessing the place; rather, it is that there is no entrance door, at least not on the two sides that are shown in the painting, and they undoubtedly represent the front of the building. A frontage without a door means it has no entrance or, worse, no exit. The house is but dead, if a house can be dead like a human will be dead after having gone through some painful agony; the building very much feels like it agonised at some point in time and then ceased to be, except as portrayed temporarily in that oil depiction. It is but a serene edifice on the surface, but possibly because of its greyness and deadness a sense of the cataclysmic is not yet showing its face but breathing quietly in the background before its final outburst. And I dare say this because there is another thing in the painting alongside the grey building and its very grey existence that alerts my attention. It is something barely visible to the naked eye yet lying in wait. If you stop and get close enough, you might just notice it; but if you think about anything other than the house, you will definitely miss it. It is such an undistinguishable element that you could well discard it as a floating viscous dot in your line of vision. Yes, there is an object among the deadness, colour among the greyness. Look again; look closer. It is an unidentified something in yellow, dangling from one of the top floor windows, under eaves, alongside the smokestack; you will dismiss it as negligible, and who could blame you. And once you are ready for the close-up, that tiny fragment in a bright yellow colour is very much there; possibly a rag, a duster, a small bathroom mat stretched outside the window to dry, a baby's bib. You might wonder whether it has been added at the very end of the work to give an

additional component to the house, as either colour or intent; or whether it is the opposite, with the tiny yellow fragment signalling what gave birth materially to the work of art: something in yellow was initially the centrepiece and from there, spiralling out of control, the house followed. Yellowness as a concept, as a resolution. Was it a mistake or an oversight, a blank that had to be painted over in yellow as a misspelling? Did the artist use it as a subterfuge to somewhat redeem the painting of a dead house, for it is the only constituent that makes the whole picture come alive, and not much at that? No, that is not what happens; I withdraw that, for nothing is alive in that painting, yellow or no yellow. I will rephrase: that yellow something makes the house lived in, if only marginally; it gives the building a sense of purpose, of non-abandonment, even of hope because if someone had left that piece of rag or cloth behind, surely they would return one day, soon enough, either to collect it or, in despair, to further blend it into the expanse of greyness. Ultimately, that splash of yellow on the top floor is the only image you can relate to and take comfort in since there is no sign of life in the whole painting (apart from those sections of sea that might contain bits of regional biota); therefore, that yellowness is the closest to life there is in the artwork of a house, not by the sea but in the sea. Ultimately what you will take back with you as spectator is a house that remains unlived, grey and remote, tattered by the waves and the many years of neglect; and whether the yellow fragment is a noteworthy phenomenon or some anodyne oddity like a passing remark, the house is still very grey, miserably so. But something needs to be saved, it cannot all be superfluous. And as the only element worth saving, that yellow piece of something or other spares the house itself, for it is the only element in that colour in the context of the whole painting. Wherever did I see that yellow artefact before, you will ask when you first view the artwork. And when you next see it, you will say: speak to me, now that we are fully acquainted...”

I stopped writing and looked at the canvas. I could not endure that greyness any longer. It appeared as if all had been lost. In a way, what I had written about that house was an expression of my own fears, for I had once been lost and discarded. Yet, in all that greyness, a single item in the brightest yellow colour, whether a piece of cloth, a rag or a bib, might just be able to save the sad and forlorn building.

“Redemption?”

I heard a noise. A rustle or a squeak. A fist banging and a foot thumping. Probably all at the same time.

Chapter 23

I had been waiting for the artist for quite some time, but now that he was finally there, I sensed only peril around me. I did not know how he would react to my next set of questions or what he would offer me by way of discernments about his art. A single word would have sufficed to call out to me, yet he produced all those unnecessary sounds to alert me of his presence. Who knows what a man living alone (this had yet to be proven) and who lived solely for his art (again, this had to be established) could do or thought it was right to do. He seemed to have enjoyed making those sounds to alert me of his presence, for he was smiling as I had not seen him until then.

“Hello,” he said, as we both stood beside his painting of a house sunk into the sea.

This time I would not apologise for having examined his work; after all, it was there in front of me, almost as a provocation. The rules he had imposed were not as inflexible as they initially seemed; maybe he would also change his mind about my equipment and let me use it freely. He looked forlorn, and I thought I felt pity for him. Not that I knew what true pity felt like but I was familiar with approximations, like saying *tough luck* in climactic moments instead of *adieu*, to give but one example. I did not really recognise such an emotion too well. In essence, it may not have been pity but scorn, not mercy but contempt.

“Hello, Hassett,” I said in reply to his greeting.

I tried to bring to a close my off-centred ponderings and got ready to begin my questioning of the artist, aware that it had to be an extremely mild version of my usually heavyweight interrogation procedure.

“Which house?” I said, pointing at the canvas.

I was asking him in simple terms which particular house did the building in the canvas represent, hoping he would understand.

“This!” he said, stomping his foot and pointing at the ceiling with his fist.

He had understood, but his gesticulation was not in anger, for he again smiled. I shook my head in disbelief, implying that surely the house in the painting and the house in which he lived were not the same one. I took the transadaptor out of my pocket.

“Sí, la casa del cuadro es ésta,” he said. “No hay otra. Es esta casa. No puedo haber más que una casa, mi casa blanca, la mía.”

“Yes, the house in the painting is this one,” echoed the metallic voice. “There isn’t another. It’s this house. There can be no more than one house, my white house, the one that’s mine.”

If it was a reply, I would undoubtedly have to work on it in order to pass it as publishable material for the exhibition. And if it was a natural reaction to my disbelief, then I would have to word the question differently. I put several questions to him, at speed and a little insolently.

“Why grey, why the Victorian architecture, why the piece of yellow cloth dangling from one of the windows, if it is a cloth, why is there no one there, why is there no door, why is the house on an island, because the building seems far too close to the sea, or is even inside it...”

I was going to add “as if drowning...” but I thought the transadaptor had more than enough material for now. What came out from its electronic bowels did not appear to be something the artist could understand. As he listened intently whilst observing his painting, he looked confused and rubbed his hands. Then he let himself drop on a

chair. There had been far too many questions, and the artist had only one answer to all of them, a mighty monosyllabic response, a usual one in his repertoire. Maybe he had not grasped a single word as interpreted by the transadaptor.

“No!” he replied, almost shouting.

“No to what?” I asked and could not refrain from more questions, all delivered in a mighty rush as they dashed out from my mind in rapid sequence. “Is it that the house is not grey, which it is, and not an island, which it is, and is there not a piece of a yellow something, I suppose to add colour to the grey landscape, for there definitely is such a yellow item? Or is the landscape a seascape, and the house a vessel travelling along the high seas? A house or a ship, then? And is it not a Victorian building, for it surely is, incongruously from another land and time, and thus so different from the straight, strict lines of this white-washed house we are in, yet much bigger than it appears, or deceptively so, with a floor above and another floor lurking below, and this may all be but an optical illusion that you have created for the purposes of...”

With a few creaks and pauses, the transadaptor did the relevant grammatical re-assignments in the target language and delivered my words. It must have picked up a few nuances from my speech, but not the disbelief in the tone of my voice.

“Well?” I asked.

The artist got up and went to the large windows overlooking the garden. He was dressed in white, not a single drop of paint of any colour on his clothes. Without looking at me, he spoke.

“Para mí no es una casa gris, ni es una isla. Es mi casa. Así he interpretado yo mi casa. Así la veo. Así la siento.”

“For me, it is not a grey house nor is it an island,” said the transadaptor. “This is my house. Thus, I have interpreted my house. Thus, I see it. Thus, I sense it.”

I offered the artist an alternative.

“This is how you would wish your house to be, you mean?”

He listened to the transadaptor.

There were no *woulds* or *shoulds* in his reply.

“Así quiero que sea.”

“This is how I want it to be.”

And before I could say ‘Let’s discuss’, he pointed at the reams of paper and the pencils on the desk, where my latest comments on the painting of a house that seemed lost at sea were sitting, and he promptly left the room.

I decided not to follow him. I needed to write down his words before I would forget them. In fact, in their present form, they were entirely forgettable, and so I would have to elaborate further and make them into a text that could be read or repeated to others. His art was, I concluded, his true language, so his spoken speech could never be enough to convey any insights he might have. I got to work with the little material in my possession while it was still fresh in my mind; I wrote it in the first-person as they were, after all, Hassett’s comments.

“We paraphrase; that is what we do, both as artists and viewers. Interpretation is paraphrasing, quoting and quoting yet again. The house in the painting is nothing but my rendition, in the same way the depicted house will be your own representation as a viewer. You could say that I have abandoned my house in search of something I dream of or wish, thus forgetting all memory of the original and, in the process, renouncing to call it mine; and you could think that I embraced what was waiting for me and relinquished all else: the dream of a house I longed to live in. But it is not that at all. The painting of my house is not a dream or aspiration. I may not have depicted

it as you see it, but how can I prove to you that the house in the painting is my house, not that I care to prove anything to anyone? No one can say or know how I indisputably see it or, better still, the way I am familiar with it. How can the spectator, who will have their own private vision of this house, or any house, tell me how my house is or should be? How dare they? You may simplistically argue that I do not like how my real house looks and that I wish for grander things. You could well think that I am unhappy in a house falling apart with the weight of time and would wish instead to possess an empty building with no art, no inhabitants, and certainly no past. You may make as many claims as you wish about me: that I would want to live on an island; or in a house from another era; or in a place that has no entry or exit; with no foundations for it is floating on seawater; with no insides for it is solid; with no gardens for it is nothing but a succession of bricks; with no inhabitants for it is self-reliant and solitary. Yet my house, which is the house in the painting, is not an empty or dead house. There is a single sign of life, however insignificant in size and representation, embodied by a dash of colour. I refuse to name the yellow object, and I will not confirm whether it is a rag or the finest linen handkerchief. And in that lack of identification lies its essence, for a kindly viewer would not be searching for an individual item but for a signal that there may be an expectation, a probability of life. A single mark in a bright hue contradicts the rest of the painting as an exception to the greyness, which is a colour (is it a colour or its lack?) that involves oblivion and ultimately loss of life. Yes, there is incongruity between those two colours; but for things to be believable, they must be customarily conflictive and be confronted with opposites. Coherence does not make for serious reading; in this way, comparisons can be made and reflections will ensue. In all, a single yellow item allows us to daydream, or at least have a moment of repose in the midst of that grey and gloomy setting. Yes, there is a contradiction in my dark house,

I will confess as an artist. But does such a contradiction not make my house the more real, tell me, does it not?"

I stopped writing. I was trying to make sense of what the artist had expressed and at the same time I was not entirely sure of what I had perceived as a viewer. There was more to say about the two visions of a house: one existed solely on canvas, aspiring to be something else, and then there was a real white-washed house wanting to belong to a more interesting period of architectural history. And when it came to the artist, there were also two sides to the story: the house in the painting painfully representing his vision, whether pleasing or nightmarish, and the real house that was falling apart representing an unmovable certainty. But he did not explain the discrepancies between them, not a single one. Was it I who saw them differently? Or was it that I could not perceive their similarities? Was one the echo of the other, the first the image and likeness of the second? There was nothing sentimental about the way he had put it to me, not a whiff of nostalgia for a dream, nor fear about a nightmare, nor any antipathy or shame towards his present condition (a man who had devoted his life to art, and not a soul knew about him or his work). It was more about a chapter in a story than an episode in someone's life; his comments were more those of a made-up character than a flesh-and-blood individual who felt both dejected and elated with his art; his was a performance, in other words, and I was beginning to think that I was part of it. What he explained was hardly a personal explanation but more a perfunctory one, something that only a transadaptor would say if it could speak for itself, which could happen one day if back at home Lundy continued her daring excursions into intelligence of the most artificial kind. But I needed more, not necessarily descriptive terms but justifications, reasons, aims, and even whims. Something was not quite right, though that did not mean that something was wrong. I called out.

“Hassett!”

I ran across the rooms on the ground floor and then went up to the first floor, carefully holding on to the insecure bannisters. Then I went down again to the gardens, leaving behind the endless blades of grass shining brightly under the noon sun, until I stopped running altogether and listened to the sounds in the distance. I could not find the artist anywhere, but the sea was very much there, with the waves crashing and the breeze bellowing.

“The sea beckons me,” I said far too dramatically, as if it was all part of a performance.

Chapter 24

I ran to the beach and could not delay entering the sea for a second, still in my dress and sandals. I crossed over the nimble waves on the shoreline until the water was deep enough to dive in. I extended my arms reaching out to the sky, I bent my torso and, with a quick thrust from my thighs, I lunged in. After all that running I was sweating profusely, and the contrast of heat and coolness was like an electric shock, added to another twinkling of blackholing: I was still alert but off-centre, convinced that my body was sinking into the most perilous sea. Who could assure me this was not the case?

Once I was fully immersed, the waters felt not cold but icy; entering was more like piercing, not sliding or skimming. There was a solidity about the sea, and my hands and arms, head and neck, chest, waist, hips, felt like they were breaking into it. Tiers of water crashed into the layers of skin and flesh. I resisted the temptation to return to the shore, and instead I swam towards the watery horizon. No, I had never swum at that speed and with such compulsion. I remembered the long years spent at my boarding school beside the sea and the joy of my morning swims: feet wriggling like a rudder, waist twitching over the water, thighs holding me in place like a brig; my chest the wheel, my arms the masts, my skull with surely a nautical expression the figurehead of my childish vessel. And once again, all those years later, I felt like the same lonely craft floating in the sea and guided solely by currents over which I had no command. The difference now was the relief I sensed when getting away from the house, whether the real white one or the depicted grey one, and especially from its sole inhabitant, whether real or created by

himself for himself, whether living or performing. At the same time, it was good to drive away the memories of past manoeuvres and sink eagerly into my squelchy companion.

I swam over and under the waves, facing the sun and leaving the sun behind me, with the current and against the current. When I looked behind me in the distance, the house and the gardens could be contained in a tiny space between my thumb and index finger. That sudden exhilaration not felt in years satisfied a need that I had not paid attention to for a long time. It was the wish to get away from land and from the blows it could hold.

“What the hell are you doing, Iona?” I heard a man’s voice shout in the distance.

It could only be my blackholing, a voice in my head speaking out. And I opened my mouth to answer.

“Well, you see, I’m about to...” I began to say.

As I said that, the current dragged me against my will and pulled my limbs back and forth. And into my open mouth the first elements to arrive were the spray and foam from a wave three times my height. And then it was the turn of all that stirring seawater, which I swallowed in mouthfuls. More than saline it tasted like an oversalted broth, surrounded as I was by endless strips of kelp. I opened my eyes under the surface, but I could not distinguish the seafloor; tiny fish and dense seaweed interrupted the view. I tried to close my mouth, but it was held in place by the sea itself. And as I swallowed more water, predictably I lost course. Adrift as I was, my rudder fell apart, the masts collapsed, the wheel was unruly, the whole vessel became ungovernable. The only thing holding me in place was my solid body performing like an anchor with a mission: to fulfil its role and engage firmly in the seabed. I plummeted three or four meters possibly, but

then I was in no condition to make any kind of calculation. And all that time I kept my eyes wide open; I certainly wanted to know how it would all end.

“A dream?”

I had been waiting for the end to happen at any time, and for a very long time indeed. It had been presented to me as an unavoidable event that would take place sooner or later. As expected, I had been thoroughly trained for that moment. It was Miss Pilkington who had provided me with her sound and sensible advice, but also with a series of quick and strenuous exercises of the upper torso to say goodbye to life and the living without a single regret. She would state that you should not feel, at the precise moment of your death, that you had nothing to lose; more importantly, you should convince yourself that you had nothing to gain by continuing to be alive. She kept saying this was the secret: you had to tell yourself that death was nothing but another of life's many mishaps. All these routine reminders she recited slowly and gravely as ancient aphorisms. Her advice was not convincing enough, my colleagues and I agreed. And after the incident in Barcelona, I myself came up with a solution to the challenge: I will be ready at any time, any place; and when the time and the place were finally there, waiting for me, I would go cheerily, unlike all those upon whom I inflicted a fitting ending and who went on their way either wailing or weeping. I wanted to do it differently and so, as the time seemed to have arrived in that stretch of sea alongside a house belonging to an artist whose work I was very gradually beginning to value despite my many doubts, I willingly began my descent to the bottom of the ocean. Still, there were advantages to death. Yes, terrible incidences would come to an end, which was comforting: my blackholing, the perils in my life, Tony, Mr Taras, Bill and my many enemies. Even my distorted face.

And as I thought all this, a huge and menacing wave crashed on the surface of the sea above me and made its forceful way to where I was. It appeared to have forcefully trapped the faces and bodies of others who could not make it out of the deep, all of them fashioned in onyx and almost sea-coloured; I myself was as heavy as a bronze statue sinking all the way to the bottom. Time could do nothing but stand still.

If I felt threatened, it was not by the lack of colour or unusual rock formations at the seabed but more because of the leisureliness with which everything moved there. A different speed meant a separate time with more pauses than actions –a lazy and capricious time, with its own free will. No, I would not put up a fight, there was little I could do. I was so far away from the surface that the only reasonable action to take was to succumb to my fate, accepting it wholeheartedly. Throwing in the towel at a place like this was not that tragic anyway: vanishing in the sea, which I loved, and whilst on a mission on the subject of art, which I was falling in love with once again. Certainly, a romantic ending for an unromantic woman. In any event, I did not have to do a thing, with the currents dragging me back and forth without me moving arms or legs.

“The nurse is avenged...” I tried to say, remembering the fate of that unfortunate being whose drowning I had caused so very recently.

Dozens of fish, some small like needles and others swollen like balloons, swam out from channels in the rocks as the surge pulled me in their direction. I could not possibly exist for them, it would be intolerable that a huge monster like me in their eyes could be part of their civilisation.

“I don’t exist in this place, I don’t exist!”

The air within me gave way to water, and my whole body seemed to fill with liquid. But my mind also filled with random ideas of scarce consistency: what I had yet to do,

what I would leave behind, the faces of those whose lives I had ended, the words I had said to them just before the final act, the wrongs and the damages, my mission in that place beside the sea, the Exhibition, what art was and what it was not, the art or even antiart of the artist himself, art in general and art in particular, art for the sake of art, art on its own, art, art, art... All these visions dissolved as in a whirlwind, and what remained were the orders from Mr Taras.

“Find the artist, get hold of a few samples of his art, and bring back whatever you can in whatever form. If not the real thing, then a description, and if you cannot write it, then bring back a memory. The memory of art or even the memory of what may be considered art. And if you’re going to come back emptyhanded, Iona, then don’t come back.”

After that, my thoughts were about nothing whatsoever.

Chapter 25

“Wake up!”

I thought I heard a scream, but it could only have been the sound of the sea, with its stubborn currents not letting go of my body. By then, my stupid misadventure should have come to an end, the total and definitive end of it all.

“Wake up...”

I was convinced that the tide was trying to pierce my flesh and pull me apart. Not having enough with drowning me, it presumably wanted to destroy every morsel of who I was.

“Wake up!”

I had to put a stop to such absurd demands: wake up from what and into what? They resembled a human voice but could have been the echo of waves callously crashing into me. I was reminded of a woman who insistently asked me to recall memories whilst I was lying in a hospital bed; in my sorry state at the time, I could not possibly oblige to such demands and readily remember. But this was a different request, and it could be that I was in a faraway place where there was no need to wake up or remember or even breathe.

“What?” I asked indignantly. “What the hell do you want me to wake up for?”

Something faintly touched my face. A hand possibly, wiping away whatever it was –water, seaweed, the foam of the sea. Or was that hand running along my scars to make sure they were real? It all came back.

“The sea...” I recalled.

But my comment was met with the customary demand.

“Wake up, Iona, wake up!”

Oh, they knew my name in that final resting place, so it was not as impersonal as I thought it would be.

“But the sea...” I repeated.

“No sea, you dreaming, no sea...”

Defective grammar, and about to put that into correct language, I opened my eyes.

“Oh!”

There I was, lying on the bed of my yellow room. Was it a previous existence, or was I, in fact, in a distant place where they had managed to reproduce everything as accurately as could be, again not unlike that hospital room pretending to be home? And as I focused on what or who was in front of me, I saw a woman. She was small and far too cheerful for my liking.

“You now wake up,” she said and smiled even more.

I tried to prop myself up but did not have the strength, sore in every part of my body.

“The sea... I drowned...”

“No, only dream.”

She helped me to sit on the bed and tried to give me water from a cup, which was the last thing I wanted.

“No more water...” I said and pushed her away.

The water splashed on the bedsheets.

“What happened?”

“Dream, dream, dream...” she said mellifluously, smiling even more if that was possible.

Her speech had an unfamiliar rhythm, doubtless taken from another language. Spoken to such a different score, her words appeared to mean nothing. And yet the sounds obeyed a pattern far too consistent, achieved solely by learning and not intuition.

“Dream...” she repeated.

I breathed in deeply and sat up. I realised it was evening.

“Who are you anyway?” I asked, raising my voice.

She was an older woman dressed in black, still smiling and holding the cup of water in her bony hands; most of the liquid was rolling down my neck. Her face was crossed in every direction with deep wrinkles.

“I am... I think you say *housekeeper*,” she replied as she placed the cup on the side table and dried my face with a towel.

“Housekeeper?” I asked.

“I clean, I prepare food, I do garden,” she added, suddenly looking sombre; describing her duties had possibly made her reflect on how awful it all was.

“But I’ve never seen you before,” I protested, “so you must’ve been doing all those things when... when I was sleeping or outside the house or...”

I felt nauseous and had a salty taste in my mouth. She cleaned me with the towel.

“Yes, I clean... I prepare food... I do garden...” she repeated.

If those were her only words in my language, we would need the transadaptor. But then I remembered that I could use the device with only one other person, the artist, as instructed by Lundy.

“The transadaptor might go into overdrive,” she had said, and I had seen that for myself.

No, I was not in a distant place, but the closest place possible. It was the house of an artist who had to be revealed to the world. And I was still a woman on a mission.

“Hassett...” she began to say.

“Yes?”

“Coming soon,” she announced.

I stretched and rubbed my arms vigorously to instil some life into them.

“I hope so,” I replied.

“Soon,” she repeated.

I was insistent.

“But what happened in the cove? I thought I’d drowned at the bottom of the sea, and...”

She got up and went towards the door.

“I cook for you,” she said as she was leaving, “something very nice.”

I lay down on the bed again. My limbs ached badly, my nose and mouth felt inflamed and raw. A dream? More like a struggle to stay alive.

“Alive!”

And as I shouted the word, I stretched my arms again and rubbed my head. There was something there. I pulled it, rubbery as it was. And as I brought it towards my eyes, I saw a very long and lustrous piece of seaweed.

It was morning when I woke up, and there was only one thing on my mind. What had happened in the cove could not have been a dream, especially not the desperation I had felt there. It had all been vividly real, and I had sensed the approaching ending like any living creature would, with a sense of doom and an acceptance of the final and catastrophic denouement. I was still wearing the same dress and sandals as before entering the sea or, should I say, as when dreaming that I was entering the sea, according to what the housekeeper had claimed.

“Seaweed tangled along my hair...” I confirmed as proof.

Something significant had happened, and it was being kept from me.

“Seaweed...”

I should have taken a bath to feel better, but for that present moment I dreaded the sight of water. I left the room and went downstairs. After what had happened, whether dreamt or not, the stairs did not feel so perilous.

“Hello,” I said.

The woman was in the kitchen; her hands sunk in a large bowl filled with flour and countless bright ingredients.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Something very nice,” she replied using the same words as before, pulling her creased lips into the widest grin.

So far, I had been surviving on various morsels I had found in the cold-storage box. I was looking forward to the aroma and taste of real food.

“Hassett here,” she said, lifting her eyes and meeting my gaze.

I was startled.

“Here? Where?”

“The garden,” she announced.

Her eyes lowered to her kneading, and her smile disappeared.

I saw the artist in the distance. There he was among the eucalyptus trees, stopping in front of them, caressing their trunks softly. Maybe his next artwork was to be about trees, his garden, the natural world. He was again dressed in white, not a speck of paint on him. I must have looked a sight, with my creased dress and desolate face.

“Hello,” I said as I approached him, and I promised myself that, this time, I would get as much information from him as I could.

“You are fine?” he asked, his eyes searching for something along my facial features.

“Yes, apparently I had a bad dream...”

“Yes, bad dream,” he said.

“But I could’ve sworn that I almost drowned down by the cove and...”

“Bad dream,” he repeated.

My evidence to the contrary was not necessarily overwhelming.

“I had a piece of seaweed...” I said, pointing at my head.

He laughed, but there was no humour in his face.

“Much seaweed in this sea.”

Perhaps they were right and it had all been a nightmare, a very accurate one at that. I still felt unwell, but I had to go on.

“I would like to ask you a few questions.”

“Ask, please.”

“We have to enter the house,” I said, “I expect complex answers, so I need to get hold of the transadaptor.”

“Yes?”

“I want to know more about the yellow element in your painting of a house.”

“Element?”

“Yes, that tiny section in yellow, whatever it may be.”

We were in the main room on the ground floor, sitting side by side on the ramshackle sofa.

“Yes, yellow,” I confirmed.

That was what I had been doing since my arrival: waiting for him to answer my questions, to appear after his many disappearances, to give me a full account of his artworks. I recalled the instructions I had received back at the Agency.

“Do it all in his time, Iona,” Mr Taras had said. “Don’t precipitate things with the artist, remember to proceed at just the right *tempo*.”

No, I did not want to antagonise Hassett, fearing he might disown our flimsy agreement. It was only when I slowed down my pace that the artist appeared to collaborate.

“The section in yellow,” I asked him once again, speaking very slowly into the transadaptor; I was convinced that it represented something significant.

The device repeated my question in the target language and Hassett replied.

“Esa sección en amarillo,” he began to say, “es la parte más importante de la obra. Es mi aportación personal, privada, secreta...”

The transadaptor duly decoded.

“That section in yellow is the most important part of the work. It’s my personal, private, secret contribution...”

“A symbol maybe?”

The transadaptor asked my question, and the artist replied with a lengthy but anodyne speech. It was gradually translated into mostly intelligible language, though poor and occasionally trite. The subject was typically about the significance of privacy and secrecy in general, and not necessarily about Art.

“My private contribution, my secret contribution...” said the transadaptor unremarkably; I was not sure whether the artist had said that, or if by then the gadget itself was hardly inspired.

No, Hassett did not reveal why the small yellow section was his private and secret contribution, rebutting my question by shaking his hands in the air when I asked him again.

“A contribution to what?”

“Yellow...” he replied.

“Please elaborate,” I requested.

“Yellow!” he said, raising his voice this time.

“Do you not want to reply to my question or is it that you have nothing to say?” I asked, but I immediately disconnected the transadaptor to avoid a confrontation with him.

He got up from the sofa, but did not leave. He just stood there, looking out of the window towards the garden.

It seemed that once again I would have to resort to recreating his comments with a text about colours, betrayal, warning signs, secret contributions, and such like; in other words, I would have to interpret his ideas about the painting of a house by the sea (or was it *in* the sea?) in a more convincing way. And as I did that, I began to question the whole project. Should I contribute with my words to what was not mine to speculate on and, worse still, might the resulting text be considered more persuasive or empowering than the words of the artist or what was reflected in his works? For the purposes of the exhibition, could I not dramatically change what the artist said to increase his credibility, and could I also impoverish this words if I so wished for the purposes of tarnishing him? The rendition process did not end with me, for it would be beautified or belittled by those attending the eventual exhibition with their comments about my words, not as viewers of artworks but as interpreters of my explanatory texts.

Where would the truth of an outlandishly depicted house be found, to put but one example of the artworks I knew so far? Would it be in the artist's words, in my words, in successive interpretations whatever shape they took? Putting all this to Hassett would have been challenging via the transadaptor; at any rate, I was not convinced it would do a reliable job with what would had been a far too verbose passage. I spoke to the point.

"But I see yellow as a colour of warning in this painting..." I suggested.

He looked perplexed but said nothing.

"It is a badge of... shall we say, disease," I added.

"Disease?" he asked.

"Enfermedad," said the transadaptor.

Hassett looked relieved when he understood the word.

"Quizás..." he said.

"Maybe..." replied the device.

"Is the painting saying something else beyond what we discussed earlier? Is it stating that there's something horribly wrong, that the house is possibly... sick?"

The transadaptor explained. Without saying anything, Hassett got up and went towards a canvas propped against one of the walls.

"Another painting," he suggested.

He pulled the linen covering to one side, and there in front of us was something wholly different which maybe could speak for him.

Covered in thick *impasto* spread with a palette knife to create an almost overpowering high-relief, the canvas depicted two different-sized blocks of colour. The work seemed to be asking the viewer to take a pick. So, which of the two should I

choose? The large rectangle in dull red or the wavering square in fading black? You could always rest the eyes on the barren uncoloured strip of canvas between the two blocks and avoid deciding. Or observers could maybe visualise alternative blocks to bring the painting to life, say, in electric green or in shocking pink, since using only two subdued colours –so far, red and black– depicted a miserable and dull experience without too many possibilities. I immediately realised that I was making a value judgment; no, I was not there to judge but to ascertain.

“With these two blocks of colour,” I said to the artist and connected the transadaptor, “you’re aiming beyond the more complex works I’ve seen so far. And I mean this in terms of the original geometrical premise –for the dimensions are not solely about height and width, but more importantly about the depth of the two figures which cannot be predicted in full by the viewer, with depth being a make-believe parameter on a canvas and the most difficult to achieve; and in terms of the chosen composition, let’s not get carried away by the apparent simplicity of the preferred colours and shapes. I concede that, at first glance, those two shapes appear as tame blocks of colour, as if you had wanted to articulate nothing more than what can be seen and you expected any further conceptual additions to be provided by the viewer. But who says that I ought to contribute to a work of art by offering fresh ideas as suggested or inspired by it? Ultimately, I should not be required to do the heavy lifting with your work, nor should the work use me to take a stance or make a statement. If anyone needs to be omitted from the equation, it ought to be the viewer, for the shapes and colours on the canvas should be self-reliant without the need for my gaze to justify their existence...”

Hassett listened to the transadaptor carefully. How did I dare say such things, he seemed to be expressing by closing his eyes and refusing to open them. He was an artist, and I was not.

“Stop!” he retorted.

I switched off the transadaptor before it had reached the end of my commentary. I thought it was best to leave untranslated the rest of what I had said.

“Your ideas and my ideas are... different,” he described without further flourish, and he finally opened his eyes.

I waited for more words, but none came. So, I put to him one more of my ideas; it had been plaguing me for quite some time.

“From what I can judge so far, your work is far too wide-ranging... there is no single, unique style. This particular work, for instance, doesn’t appear to be a companion to the other artworks I’ve seen.”

“Yes,” he replied.

I was surprised to hear that he had understood and readily agreed with what I said.

“Among so many, then, what’s your favourite style or theme or, we could say, obsession.”

“Obsession?”

I was sure Hassett had understood the word but had not grasped why I was using it. I connected the transadaptor.

“Obsesión.”

He was almost shocked.

“¿Crees que mis obras son obsesiones?” he asked.

“Do you think that my works are... obsessions?” said the transadaptor.

“What else can they be?” I said, pointing at the latest work he had just shown me.

“There is nothing but obsession in this artwork, why bother to go through all this hell if you’re not ultimately obsessed?”

He listened to the transadaptor and then shook both hands in the air to express his annoyance.

“My painting is *your* obsession, not *my* obsession,” he said in my language.

Was it all about obsession, then, whether the artist’s, as I claimed, or the viewer’s, as he seemed to suggest? I for one did not want to go there, it might have been too painful in my case. I would have had to talk about the art I had renounced to long ago, as obsessed as I was with it at the time; and even discuss my obsessive fascination with artwork depicting what was no longer alive. All this had to be about him and not me, so I rephrased.

“What’s your favourite style or theme then?” I asked.

The transadaptor asked and Hassett replied without hesitation.

“Naturaleza muerta.”

I thought I did not have to rely on the transadaptor for such a simple answer. I translated what he had said, word for word, but it meant nothing.

“Dead nature?” I suggested, and immediately realised that I had to connect the transadaptor.

“Still life,” it answered, far too dryly.

“But there are no still lifes in your collection, at least not in what I’ve seen so far...”

He switched off the transadaptor.

“Not now.”

“If not now, then when?”

“One day...” he said, looking away.

He got up suddenly and returned to the garden.

“But...” I began to say.

And before forgetting my reflections on the new canvas he had just shown me, I began to jot them down.

“Shape and colour intimately merged, with each colour corresponding to a single shape alone. But would the lack of colour itself have a shape, subject obviously to texture and porosity? All artwork aspires to give you a response, or so you would like to think as a viewer. You ask the questions and expect the artwork to provide the answers. But if shapeless and colourless, what will the depiction need to do to guide our attention; this is something we must ask in the face of the exhibition we are planning to hold. Trying to encounter the recognisable in a shape, any shape, is a common trait; only a courageous viewer will go for the nameless and affirm that the work may not resemble any known experience, though they may be profoundly touched by what they see. But whatever the courage, there is a need to go beyond that perfect and synchronous unit of colour and shape even if only because reasons and purposes are permanently being sought mostly out of necessity; it is but a profound psychological necessity when confronted with an indecipherable image, and there will inevitably be a degree of retouching in the mind’s eye so that it can arrive at some recognisable territory; the mind needs to solve the puzzle, any puzzle, not because it is being challenged but because this is what the mind does. It is only human to admit that we need the work to be recognisable in order to allay fears of the unknown: as an everyday object, as a memory that once haunted you, as a setback that needs to be urgently made good. And in that red-hot roseate rectangle or in that

square of the unkindest solid black we will convincingly find the familiar and the accessible. Within the intimacy of faded red and distressed black on a canvas –such seemingly quivering and not yet fully defined colours– we could find what might just comfort us: the interaction of those two colours engaging in unavoidable political undertones, or in literary nuances, or in a game of chance. And between those two-coloured shapes –not yet full shapes, in not yet fully-fledged colours– we move and are moved: one primarily stands for life and new beginnings, on the way to a shining sun; and the other, a self-appointed eerie colour resulting from absence of all things and standing mostly for the lack of life. There, caught between the two, we are forced to choose against our will because, after all, why should this be better than that, cannot both be equally good? But choose you must, the artist seems to be demanding, or perhaps you yourself have brought this choice about: it is either one or the other, like one way of life over and above another way of life; and in the process, you will forget about the options you did not choose in the same way that you must leave behind without complaint or regret other more stimulating itineraries, other more beautiful people, other more breath-taking landscapes, all for the simple reason that you cannot have and cherish everything; there is not enough time, is the usual dictum. Worse is that you cannot look elsewhere for alternatives because, after all those hours of contemplation, the two blocks have become the protagonists in the room. And now, taking a few steps back, you come to terms with the fact that they are entirely self-sufficient features, each colour and each shape with its own agenda: on the one hand, a terrible thought that is drilled into you, all about loss and failure; and on the other, a beautiful, joyous thought that soothes you beyond the visible and the tangible, as all acts of creation should. And as viewers, here we are, trying to remain steady and unwavering but sadly failing, with our eyes moving from one shape to the other again

and again. It could well be that the canvas has taken over the viewer's wayward mind, forcing it into a corner and imposing its own meaning and sense, if it entertains any such things. What did the artist think, I will ask, was he being foolish enough to involve us in an ordeal that should have been his alone? Or did he believe that the onus was on the viewer, so he entirely washed the paint from his hands, so to speak? Or could it be that the red and the black are finally free from their obstinate creator and, taking fully hold of who we are, they begin to see through our eyes and speak through our lips, for I am entrusting those blocks of colour with my soul, at least temporarily until I move on to the next painting."

Chapter 26

It was always unfinished business with the artist; he either disappeared, hesitated, or did not wish to listen to what I had to say. I thought it would all be over in a couple of days; but with him being so uncooperative, it all turned out to be more demanding than envisaged. It was to be a straightforward manoeuvre, with no spilling of blood and presumably no vile developments, yet there I was in the house by the sea, with so much to learn about him and his art. And yet I asked myself whether there was still much to be learnt or whether I already knew what I was meant to know.

“Hello!” I shouted, but again there was no reply.

Hassett could have expressed his disagreement instead of rushing off in a huff. But we were not equals; he had the upper hand and could do as he wished in his own house; my being a tried-and-true senior representative of the Agency was of no relevance in that setting. This was the logical explanation, but there was another demand that still had to be satisfied: he possessed something I desperately yearned for. It was my own private need, nothing to do with the Agency’s wish to promote Hassett’s works as a commercial operation. I had to find out what it was that moved him to dedicate himself to this ethereal thing called art to the detriment of his own life, willingly living in solitude and rejecting all other things.

“But then I’m presupposing this,” I suggested in a whisper, “because Hassett has not yet confirmed that he is committed fully to his art nor spoken in detail about his reluctance to make himself known in the art world...”

I finally saw him. He was by the cove where supposedly I had dreamt that I drowned. I would ask questions and he would have to answer because, very simply,

he was cornered. I was blocking the exit between heaps of rocks and stones on one side, and the flowing sea on the other. No, there was no way out. He was not a sturdy man and I, Iona, had been trained to basically kill, what else. He looked at my scars and smiled; he seemed to be telling me that sometimes there are things that you just cannot hide.

“Which is the more real of those two houses, the one where you supposedly live and the one you have depicted? Which of the two houses is the real one? Who is... who is the real Hassett? What is real for you? Is all this real?” I asked, looking around me, realising that my questions were increasingly more about him than about his art.

I had to put it unassumingly. In the works of his I had seen, there was nothing of the real house by the sea, despite his protestations, and certainly nothing about him and his desolate way of life, at least nothing that he had credibly explained. He had not satisfied me so far about where he stood in terms of his work, if anywhere at all. There was no artistic persona, I began to believe, but merely a man whose art was possibly too big or too mysterious even for him. And as I asked the various questions, I immediately wanted to take my words back. They sounded both simplistic and agonising, and I for one could not give satisfactory replies to any such questions about myself and my own reality unless I talked about my convoluted life and my ever more convoluted actions. But they were far more challenging questions to answer in the realm of Art, for they incorporated the two sides to the story, the proponent's and the observer's; art could not be a shared experience but a highly personal one, each to their own interpretation. So what reality was I talking about?

The transadaptor did what it was told.

“¿La realidad?” Hassett asked, opening his eyes as wide as they would go.

“Yes, reality,” I replied.

“Sí, la realidad,” said the transadaptor.

“Es mi inspiración,” Hasset then said, rubbing his eyes.

I did not need the transadaptor for that sort of thing.

“No, I don’t want that word.”

“¿Inspiración?”

This time it did not sound like an answer but a suggestion. Would I buy it, he seemed to imply.

“No!”

Oh, the innocuous comments by the artist. What is reality, sir? Reality is the place where I get my inspiration from... Very well, then. Instead of reducing the idea to its smallest denominator I resorted to what I occasionally did in my manoeuvres: I asked a direct question in all its various facets just before the kill, along the lines of *how do you want to die, you know very well why I’m about to dispose of you, you’d better tell me what you haven’t told me so far because there is no need to hold on to what won’t be of any use to you from this moment onwards...*

I reconnected the transadaptor and spoke.

“Who are you really, why have you lived away from everyone, why is it that you do your work in this most inauspicious of places, why does no one know you or your art, why...”

“Demasiadas preguntas...” he replied.

“Too many questions...” said the transadaptor.

I then asked the same but I put it differently. It was a confrontational statement, and I said more that I intended.

“Why is all this becoming a nightmare, at least for me, though it might also be a nightmare for you? In fact, it’s almost illusory, even meaningless, as if it were not real, as if there was a very different purpose to the whole experience of discovering you, as if you were not who you say you are...?”

Hassett listened to the transadaptor and was silent. I put to him one last question that had to do more with me than with him.

“Was it all a dream? Like the dream that I drowned in that stretch of sea across the cove?”

He forcibly grabbed the transadaptor from my hand and spoke into it. He did not stop talking; he was trembling but I could not tell whether it was with anger or fear. I understood just a few of the things he said in his language. After a while his tone became conciliatory, and he delivered his words lowering his voice as in a kind of confession. I waited for him to finish. Had the transadaptor picked up everything, I wondered. Were those words more meaningful than commonplace? Did they have a purpose besides replying, or were they said to appease me or even shut me up? Ultimately, were they words worth quoting? As to the word *inspiration*, he said that reality inspired him only because he could not back out of it. He also said that you worked with what you had at your disposal, whatever it was. And he finished by stating that in art you had to ultimately abide by the rules of existence, to live or to die.

“Go to the garden and look,” he said in my language.

He pushed me to one side and hurriedly ran from the cove. I decided not to follow him until I got my breath back. After a while, as he had advised me, I returned to the garden to find out if I had missed something important there.

Compared to the almost dilapidated house, the garden was the place where perfection and balance were sought. I had not examined it thoroughly yet; maybe this would be the ideal time to do so, with me in pursuit of the artist and him trying to keep away; disquiet always helped me to see things more intensely. The garden was about simplicity, in other words, it appeared so unassuming that it allowed me to think of reality only as inspiration, as the artist had said, the ultimate *here* and the decisive *now*, always quoted but never quite understood. In the midst of it, I discovered a path that crossed the whole space diagonally. The visual geometry was interrupted by the chaotic screeching of the cicadas, but I had grown accustomed to them and heard mostly alluring rhythms in their song. I followed the gravel path without once stopping; and at the very end of it, I finally found what I had anticipated: the rose garden. Unpredictably, all rosebushes there produced nothing but roses in the same yellow hue. What was the point of a rose garden, I thought, if all its flowers were of the same colour? The beauty of roses resided in their many varieties, bred explicitly in the memory of a deceased lover or dedicated to celebrated individuals; roses had so many different shades and could be as tiny as fingertips or as large as peonies. I had already had a sample when I first arrived; Hassett had left a yellow rose at the entrance to welcome me, but only now was I aware of where it had come from and, possibly, what it meant. Yes, there was a preponderance of yellow throughout the house, and now in the garden, when there was no yellow in Hassett's art except for a tiny section in the painting of a house floating in the sea.

I walked swiftly along the garden in search of clues; the answer had to be there. Not an answer with commonplace words like inspiration and reality, but with more complex ones like discernment and awakening; or redemption and absolution; or attachment and deliverance. Those were the words that could be found in that garden if I looked carefully enough, or so the artist had claimed in his broken language.

“The garden is almost perfect...” I said.

The layout had been meticulously drawn, and from my first-floor room I had appreciated its harmonious lines and symmetries. But now I was there, I saw it in its full splendour. Within the vast central area, there was a seamless and freshly-cut lawn shining like silk. There were no flowers except for the rosebushes, and on the other flank stood several small apple trees bearing almost ripe yellowing fruit; this was the section that caught most of the light, a quaint little homely orchard in the middle of a large and stylish garden. Unexpectedly, I felt like doing something I had not done since childhood in that remote boarding institution beside the sea, with its extensive and frenzied gardens, winding paths, and ancient trees. No, I had not eaten flowers since then, and now I felt compelled to do the same. Who could blame me, for I had not really had any proper food since my arrival.

“This is art... this is not art,” I remember I would say in those days before swallowing each petal.

Back then there were so many flowers, and I used to like daisies and honeysuckle most of all, comforting and warming as they were, whereas the flavour of rose petals felt far too delicate and dreamlike; as a young child, roses were the only flowers that allowed me to imagine how things would have been if they had turned out right. But in that garden by the sea, the only petals available to me were from all those yellow rosebushes.

“Roses!” I said, submerged as I was in wave after wave of yellow flowers.

What a silly spectacle I thought, a grown woman eating rose petals; I felt powerless to stop myself. Without any reason I could come up with, I had allowed myself to be dragged away by an instinct I rarely expressed; it was the kind of instinct that says that you are free to do as you wish, from enjoying the flavour of flowers to doing something

utterly pointless and entirely symbolic. I recalled my whole existence: my hidden passions, my endless flaws, the relentless search for the as yet unidentifiable, my confusing destiny that drove my confusing life, the love I was unable to give... If there were scents that could make virtues swoon, in my case there were flavours that awoke episodes I had condemned to oblivion and were being urgently recalled. But it was not a memory at all.

Let me explain.

It was a novel experience based undoubtedly on the past but happening there, in a garden that allowed me to perform a forgotten and private ritual by feasting on all those yellow blooms, on a permanently hot summer's day, along a perfectly cut lawn as quiet as a placid sea, all sounds drowned by the unrepentant cicadas, and with an artist who from afar, I was sure of that, had seen me seizing his roses but had decided not to say a thing.

Chapter 27

“What have you prepared?” I asked.

I was back in the kitchen, my hunger pangs uncontrollable by then. The housekeeper was sweating profusely in front of a very hot stove.

“Sit,” she commanded, with no *please* or *would you mind*.

She then smiled as if remembering something.

“Thank you,” I said.

I sat at the table and waited. She had set it beautifully: pretty porcelain plates embellished with tiny pink buds, silver cutlery, a cut glass tumbler. She took her concoction out of the oven, she served me but not herself. I was to eat alone.

“But...” I complained and looked up.

She had left.

It was a dish that I could not quite make out, with far too many ingredients. I would not call it a pie of this or a casserole of that, but an assortment of, well, various unidentified components that might, as I saw them, only be found in an artist’s atelier: tiny drops of pungent blue paint, splotches of squishy transparent lacquer, unidentified insipid pigments, shiny beads of brackish red, streaks of pulsing lustre, minute spicy strips of expended canvas... in all, rhythmic iridescence, supple radiance, fragrant exuberance. The taste was exquisite, but not knowing what exactly I was eating unsettled me a little.

“Hello,” the housekeeper said.

She appeared in the kitchen when I had taken the last mouthful. I thanked her and said the dish was delicious.

“How enjoyable to eat proper food finally,” I commented.

She was solemn when entering the kitchen but smiled affectedly when she saw that my plate was empty.

“What are the ingredients?” I added, and immediately realised it was the wrong question.

Her smile ceased abruptly, and her wrinkles became deeper.

“Many things,” she replied.

The question remained unanswered. She cleared the table swiftly and turned to me.

“You want to see other painting?”

“You mean another one... a new one?”

“Yes.”

“Something I’ve not seen before?”

She nodded, but I was not sure that the artist would like that. I tried to explain it to her, but she insisted.

“This is beautiful painting... my favourite,” she said in broken sentences. “You will like... yes, like this painting... very much, yes.”

I got up from the table and followed her up the stairs. I was still unafraid of the staircase, and the housekeeper sailed along it without hesitation. She had a bunch of keys in her apron pocket, and opened a door. We entered the room beyond my yellow room. Inside was a tiny space, empty but for a small canvas covered with a piece of grey cloth and leaning against the wall.

“This!” she said, kneeling down and lifting the cloth.

She did it so swiftly that I thought a bird had taken flight. And there was the painting, shining in the dark.

It was a small portrait of a grown woman and a very young girl, a child, both squeezed into the canvas, with their outlines almost touching each other. Peering into a most private moment, the painting was intrusive, almost insensitive. The two figures in profile looked surprised, eyes wide open as if shocked at the viewer closing in on them and invading their privacy. There were dark patches on either side of the two figures, maybe shadows. The portrayed woman appeared to be concealing the young girl, as if protecting her, both kneeling in the tiniest space the artist had allowed them. They were covered by gauze or a very fine tulle, but the ochre-coloured surface made it difficult to see what they were wearing, if anything at all. Though the two occupied such a small area, there was no contact between them: the woman extended her hands but did not hold the girl, and the girl could not quite reach the woman with her little arms. There was a tenderness in the painting that made the viewer want to embrace them both and safeguard them from the outside world.

“This is so... so lovely...” I said, enthralled by the painting.

The housekeeper beamed. It was not her usual smile, out of courtesy, but a joyful and admiring grin.

“Yes!” she replied.

“The artist must be so proud of this particular work. It may be the best I’ve seen so far, at least the most moving.”

“Moving?”

I explained.

“Expressive, evocative, suggestive...” I said, remembering Mr Taras and his proclivities.

Unexpectedly the housekeeper stopped smiling and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I put light on,” she said, getting up.

And as she switched on the ceiling lamp, tears sprung from my eyes too.

“Don’t say... to Hassett I show you... this painting...” she warned.

Barely able to speak, she still smiled.

I realised that the dark patches along both figures in the painting were not shadows but long black hair, both the woman’s and the child’s. Or should I call them mother and daughter? The location seemed to be a cave or a grotto where they had posed for the painting. Or it could be the setting where they had been locked up, confined to an existence where their only source of contentment was each other; this was the story that the artwork suggested. The woman’s locks reached her waist, and the young girl’s hair were shoulder-length. Although they were profile portraits, it was clear that both figures had the same small, upturned nose and pouting lips. The woman’s face showed only one side, the good side, the unspoilt side. It could be that the side not visible to the viewer had been damaged in some way and only the child could see it; and yet the little girl’s expression was of wonderment and not fear.

“But...” I began to say.

“Yes?”

“This is...”

“Yes?”

“This can only be...”

“Yes, only...”

I got up and switched off the light. It was unbearable to see any more.

“The woman and the little girl...” I said, but I could not continue.

The housekeeper wept in silence.

“I don’t understand!”

I wanted to scream. It was all a mistake, a huge and terrible mistake.

“No!” I shouted.

I was trembling and shaking my head left and right. The housekeeper smiled once more, but her tears shone along her cheeks.

“But... but how can this be... The artist knows nothing about my life... Even less would he know about... about... about...”

And I began to feel nauseous once again.

The double portrait had impressed me more for how it blatantly interfered with my life than for any commendable qualities. And I wrote: “You cannot judge a work of art with emotions alone, but withholding them will impede any lucid interpretation. In experiencing art, both the rational and the sentimental must be on full alert and leave no stone unturned. You cannot, must not, avoid what art can do to you: from distressing you to elating you, from instilling indifference to changing your life. Finding the personal in a depiction may be heart-rending or delightful as the case may be, but any emotions stirring in unison must be allowed to be part of the experience. Yet an emotion is not always a presentiment of some hidden truth, neither is art always an indictment...”

And as I wrote, I decided that these were not my thoughts, but something meant for an exhibition catalogue or an art directory. I was not sure I wanted this painting explained, but I had to set the record straight, if only for myself.

“And once again, Rodin makes a mark in my life, as his Burghers would regularly do back in the city, along my many walks. But this time, it was to be his most precious sculpture of a woman and child, or a young mother in a grotto, or simply a young mother, or a woman and love; a work known by so many identities. And Hassett

has done nothing but copy this celebrated work with no consideration for the original and even less for the depicted woman and the depicted child. The painting creates nothing but a false impression, for those two characters never once posed for the artist nor did they share any memorable moment, expressly in such a private setting. And my viewing of the portrait of two figures linked by flesh and blood is no more than a fateful accident that must remain unexplained since no one, but no one, must know the complete story. I will not discuss the issue further; I refuse. And my textual interpretation of this work by the artist will not be included in the exhibition and must be completely disowned...”

I seemed to be alone in the house once again. I used the opportunity to look for my various gadgets, the technology as Hassett had put it. Everything was under lock and key; such old and rusty locks could not be forced, and the locked wooden doors were still holding. I looked everywhere in the house, behind covered paintings, under aged pieces of furniture, in old creaking cupboards. It was clear that I had to go on working with pencil and paper.

Chapter 28

I was dealing with something I could not quite make out, a dissonance between me and my surroundings that did not let me breathe freely or think uncoerced. But there also seemed to be a conflict within: something unknown was hounding me, and I did not feel resilient enough to confront it. I had plenty of reasons to pick from, but the dammed and as yet inscrutable artwork was the most salient. The effects of my sudden nausea were not to be discarded either, as were the many disappointing encounters with the artist. However extensive my experience in the toughest cases involving, to use our cliché at the Agency, *death and destruction*, I felt that what I would bring with me for the exhibition was not going to be enough; I needed more of his *words*, more of his *works*. There were unanswered questions about the paintings I had seen, not only because Hasset was unwilling to cooperate as I would have wished or as a result of his wide-ranging genres and styles, which he was and they were. It had to do, though I was not entirely sure of this, with the fact that his works increasingly reminded me of other artists and schools, albeit fleetingly and sparingly.

“A homage to the prodigies that came before him?”

And as I asked the question in a loud voice, it appeared more a fact and less a suspicion. Innately, Art integrated the past (and occasionally anticipated the future) since artists could not avoid influences from what had gone on before in terms of art creation. Art begets Art, it could not be any other way. But the situation with Hasset's work felt very different; possibly not tribute but plunder, not inspiration but copy. The feeling that there was more than met the eye began to overwhelm me. Until then, I had not wanted to give in to my reservations in case they led to something I had no

desire to contemplate. There was something, should I say, not poignant enough or sufficiently tormenting or amply electrifying about the artworks I had seen so far. To put it simply: on the one hand, they appeared to be all those things; on the other, they instilled in me nothing but detachment.

“I had much to say about those works, but they did not touch me as I had expected...”

I suppose what most confused me was the ominous picture showing me and my child in a private setting when we had never been in the same space except for the few times I had visited her and, obviously, at the moment of parturition: a new-born and me. And even then, that closest of proximities had lasted minutes, with the Reeses taking the child away after the birth.

“I don’t want her near me!” I had said to them, not entirely sure whether what I felt was revulsion or guilt.

Yes, that painting was so very alike, albeit in two dimensions, to a sculpture of a mother and a child in a grotto by the most celebrated sculptor of recent times. And yet the painting by Hassett, as emotional as it could have been, had left me as cold as the act of giving birth.

Neither Hassett nor the housekeeper replied when I called out; there was no one else in the place, yet I felt I was being watched. It was a feeling I had developed over the years: a brief crackling sound or a fleeting image immediately awoke in me the worst misgivings. Without the breeze blowing, leaves and petals rustled along the garden and bushes swayed, but I also saw a flash of red and heard a subdued voice. I called out several times and thought someone was saying my name in response, just like I heard someone call out to me when I was drowning or dreaming I was drowning.

“Iona, Iona, Iona!”

It could only be a dream; what else? Dreaming about leaving the house and walking in any direction. Dreaming that my last moments would be spent among relentless waves, marine creatures, seaweed, treacherous currents. Dreaming that a canvas depicted in oil a scene with a woman and her child as some kind of document attesting to an episode that was best kept secret, yet nothing more meaningful than that.

“Was there something in the food I ate?”

I craved some respite, even if temporary. Thus, I left the house and walked away, not fully grasping that I was walking until I had covered quite some distance.

“What crop can it be?”

Once again, I saw the unidentifiable and luscious crop variety along the way. Yes, I was returning to the place from whence I had set off. The route to the village meandered along country roads and gradually moved inland. And when I had no more strength to go on, I was already in the village square. This time I would be showing my face openly, without a covering or any sense of shame.

There they were. The same people I had seen when I first arrived, in almost the same position I had left them: the taxi driver in his vehicle, the only one parked in the taxi rank; the elderly locals sitting on benches around the square with nothing to do; the children playing uninterestedly with a deflated ball. All of them appeared to be out of breath.

“Hello,” I said, surely they could understand that most basic of greetings.

The taxi driver got out of his vehicle and approached me, signalling something I could not quite make out.

“Yes?”

He lifted his arms, embracing a vast stretch of air and moving them in circles like a craft about to take off.

“Are you asking me whether I want a taxi?”

He nodded, but who could say whether it was a *yes* or a *no*. In the state I was in, he could not have taken me seriously: a woman with an offensively crumpled cambric dress and torn sandals, a strip or two of seaweed dangling from her hair, and a likely expression of near defeat on one side of her face and total devastation on the other. Oh, the things that had been done to me, whether dreamt or not.

“No, I don’t want a taxi...” I replied and tried to smile.

But what I should have said, by means of some dramatic gesticulating, were things like *please take me anywhere but the house... I give up... I don’t want to go on... this is more than any human can bear...* A powerful noise made us all look up.

“The local bus!” I shouted, announcing the obvious.

The heavily corroded bus stopped in the middle of the square, its brakes screeching like a wild animal. No passengers were getting out; no passengers were queueing to climb in. Its arrival seemed to be the only attraction that afternoon. Those sitting on the wooden benches in the square appeared to be relieved, and several people showed their faces from the windows to look at the empty bus idling and waiting. Waiting for what, I could only speculate; possibly to stay there until it filled up with passengers so it might embark cost-effectively on the journey back.

“No!” I said, shaking my hands to stress the word in case the driver thought I wanted a ride.

And about to turn and go back, I looked around. Like the previous time I had been in the village, the inhabitants were either very old or very young. Some of the older ones sitting on benches got up and walked towards me. And those watching from the first floors of the few single-storey buildings came down to the square and began to approach me. I was surrounded.

“Is this all in my mind?” I shouted.

Yes, I felt threatened by a group of harmless elderly villagers, seeing them as menacing, their hands as fists and the corners of their mouths downturned.

“Go away!” I shouted, pushing them back and thrusting my way out of the melee.

I rushed to the centre of the square. There was a stone fountain without a drop of water, doubling as a goalpost; the children were half-heartedly playing around it with their deflated ball. They looked so wearied that I decided to interact with them; hopefully they could tell me something I did not know, though I doubted I would understand them. I knelt and looked at their sullen faces.

“Your eyes...” I shouted, and they turned their heads away from me.

Their irises were shining brightly as if coated with a gleaming liquid. I then approached the taxi driver standing alongside his vehicle and pointed at the children.

“Have you seen that?” I asked him, my heart thumping. “Their eyes are...”

And as he looked up, I saw that his eyes flickered awkwardly and glazed over.

I don't remember anything after that, for the nausea I had felt since the morning overpowered me, and then everything went black.

I woke up in the yellow room, convinced that the colour of those walls was more a sign of distress than a shade of paint.

“Hello!” I shouted.

Someone had brought me back to the house, maybe the taxi driver.

“Hello!” I shouted again, but no one replied.

What would I dream of next? An exhibition of indiscernible art or a semblance of what art might be when it exists only in someone’s words, artworks that did not make impressions of any kind in the viewer’s mind, or an artist who wished to paint nothing but still lifes and yet depicted a house melodramatically surrounded by the sea and ostensibly screaming for help?

“It couldn’t all have been a dream...” I said out loud.

What had happened in the village still felt fresh: how the elderly inhabitants had wanted to intimidate me, or so I believed, and how the wearied children looked at me with gleaming eyes and reminded me of the concierges back at the Paranyrn. The event had all the features of a threatening dream; and if it had been a dream, I still needed to wake up from it.

I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

It was the artist.

“New painting, not finished,” he announced, opening his eyes wide, and failing to ask what had happened to me; maybe he already knew.

I was not sure what to do. I wanted to see a new painting but maybe not. I wanted to go but then I wanted to stay. I had left the house; I had come back to it. Perhaps I would leave again and then return. Or not. The lure of another painting forced me to get up from the bed.

“But the village, but the people in the village, but...”

“Come...” he said, attempting a smile. “With machine.”

“You mean the transadaptor?”

I trailed behind him along the corridor and then made him stop in front of the door that concealed the painting of a mother and a child.

“How did you know what I looked like before I even arrived here?” I asked him breathlessly. “How come you were aware of the existence of a child? Did someone provide you with photographs of both of us? How was it that...?”

I could not go on asking any more questions. The persistent nausea I was feeling had taken its toll.

“Come,” he repeated, probably not having understood all my many questions.

And the door beyond my door and the next one opened to a large room with a window overlooking the road at the back of the house. It had an easel on one side and a few tubes of paint tidily placed on a small cabinet on the other, but there were no preliminary sketches pinned to the walls or splashes of paint on the floor. I was going to ask him whether this was the lived-in studio of a seasoned artist. And about to connect the transadaptor, I noticed the object sitting on a table. It was very red.

“A hat!” I shouted.

“Yes, hat,” he said, “new painting.”

And there was the hat, admirable in all its features, as red as a post-box, with a partridge feather on one side and a piece of seaweed on the other. It must have been a heavily used hat, threadbare as it was, in its last throes. No, it could not claim to be a hat any longer, more a memory of a hat, a hint of a hat, the suggestion of a hat...

Yes, Iona, I said to myself, you are already talking about the hat, nothing more than the object of an artwork, describing it profusely and coming to firm conclusions

about it when you have not yet seen its depiction nor appreciated how it has been reinterpreted in oil. I turned towards the easel that Hassett was pointing at.

“The red hat,” he announced unnecessarily.

The contours of the depicted hat had almost no colour; the red paint had been coarsely blended in the centre of the image, dying down to virtual transparency in its recesses in a perfect *sfumato*. And where the red was most intense, it appeared more in splodges than brushstrokes. A hat was, after all, a simple representation; what could go wrong with drawing the arches and wings of a hat, its crown and brim? Far too easy a composition, though its depiction could well say a great deal about its owner and even intimate any dreams it likely housed or the purposes of its use: to cover up in the cold, to protect from the sun, to ask for coins in case of necessity, to contain numbers to be drawn in a raffle.

“My red hat,” the artist added and smiled proudly, this time assigning it to himself with the possessive.

He showed me his hands, stained with red paint, probably to prove that he was the one who had painted, well, a red hat. I switched on the transadaptor.

“I cannot understand,” I said, still puzzled by the simple image of a hat. “All the other works you’ve shown me so far are highly complex, difficult to decipher, excruciating as statements, and yet you’re now working on... on... on a hat.”

The transadaptor finished translating my comments, but Hassett did not seem offended.

“He decidido...” he began to say.

“Yes?”

“He decidido que tengo que volver a lo sencillo, a lo básico, a lo elemental, al origen mismo de las cosas...”

“I have decided that I must return to the simple, the basic, the elementary, the same origin of things...” said the mechanical voice of the transadaptor, as unimpressed as I was.

“You mean the *very* origin of things...” I needlessly complained to the transadaptor, and switched it off.

I was reminded of Mr Taras and his endless lists, but I also recalled the head of my squadron because of the hat itself. Yes, the red hat could wholly be one of Mr Taras’s possessions; he owned many hats, all diversely embellished (the feather, the bud, the twig, the velvet bow, the rosette in lace). And thinking of Mr Taras and his many hats, my nausea worsened. I was going to ask the artist to elaborate further on his musings; but first, I had to ask a question.

“And where did you get this... this hat?” I said, pointing at the table where the object of his latest inspiration sat.

He looked confused.

“Sea.”

“You mean you found it in the sea... on the beach?”

“Yes, beach.”

“That’s why it has seaweed stuck to it...”

He turned his palms towards me, undoubtedly to express that he could not understand my comment. I was about to switch on the transadaptor, but I had another idea. Without any shred of evidence, someone from the Agency once joked that if you said something very slowly, those who spoke another language would understand you. As absurd as this was, perhaps it could work with the artist since he knew a few words in my language. I was feeling so much in awe of everything around me that such irrational premises appeared to make sense.

“And... and to whom... does... this... red... hat... belong?”

Hassett showed me his reddened palms again, probably to state that he had not understood a single word.

I could not face describing the hat, nor discussing its features from the perspective of colour and shape, nor speculating on what it either suggested or silenced as a work of art. A hat was a hat, after all. I would have wanted to talk further with the artist about what he meant with his latest offering, but he exited the room in a rush, yet another of his sudden disappearances. He failed to lock the door, and I was left on my own with the two hats: the real one, whether abandoned or lost, and its unexciting representation, whether an outline or a finished product. Yes, despite its elusive qualities as a painting it could well have been a completed work, and that was as far as the artist would go on the canvas. To me, it said nothing unusual or remarkable; but then I was not myself because of the nausea still enveloping me. And as I thought of food, I went to the kitchen.

There was no sign of the housekeeper, yet the table was set, and the food in the pan was warm. I served myself some of that multicoloured stew. It was flavoursome, though still unidentifiable.

“Delicious...” I could not help saying out loud.

I had eaten two spoonsful when I suffered a dizzy spell. It could have been another sudden blackholing event. I wondered whether there was something in the stew, that colourful concoction that could not be readily identified.

“Maybe it’s not so delicious after all...” I said out loud and stopped eating.

In that troubled state, I could not write a single word, certainly not about a red hat. I should have used the recording facility on the transadaptor and dictated all I

wanted, but I felt too indisposed even for that. I was sure Hassett did not know a thing about such a facility, otherwise he would have stopped me from using the transadaptor as well.

“Recording your message will allow you less time to reflect than if you jot down what you think,” I said, remembering one of Lundy’s pieces of advice regarding the transadaptor, “but what you dictate will be so much closer to your thoughts, communicating them almost immediately and in their original state...”

No, I could not bear to do either, neither write my words nor record my ideas. And then I remembered. Yes, there was yet another facility on the device. It could obey specific orders and requests, a command I had yet to use. Much more advanced as compared to previous versions of intelligent devices; its knowledge, according to Lundy, was unlimited.

“You can ask it anything you want,” Lundy had told me back at HQ with a huge smile, “as some kind of magic lamp that can grant you any of your wishes.”

“As long as they’re three?” I asked her, trying out some banter but she did not reply.

I wondered what the transadaptor would do after three requests. Might it turn against you, transform you into a changeling, or totally take hold of your life? And as I mused pointlessly, I lifted the transadaptor until it was very close to my eyes.

“Talk about a painting of a red hat,” I ordered, thinking that it was not a bad idea to let it do all the work while I did nothing.

And the device immediately told me what it thought about a red hat, not having seen one before and not having touched or smelt one. Certainly not having worn one, purchased one in a store, given it to someone as a gift, or desired it desperately when

admiring it in a shop window for months until a kind soul presented it to them for their birthday. With no lived-in experience of a hat, the subject was technologically discussed and theoretically analysed: the shape and the colour; the procedure and the purpose; the *what* but not the *why*, the latter being the only component I was interested in. Assumptions were made about the reasons for the colour of this imaginary hat, and conclusions were reached regarding the reaction that an illusory painting might or might not produce in the observer. All mere speculation, yet convincing enough; the device played it safe in the guise of some carefully worded methodical observation whilst warning us as viewers that we might need further context to make a sound judgment on the artwork or to find out what the artist ultimately intended with their painting. Indeed, a theoretician's view and not a practitioner's, albeit applying incomplete and hackneyed notions, half-baked or otherwise, and not splendiferous and carefree thoughts. Interestingly, the hat was described verbally using a more involved and committed voice than the bluntly anodyne translating discourse. More importantly, its words sounded a little grand, as if the transadapter knew that its speech would be recorded for posterity as the ultimate judgment on a hat that happened to be red: "The red hat occupies a central position within the composition, drawing immediate attention through its distinct colouration and placement. The hue of red utilized by the artist is vibrant and saturated, evoking a sense of intensity and commanding visual presence. The hat is meticulously rendered, with precise brushwork capturing its texture, shape, and intricate details. The redness of the hat is contrasted against a subtle background, creating a juxtaposition that enhances the hat's visual impact. The hat is strategically positioned using the rule of thirds or other compositional techniques to create a dynamic and visually engaging arrangement. The artist may have utilized leading lines or directional elements to guide the viewer's

gaze towards the hat, emphasizing its significance within the composition. The artist demonstrates technical proficiency in the rendering of light and shadow, using chiaroscuro or other shading techniques to create a sense of volume and dimensionality. The play of light on the hat's surface is meticulously observed, resulting in the realistic depiction of highlights, reflections, and cast shadows. The emotional response elicited by the red hat could range from a sense of boldness and vibrancy to notions of individuality or cultural symbolism, though such interpretations should be inferred with caution without specific context or knowledge of the artist's intent."

The transadaptor could have gone on conjecturing *ad infinitum* without any sensory knowledge of the world of hats. What it had produced was not the type of text I wanted or expected. But for the moment, it would do. So much for the age-old adage that there is nothing in the mind that has not previously crossed the threshold of the senses.

"Aristotle!" I remembered.

Lacking the five senses, the gadget could not have admired the rich colour of the original hat nor warm to its suppleness; it could not have smelt the soft fibres nor run its fingers along the smooth felt. It saw the hat through what others had seen before, all of it based on the boundless information that had been fed into it like I was being fed by mouth a bizarre concoction which, I suspected, was making me unwell. Ultimately, the device lacked the necessary experience, human or otherwise, and more importantly it knew nothing about the excitement and even the rapture that experienced events could invoke.

"Or perhaps..."

Or perhaps the transadaptor was *hallucinating*, as Lundy had warned me could happen. Naturally it would not *hallucinate* in the usual way, as a result of sensory deprivation or substance abuse or technical overdrive, nor because of any medical or psychiatric condition. After all, hallucinations were internal and not external, there was no outer reality to them, and cognition and perception could not be their causes in the case of such devices; but conceivably, these could be generated digitally as well. The transadaptor's way of hallucinating was surely believing that its ideas about a hat were, well, the only way to think about a hat: as though no one had seen a hat before, and the hat it discussed was the first and last one ever, the greatest hat that existed. It could also be that Lundy had fed an additional request into the system: a simulation in the hope of mimicking an actual observer of hats, with a personality to match and emotions to complete the picture.

“The simulation of a simulation of a...”

And yet a fragmentary image of a red hat by Hassett stayed in my mind, and every time I closed my eyes I would see it. Even if a coarsely expressed figuration, it still touched me more than I thought possible. Was that also art, I asked, Hassett's worst painting to date? Was art also the portrayal of an everyday object, ineptly carried out, merely observed and not explored or interrogated, probably not yet a finished artwork? Which depictions would make it into the realm of art, and which would not? Can any representation be called artistic, creative or original? Who was I to say this is art, and this is not art; this is inspired, and this has been carried out with no inspiration at all, whatever inspiration may be as a tool or justification for creation; this is good, and this is not so good? Yes, why should I express a view when confronted with what was possibly a work in progress, a brainstorming venture, an attempt however futile at artistic interpretation? It was clear that Hassett's portrayal of the red hat, a still life

after all, had affected me more than the other paintings I had seen so far, all those works that showed considerable accomplishment and quite a degree of confidence. And yet the image of the red hat seemed... how could I put it?

“More authentic...”

Yes, that was it. In its own simple and unremarkable way, there was more authenticity in Hasset’s image of the red hat than in his other artworks. There was a determination in its application of colour; there was a purpose in the way it enticed the observer; there was a significance in how it urged me to find out more about it despite its ordinariness. No, art that demanded fancy words to expound on its complexity was not enough. Art had to be asserted and affirmed, but mostly it had to make an imprint on the mind of the viewer, stirring emotions and awakening memories as added bonuses.

“The red hat...” I said, closing my eyes.

Chapter 29

I needed to find out whether there were other artworks in the house as absorbing as the painting of the red hat but preferably more elaborate, mostly for the sake of the exhibition we were planning to hold. If Hassett had achieved such intensity with a simple image, I was sure he would have other works lined up that could generate a similar kind of response from the viewer. No doubt, the works I had seen so far had indeed impressed me, but not to the point of shaking me to my entrails like the art I regularly collected or those works I had contemplated and studied in so many galleries and museums.

“Although about the subject of death, such are the paintings that make me come alive...”

I climbed the stairs and came down again. Went out to the garden, returned. I instinctively avoided the kitchen, unsure about the concoction the housekeeper had prepared for me. And not knowing what exactly I was looking for, I found it. It was another canvas, the only one along the corridor on the ground floor, rather small compared to the other works I had seen. Part of the sheet covering it had slipped, and I could see the white neck of a bottle, its milky and undulating transparency.

“A spectre of a bottle!”

I checked whether the artist was around. I was on my own, so I pulled the sheet and observed the painting in its total simplicity, its lack of abundance.

“A spectre...”

It was a still life, dull and impassive, and crowded with objects in muted colours: transparent bottles on display, an empty earthenware cup, an upside-down iron

saucepan, a lemon juicer, an unopened box with no engraving but solely a lock. I closed my eyes.

“The red hat!” I said, naming what my mind was seeing.

I got closer to the still-life and saw in detail the audacious brushstrokes, far too much movement for a tranquil and unobtrusive genre. I even dared touch its surface, appreciating that it was rougher than expected; so much coarser was the grain of the canvas, lumpier its shell. I smelt it, expecting an odourless oil paint, and yet there was a sharp, acid smell, not entirely unpleasant though. I wondered what the artist had called it (*bottles and other objects, or dead life, or dead nature, or simply death*; he was prone to call things by their name) and whether it was his favourite among the still lifes he claimed he enjoyed painting. I rather liked the work; I could not deny it. Primarily for its simplicity, it allowed a sense of abandonment in the viewer, a need to forget all and focus on those unexciting objects for the modest purpose of getting carried away by nothingness and senselessness, with not much pondering and, mostly, with no anguish involved. This time I would not ask the transadaptor to describe the painting; I decided it might be too complex a piece of work for an electronic contraption to discuss and pretend it knew all about still lifes (the command to the transadaptor would have been too wordy: *describe a painting in muted colours, with transparent bottles, an earthenware cup, an upside-down iron saucepan, a lemon juicer, and a box with a lock, all of them objects that cannot truly be used in the privacy of a home, and please do so using a rather laconic writing style in keeping with the dreary image, bearing in mind that the viewer is feeling particularly woeful when faced with such a portrayal...*). Instead, I decided to record all these ideas that were showing up unexpectedly in my mind. I was too weary to use pencil and paper, but a recording

would allow me to be more direct and therefore postulate a more personalised and immediate opinion along the lines of what Lundy had mentioned about using the transadaptor.

“Everyday objects rest in the foreground, humdrum and idle, nothing that we would care to mention had we been asked to guard them to avoid breakages. The discarded takes centre stage and aims at making a statement, however banal. Invariably, the viewer must be given a chance to play a role in the painting; the more intimate the role is allowed to be, the easier to achieve an alternative exploration and make unpredicted discoveries when we suspect there is not much to be explored or exposed. After all, the items have not been placed there to impress the eye but more likely to soothe the mind, and if this is mere speculation on my part, it is because I would sincerely wish them to do exactly that. Any attempt at understanding why the work should be what it is, why those neutral colours were chosen, why one should bother with objects that are mostly castoffs in any standard household, could well be met with indifference, the sort of *so what, who cares, there's no point, keep quiet, remain very still*. Must there be a meaning to this artwork, and how can we be sure that any meaning we come up with answers the question that the artist asked by virtue of his work? Or decided not to ask, but was very much a latent question? Moreover, the objects are the more useless the closer you get to them, for the bottles appear not to have an opening at the top of their far too elongated necks, the cup is cracked, the lemon juicer is missing the bottom section, the lock in the box appears to be broken. Were these objects ever used, or were they solely created to be painted one day by someone with the time and the inclination? It is all so annoyingly limited on that canvas, from the range of colours, none of them clearly defined like faded rose or washed-out blue, to the pitiable variety of the objects depicted, and finally to the viewpoint of the

artist, looking straight ahead with no gradient of any sort. Even the shadows seem out of place, corresponding to what is not visible in the painting but could well be if we were to change our vantage point. From which angle, I wonder, did the artist depict those shadows; there is uncertainty as to what they might be echoing were they to be moved a little to the left or the right, flattened as they are with no vanishing point and no perspective. Such dark contours seem not to correspond to the depicted utensils, an indication that these were displaced somewhat after their original location, or they may be the shadows projected by other utensils further in the background, behind where the artist is standing. Overall, there is a despondency suggested by the depiction, that bottomless feeling that surges when we ruminate on endings and dying, possibly because the portrayed objects, supposedly once vibrant, are now nothing but the remains of what was and is no more, much like cadavers on a slab in preparation to be dissected. But what if I were to look deeper still? Not all is revealed when closing in and reducing the distance between eyes and surface; yet I begin to appreciate that those brushstrokes are making a statement more than the objects themselves to assert that this is how the work was done and do not think for a second that it was produced out of nothingness. On even closer inspection, there appears to be something else beyond the physical efforts and mental strains of an artist setting out on a new art venture, but not entirely belonging there; it would appear that those far too bold brushstrokes were meant for a more daring depiction with, say, horses galloping or waves crashing or crowds fleeing. This work required a softer, lighter touch of the brush, which makes you wonder why that investment in energy unless there was something else the depiction wanted to express, something much more powerful than a picture of various utensils from daily life. Worse: there is a dark element about the work, not that you need more light for better viewing. It is a darkness

of a different kind, more pervasive and long-lasting, asserting the bleakness of endings, of unreserved melancholy. What is Hassett saying then, if he wants to say anything at all? For his is a denial of explanations; once the images appear on a canvas, they cease to belong to him and can now be appropriated, albeit in pictorial terms, by anyone standing three feet away and assigning to the painting any plusses or minuses they may so wish. There is no rightful owner in art as representation. No rightful implication. No further choices, unless one's own. An artwork exists for the sake of art, if that is reason enough to continue operating as an artist with no further ado. In all, the depiction is a refusal to affirm anything of substance except for the irrelevance of objects that were once possibly cherished but ended up posing for an artist who cared not a jot about them, his commanding brushstrokes completely out of place there. Those objects are simply discarded, and justly they deserve to be. I would reject them as well if I had a choice, yet not the resulting work which, at length, shows one way of keeping and heightening the unusable, even the hopeless. And despite all, those objects are telling me what I should know: that everyday existence, however cheerful, will one day turn into a still life forever. But I have my doubts even about that..."

I switched off the transadaptor and took a deep breath. I was left with a sense of the incongruous but placidly so. I wanted to know if this was what the artist had aimed for, with those pitiful objects in subdued colours –so many colours, except for yellow. On my part, it had been a tiring scrutiny, even though recording it on the transadaptor had made it a more instantaneous and intimate experience. I desperately needed a moment of tranquillity, and I closed my eyes.

"The red hat!"

I covered the still life with the cloth, making sure that the top of one of the bottles was still visible, as it had been when I first came across it.

“No one has seen this painting today...” I said and smiled.

And there was the artist beside me, just like that. He appeared as suddenly as he had disappeared.

“I’m so sorry...” I said, pointing at the canvas.

He also smiled but shrugged his shoulders.

“Sorry!” I repeated.

I spoke into the transadaptor and explained that I had not been able to resist examining that particular painting, for it was just lying there in the corridor. And anyway, the piece of cloth was not entirely covering it and part of the painting was showing, therefore I was tempted to explore further. I went on justifying my actions more than was strictly necessary and apologising profusely, childishly fraught with a sense of guilt for my very minor transgression. I remembered my excessive apologising in another place by the seaside many years earlier, when in class I was caught trying to draw the sea from the classroom window, and was consequently badly chastised for disobedience, with no food for a whole twenty-four hours.

“Is this your favourite still life?” I asked, hoping we would move on to the painting, and connected the transadaptor.

He did not seem willing to reply. He hesitated, coughed, looked here and there.

“Your favourite?” I asked again.

He took a deep breath. It seemed like he had understood my question, but he replied in his language.

“He pintado muchas naturalezas muertas, más de las que nadie imagina. Pero este cuadro me abruma y me asusta. Lo mejor sería destruirlo.”

The transadaptor spoke without a hint of concern in the matter.

“I have painted many still lifes, more than anyone can imagine. But this painting overwhelms and frightens me. The best would be to destroy it.”

I shivered when I heard those words.

“It would be best to destroy it? How can you say that about one of your works?”

The transadaptor articulated my words in the target language, but the artist said nothing. I decided it was time to put my thoughts to him about his *homage* (it was a better word than *mimicking* or *plagiarising*) to established artists throughout his work. In fact, they were more concerns than thoughts.

“I have been noticing certain... certain influences in some of your other works but decided not to discuss this until I had seen more... more of what you do?”

The transadaptor explained, and Hassett nodded.

“Yes?” he replied, a question and not an answer.

I elaborated.

“Among others, I can think of...”

“Yes?”

I spoke quickly.

“... of Rothko... of Hopper... of Munch... I was also reminded of a small sculpture by Rodin. Incidentally, there was no emulation of women artists whatsoever, only male. And in the case of this painting of a still life, it is more than obvious who you were inspired by.”

I stopped speaking. I was going too fast and sensed that the transadaptor, but more so the artist, could not catch up with me.

“In this still life,” I continued, “you were inspired by...”

“Yes?”

“... inspired by... Morandi.”

The transadaptor did what it was supposed to do, ending with three words which sounded like a sentence passed.

“...inspirado por Morandi.”

The artist looked a little bemused. I stressed what I had said.

“In my view, this painting is very much a Morandi,” I added.

“Morandi?” Hassett asked.

“I mean, an interpretation of Morandi...” I suggested. “A version, an imitation, a simulation... Without wanting to offend you, it could also be... an assassination of Morandi...”

I burst into laughter at my own suggestion. I covered my mouth with my hands, but it was too late.

“My apologies...” I added as the transadaptor went on translating my words.

I was not one bit sorry, really. In fact, I was glad that I had finally confronted Hassett. It was about time I spoke the truth. I had given in far too much with the whole project, beginning with the decision by Mr Taras to commission me when I had not taken part in any of the groundwork and ending with Hassett’s demand that I could not use any technology, thus making my task almost impossible. The transadaptor was a necessary evil, supposedly, in his mind; but also, and for different reasons, in mine. Again, I dishonestly apologised.

“I’m sorry, but these are some of my thoughts...”

Hassett shook his head. I could not tell whether he felt slighted or had simply not understood. I had let the transadaptor deal with my speech, hoping it would adjust the words somewhat to make them a little kindlier. Still, the artist said nothing.

“I take it that you’re familiar with the artist I mentioned,” I suggested.

I explained it all in simple terms and made the transadaptor interpret. Hassett smiled throughout the stilted account coming from the transadaptor.

“This particular work is so alike Morandi’s style in both technique and subject matter that one would think that you were... you were producing a... a fake!” I said, and again laughed, this time at the ridiculous idea.

Hassett gestured to indicate that he had not understood. And I realised that the transadaptor had become unset. I shook it in the air, hoping this would bring it back to life.

“A fake!” I repeated, managing to connect the device once again.

“Una copia...” the transadaptor said, but did not stop there, “... una imitación, un engaño, un fraude, una falsificación, un amaño, un fingimiento, una tergiversación, una falsedad...”

There was an element of thrill in its voice; perhaps it like being challenged and wanted to show off.

“... una impostura,” it went on, “una farsa, una simulación, una abulencia, una ficción...”

I shook the transadaptor once again, this time to stop it.

“A fake!” I said again.

Something was disturbing Hassett deeply, and he shut his eyes. But I carried on with a new set of suggestions, speaking into the awaiting transadaptor.

“Art forgery,” I stated.

“Falsificación de arte,” said the device.

Then I thought of a variation on the previous premise, close but not that close; the implications were far too serious. The device beeped intermittently until I reset it again; maybe it did not like my words.

“The art of forgery...” I suggested, to make it sound less accusatory.

“El arte de la falsificación,” the transadaptor proclaimed.

“Is the art of forgery also art,” I then asked, “is forged art also art, is the artist of forged art also an artist, ultimately doesn’t all art borrow and even steal from previous art...?”

Those endless possibilities swirled in my mind: forgery, fake artworks, forgery as an art, the art of forgery, fraud, a fake artist, an artist borrowing and stealing from other artists...

Hassett had still not opened his eyes, listening intently to the explanations by the transadaptor.

“Are you then... a fake... artist?” I asked him very slowly, also closing my eyes.

The transadaptor seemed to have reached saturation point because it said nothing; when I opened my eyes again, Hassett was no longer there. I shouted his name and heard a noise behind a door. I looked up. It was not the artist but someone I knew from much earlier. I felt dizzy, about to pass out. This was not my usual blackholing in the midst of an urban setting but a maddening daze at a seaside location. And as I collapsed on the floor, that person asked a question with a contemptuous familiarity I recognised from before.

“You haven’t happened to see my nosecone, have you, Iona?”

Chapter 30

There was a gap in the middle of a face, that was all I could see; an emptiness, a vacuum, a pit. And as I recovered my consciousness, I greeted him.

“Hello, Bill.” I said pathetically.

He helped me to a chair. I felt so faint that once again I was convinced I was dreaming.

“I’m sorry you have to see me like this,” he said hurriedly, pointing at the void.

He looked like a sculpture from antiquity that had lost its nose because of the passage of time or some act of historical vandalism to which I had contributed. Strangely I was not afraid of that most inhuman of faces, for I myself had been seriously injured at the same event. And by him.

“But it was I who caused it, and so...”

He sat across me and took out a handkerchief to cover the area where his nose should have been. And I obliged, concealing the ruined side of my face with my hand.

“How have you been, Iona?” he said, throwing away his question like the most casual remark.

I thought it was the end. No more discovering unknown paintings, no more trying to communicate with the artist, no more introducing him to the world of art through words alone. Clearly, the Organisation was fully aware of my assignment and would stop at nothing.

“Well, you know me, Bill. I just get on with it.”

He nodded because he knew my way of playing things down.

“Yes, I heard you were in hospital for some time.”

“A very long time,” I specified.

“And so was I!”

The handkerchief also covered his mouth, but I could tell he was smiling. I did not comment. He probably thought he had to say something nice but non-committal by way of an apology –that was how it had been during our time together.

“You’re still beautiful. And I don’t mind those scars.”

I sat up.

“They’re not there for you to mind them or not!” I said, raising my voice.

He laughed intermittently for a while.

“Interesting that you still see me as cute and ditzy,” I added.

“You were once.”

“I played the role.”

“Convincingly.”

“I’m a professional, after all.”

I had the last word, and we were silent again. After such formalities, I asked him a now irrelevant question.

“I was convinced that you hadn’t survived our encounter in Barcelona.”

“As you see, I have. Minus a nose...”

He laughed again, still holding the handkerchief in place.

“And why the hell are you here, Bill, in this wretched place?”

“I wanted to see you one last time,” he said, his laughter dying down.

“You mean before I dispose of you?”

“Oh, I forgot you call it that. At the Organisation we call that sort of thing *vandalising*.”

“Before I vandalise you then?”

He pressed the handkerchief strongly against his face.

“I also thought you were dead, until I realised that I could find you here. I’ve been tailing you, Iona. Isn’t it obvious?”

I wanted to display my anger but could not yet get up from the chair.

“So, you know about the artist?”

“I know about most things.”

“And is the Organisation also interested in this... this whole operation?”

“Indeed!”

“But it’s our territory, Bill, and you’ve no right to...” I began to say stupidly.

He looked around the room, supposedly for the item he had lost, still hiding the gap in his face with the handkerchief.

“This is ridiculous! I did tell them back at home that I needed a second one in case I lost the first one. A single nosecone won’t do!”

He had always been eminently practical. I thought of asking him why stop at two and not carry three or four just in case; or better still, an endless supply of nosecones.

“Why stop at...” I began to say but paused; it would have been far too congenial for sworn enemies.

And yet I somehow empathised with him; after our last encounter, he was worse off than I was.

“And what about a proper prosthetic? I hear that, nowadays, surgeons can...” I suggested.

He interrupted me.

“Yes, Iona. That’s the plan, but it means finding the right match in terms of connective tissue and muscle and cartilage and bone, as well as the correct shape

and measurements. After the operations and the recovery, I now seem to be ready for the aesthetics of it all, something especially vital in nasal surgery, don't you think?"

He removed the handkerchief to prove his point.

"I understand," I said, lowering my eyes.

There was nothing else I could add.

"At present, they're considering a rhinoplastic transplant..." he said, covering the void again with his handkerchief.

I was taken aback.

"What? I've never heard of a nose transplant."

"And to get it right, we need a donor. The procedure requires a perfect match. Or what they call a zero mismatch..."

"That would mean..."

"Yes, I know what you're thinking. Disposable is the word you're looking for. Any disposable job will do, as long as it's a good match..."

I considered all those variations on the same theme. To dispose as in getting rid of or as in killing; disposable as in a one-use individual; disposal preceded by waste or rubbish. What I really wanted was Bill at my entire disposal so that I could end the feud for once and for all.

"You did a lot of damage, Iona, all by yourself."

I pointed at my scars to signal that we were roughly equal.

"My apologies," I suggested.

"Mine too," he replied.

We had both been trained to leave unnecessary turmoil by the wayside and get down to business.

“Yet again, the Organisation wants what I’ve been so careful to build... this excruciating and intricate project.”

“I know all about it, Iona; you don’t have to explain. You’re planning an exhibition not showcased by the artwork itself. What the Agency has in mind is just the beginning. And we, at the Organisation, will continue to the end.”

I took a deep breath.

“You seem to be aware of everything that has gone on in this place by the sea, Bill.”

“I’ve always been one step ahead of you, Iona.”

“So, you’ve been spying on me all this time.”

“That’s what I do. And I wish I’d done it from the beginning of our... our relationship.”

I did not concede.

“Dear Bill, let me put it succinctly so you understand. Trying to familiarise myself with this desolate place, having all those inconclusive conversations with an artist who’s not interested in showing his work publicly and wishes nothing to do with the world, depicting artworks solely with my descriptions as if speech could express so much more than images... I’m not going to let you take all this away from me!”

He sat down, and I sat further up. My growing anger began to shoot up my energy levels.

“Let me rephrase that, Iona” he said, laughing mockingly. “You’ve done the dirty work, and now it’s time for us to lead the way.”

“But the artist...” I began to say.

“Yes, Iona? The artist?”

“He’ll refuse to... to make any kind of deal with you, Bill. It has taken a huge effort on my part to build my relationship with Hassett.”

And as I said those words – oh, such futile words– I realised that the artist would be helpless to oppose. Or perhaps they would offer him better conditions and rewards. Or they would convince him in no uncertain terms that he should collaborate with them willingly. Or they would write much more interesting descriptions of his artwork...

“What you want is just not going to happen, Bill!”

He looked at me, feature by feature: first my eyes, then my mouth, then my nose particularly; he avoided the scarred side of my face.

“I could have, let’s say, destroyed you several times, Iona, had I wanted to.”

I turned my head to display my scars.

“Haven’t you destroyed me enough, Bill?”

He lowered his eyes.

“You see, Iona, we wanted to find out more about your missions, how you planned them, and especially how you executed them. All quite brilliant until Barcelona. So, we spared you. Until now, that is.”

I tried to smile.

“Should I be thanking you then?”

He removed the handkerchief from his face. The black void was hypnotic.

“You should’ve been an artist, as you told me you wanted to be when very young, instead of wasting your life battling against us at the Organisation,” he said.

I refused to react to his provocation.

“This is my project!”

He got up and folded his arms as a sign of strength. The void on his face looked darker still.

“What you’ve done so far is nothing but excellent, a brilliant experiment: pretending that there are all these obscure paintings in this remote house, pretending that the artist creates work in all these different styles, pretending that he’s not interested in the world of art, in the world of sales and galleries and art dealers, in the world itself...”

I was confused.

“What do you mean *pretending*?”

“Yes, there’s nothing else but pretending.”

I dismissed his words with a bout of laughter.

“The artist is real and alive,” I said, “a man ostracised by personal choice, painting his own works far away from everyone or... or perhaps emulating other artists.”

Bill continued with his tirade.

“Yes, the right word is *pretending*. Let me say it once again, *pretend*. As in a *pretend* artist who lives in a *pretend* location on the outskirts of a *pretend* village and creates *pretend* paintings. But for the sea, around here everything is about *pretending*...”

“What... what are you trying to say?”

I managed to get up and go towards him. I thought of attempting something more definitive than in our previous encounter. The void stopped me in my tracks, as if threatening to swallow me up.

“Iona...” Bill said softly.

He came towards me. We ended up as close as we had been in Barcelona when we almost finished each other off with one final embrace.

“Iona,” he then whispered.

He covered the void with his handkerchief and again laughed loudly for quite a while. Words were not enough, and I would have to act.

“I’ve already dealt with someone from your team,” Bill said, “and now it’s your turn.”

I stood back.

“Who? Where?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. As to the place, it’s very close to where we’re now.”

“Tell me where?” I shouted, turning to leave in any direction to save whoever it was from my team.

And as I stepped out into the corridor, I saw something alongside the still life I had examined earlier. I picked up the unidentified object. It was small, delicate and pink. An unripe vegetable, a tiny newborn animal, a discarded piece of flesh?

“Does this belong to you, Bill? It looks like the nosecone for a miniature powerboat?” I asked, picking up what could only be his temporary prosthetic.

He smiled as I had not once seen him smile; in fact, I had never thought him capable of smiling in such an earnest way. He fiddled around with the nosecone until I heard a click. He then faced me. Yes, that was the old Bill I knew. The removable nosecone was a magnificent piece of detachable engineering, I thought, almost a work of art. His old nose had been reproduced to perfection in silicone, just like it was until the event in Barcelona: the arch, the bridge, the shape of the nostrils, especially the left one through which I had pushed a deadly pea as far as it would go.

“And now what?” I asked.

“Fight to the death?” he suggested.

“Why, of course.” I replied. “But on equal terms!”

He had always been a creature of habit and he was not about to change. I knew where he kept his miniature Gen 15 Glock; within a second, I had removed it from a hidden pocket, as close to his genitalia as could be. I placed it on the table alongside the sheets of paper with my many observations about Hassett's artworks.

"Deactivate as well!" I announced.

He was fighting back, but I managed to crush his alarm device on the back of his lapel with the same dexterity I had used to push a pea up his nostril.

"We're now equals!" I shouted; equality between us was something that Bill had never considered.

He was furious, turning bright red.

"You're not in very good shape right now, are you, Iona?"

"We shall see..."

I had no weapons to reveal, barely my knuckles and my knees. Yes, more than nauseous I now felt sickened. That feeling had always been one of my sources of strength. I recalled the terrible things about Bill: the time I was forced to spend intimately with him, the manoeuvres that had to be aborted because of the Organisation, the projects that had gone sour because of his interventions. Most of all, I recalled the horror that Jennifer and Whittaker had endured.

"It was you who tried to drown me in the cove, wasn't it?"

He did not reply, far too preoccupied with his artificial nose holding its own. And we fought.

"Don't damage my nosecone!" Bill would shout after every blow.

"Naturally!" I replied each time.

His last words to me were "You're surrounded, Iona". And my last words to him were "Time's up!"

Chapter 31

I thought nothing of what had happened; after all, it was what should have taken place in a pink hotel in Las Ramblas a few months back. There was no guilt or regret; should there be? It was a small matter in the grander scheme of my complicated life. But I could not help feeling an emptiness after the exertion. Luckily I was not seriously injured, barely scrapes and cuts; and of course, through me surged that overpowering feeling of triumph.

“Oh sweet success, finally!” I said, thinking of Bill.

That huge effort made me realise that I was unbearably hungry, so I made my way to the kitchen. No sign of the housekeeper, but there was still some of the highly aromatic stew. It was the only available food in the whole house, its tiny granules shining radiantly on the greyish goo as crystals waiting to be discovered inside the darkest cave.

“Delicious but deadly!” I said out loud, voicing my suspicions.

I envisioned myself as a giant creature scoffing endless plates of that nameless dish. But was I devouring the food, or was the food devouring me, as much as the house, the artworks, those endless hours of waiting for the artist to show up, my impressions about his possible deceit, were all devouring me until I was no more?

“No more...”

I managed to pull myself away without eating a single bite. Was the housekeeper poisoning me? Did she dislike me so much, had I disobeyed Hassett's orders, was I seen as an intruder? I would fight back, but first I needed to find an

alternative source of nourishment. There had to be something I could eat. And then I remembered.

“Apples!”

I ran to the garden, and there they were in the middle of the orchard. The apple-trees looked gnarled and rickety, yet they had produced an abundance of fruit. Unless I went back to eating flowers, they were the only food available to me. Those tiny yellow-green apples were not yet ripe, but they would do. I picked one.

“Will I survive this?” I asked as I chewed it, feeling utter disgust.

I managed to gradually swallow the pulp, and after eating a few I stopped minding their tart crunchiness. Forbidden fruits they may have been once, but I felt awakened and aware as if I were being nourished by some ancient tree of knowledge.

I looked around. Bill had said I was surrounded. If that meant that there was a crew waiting in the wings, around me there seemed to be no one and nothing. I would wait.

“Hello!” said the artist.

He appeared as abruptly as he had disappeared earlier. He was holding on tightly to one of the eucalyptus trees; perhaps he was afraid of being blown away by the mild breeze. The cicadas were singing frantically.

“Where do you go when I don’t see you?” I asked, expecting no answer, but then I did not want to use the transadaptor just yet; it was my way of unsettling him.

The red paint smeared on him had vanished, and he was now once again immaculately dressed in white, his hands perfectly clean. I had to deal urgently, somehow, with the possibility of being surrounded, as Bill had announced. But first I needed an immediate answer to the most pressing issue.

“I’ve heard that...” I went on, “...that the paintings in the house may not... may not be yours,” I said, “whether they’re... copies of other paintings or not.”

He still said nothing, letting go of the tree he was holding on to. Surely, he could not have understood what I said.

“I was told that it’s all... pretend. A pretence!”

I stressed the word *pretence*, convinced that he was familiar with it. And then I gave him alternatives.

“Yes, a pretence, a sham, an illusion, a fake, a fallacy...”

I translated the last word: it was one of the few words I happened to know in Hassett’s language. After all, over the years I had been involved in quite a few fallacies in several languages and in diverse lands.

“Falacia...”

Still, he said nothing.

“So, who paints all these works?”

He understood me, turning towards a different tree and touching it gently.

“Otros,” he said.

My heart began to beat faster. I understood more than I thought I would.

“Others who?”

“Varios.”

“Various who?”

“Algunos.”

“Some who?”

He smiled instead of replying.

“Not you?” I asked.

He looked at the high branches of the tree closest to him. By then, my heart was beating frenziedly.

“No.”

“I want their names.”

“No names.”

“Where do they live? In the village?”

“Not live.”

“You mean *they don't live?*”

“Not exist.”

“You mean *they don't exist?*”

“Yes.”

I clasped my arm first and then his, needing to prove what *exist* meant. He immediately turned towards me and smiled. It was the briefest of embraces.

“They...” he began to say.

“Who are *they?*”

I stopped to listen to the cicadas.

“And where does it all happen?” I asked, looking at the first floor of the house.

I took out the transadaptor from my pocket. Hassett looked in the same direction and nodded.

“In those rooms upstairs?” I asked.

Hassett started to walk towards the entrance of the house. I walked behind him with my head down, as dejected as a prisoner on the way to the scaffold; by then, my heart was thumping offensively.

“Are *you* an artist?” I asked Hassett.

The truth was imminent.

“Yes,” he replied. “My facility... I have a facility...”

“Your... facility?” I asked, unsure of what he meant.

“Naturalezas muertas...” he said and turned towards me, making twirling movements with his right hand as if holding an imaginary paintbrush.

“Still lifes?”

“Yes.”

“That’s your... facility, I mean, your... your... your...?”

“Tengo facilidad para las naturalezas muertas,” Hassett said.

“I have facility for still lifes,” the transadaptor suggested.

“Another way of translating *facilidad*, please,” I asked it.

“Specialization, speciality, specialty, specialism, spe...” the transadaptor began to suggest.

I tapped it until it stopped.

“Is there anything else you do?” I asked Hassett.

“Colour...”

“Colour? You... you add colour?”

“Amarillo,” he said, frowning at the thought of an acidic colour.

“Yellow,” said the transadaptor.

“You like adding yellow?”

He looked up.

“No hay nada amarillo en ninguno de los cuadros...”

And then I understood without the transadaptor. My suspicion was confirmed. Yellow was not used in any of the paintings I had seen. Not a single yellow flower or garment or corn husk. No fruit, or bird, or balloon. Only the item on display from a

window at the front of a house immersed in the sea, however that item could be interpreted, was yellow.

“What is it about yellow, then?” I continued, astonished that he was so willing to reply to my questions. “Why is it absent from your work? Why only one of your artworks includes yellow, the house in the sea? Is yellow the symbol of illness, a symptom of decay, the mark of decrepitude?”

He listened to the transadaptor, but said not a word. I continued with a barrage of haphazard questions.

“If you only produce still lifes, whose are those other paintings I’ve seen? What’s your true role in all this? Are you contributing in any way to art and knowledge and enquiry? Are you ultimately producing fake art?”

He did not ask for the transadaptor, and I did not offer to use it. I urgently had to see what he wanted to show me, so there was no time for more questions and answers. Inside the house, he started when he saw Bill’s noseless body lying on the floor. He looked at me in disbelief, and I shook my head. But we had to move on and climbed the perilous staircase to the first floor.

“I’m not afraid of the stairs anymore,” I told him, knowing he would not understand.

We got to the landing and walked towards the room beyond the yellow room, and beyond the room which housed a picture of a woman and a child. Hassett accelerated his pace and went ahead beyond the room where he was painting a red hat. He finally stopped in front of the door to a fourth room and unlocked it.

“Oh!” I said in amazement.

“Yes,” he replied.

That large room was filled from floor to ceiling with an assembly line of electronic equipment and supplies: flickering screens, twinkling red and blue cables running in arcs between devices, and the dull bass buzz letting us know that we were not alone. The walls were covered with the thickest padding to dampen any noise; the inexorable song of the cicadas must have also helped to keep sounds at bay.

“But...”

I covered my mouth with my hands so as not to scream.

“But when I first arrived, you said no technology,” I complained uselessly.

Inside an open cupboard in a corner, I saw the devices that I had brought to the house and I had hoped to use during my stay.

“But this is...” I said, looking in the direction of all the equipment.

“Yes, technology...”

I raised my voice.

“I thought you didn’t like technology.”

Hassett turned his face from me.

“You mean, all this is...” I said.

“The artist!” he announced, extending his arms and pointing at the many screens, alive with colours and shapes in a lengthy series of pulsating images, each more vibrant and exciting than the next.

“The artist...” I repeated, going from anger to laughter.

At the far end, a heavy piece of equipment in the shape of a drum vibrated restlessly, gradually expelling a canvas in the process of being coloured and glossed. It thudded intermittently to create, I assumed, the feel of brushstrokes and the many reliefs of oil paint. Half an image had been printed and the other half was in the process of its mechanical spawning. What I could see was half a frightened man, half a sunset,

half a bridge, the tints and shapes swirling and struggling with the wind –so many colours and not a drop of yellow. It was the emulation of a work by a celebrated master but with altered characters and objects, at a different time of day and in a different location.

“Artist!” he repeated.

The miracle of creating art was firmly in the hands of a non-sentient artefact. I had been deceived, and for that I was sorry.

“I’m so very sorry,” I said, but not for the artist or for the Agency or even for me; I was sorry for art itself.

As we left the room, Hassett failed to lock it. The game was up for him and he became careless. There was still a question he had not answered.

“Who does the red hat found on the beach belong to?” I asked.

“¿A quién pertenece el sombrero hallado en la playa?” the transadaptor asked. He replied as we descended the staircase. I held the transadaptor close to him.

“Un hombre,” he replied.

“A man,” said the transadaptor.

“Where’s that man?” I asked, rushing my words.

“¿Dónde está ese hombre?” said the device, much more calm than I was.

“En la ensenada...” Hassett answered, looking towards the sea.

“In the cove... in the creek... in the inlet... in the gulf... in the bay...” the transadaptor replied unsteadily, unsure of which word to choose.

There would be many alternative terms if you had never seen the cove along that stretch of sea. Hassett reached out and stopped the transadaptor.

“Not well...” he added, looking towards me.

“What do you mean?”

“Man, not well...”

“Not well?”

“I think dead. Yes, dead.”

Chapter 32

I ran to the cove. A single word seemed to be floating in the breeze.

“Iona!”

It felt like a familiar voice, or so I thought. More than calling out, it sounded like an order. And then what I most hated materialised.

“Rain!”

Yes, the weather occurrence that I believed jinxed whatever I was doing and caused me untold anxiety. Mercifully it was no more than the lightest shower, lasting for seconds. The grey clouds were here and gone just like that, and no storm followed. Or there would be a different kind of storm, I reflected: the discovery that all those artworks were not, truly and legitimately, art.

“Or are they?” I asked, my skin wet with tiny raindrops.

The whole project seemed to be coming to a close; disastrously so, without the results I had pursued. Nothing was what I had assumed it would be. Worse, it was all... I could not go on.

“Fake is the word, Iona, don’t vacillate. Call it by its name!”

The artist, supposedly a phoney; the paintings, simulated; the project, a deception. Whose idea had it been, and why had I not been informed of what really went on in the house? Once again, I had been used and, characteristically, abused. And worst of all: I had not suspected that it was all one made-up operation commissioned under false pretences. Indeed, I had had my doubts about the artworks in the house, but I wanted to believe in them; more importantly, I needed to believe in them. I was looking for answers, and that’s when I heard my name again.

“Iona!” someone said as I approached the cove.

It was a real voice calling out to me in the distance, coming from a man lying on the beach, doubtless the owner of the red hat as Hassett had alerted. Except for his head and arms, he was covered with sand; someone had tried to bury him and stopped just before the final shovelful. With a wound to his neck, he was possibly bleeding to death. I could not help thinking that he was the perfect sitter for one of the dramatic blood-splattered paintings I collected. A blood stain covered his bald and pumice-like skull in lieu of the red hat, one of his many hats, in many colours, in so many shapes.

“Mr Taras!” I shouted but got no reply; he was not dead as the artist had said, but almost dead.

His eyes were closed, he was still breathing. I knelt and tore a section of my dress, placing it against the wound on his neck to stem the flow of blood. I thought of returning to the house to get bandages.

“I’ll go to the house!”

He opened his eyes and spoke.

“No, don’t go, Iona. Don’t leave me, please. This...”

His voice was cracked and slurred. I got closer to him, my ear almost touching his lips.

“Yes, Mr Taras?”

“This... may be the end.”

I responded how I had been trained. In moments of crisis, the manual kicked in. Moreover, I was no good at making emotional statements.

“This is unquestionably not the end,” I said far too loudly, “just an episode, after which other episodes will arise, and we will try to determine why we got it wrong to make sure it will not happen again...”

He opened his eyes widely.

“No bullshit rules at a time like this...” he replied voicelessly, clenching his fists.

The section of my dress doubling up as a bandage was now soaked with blood. All that life-giving fluid spilling hastily away convinced me that the experience was not in any way a dream, as much as I wished it to be.

“Mr Taras,” I urged him, “we need to call a doctor or an ambulance. We must take you to a hospital as soon as possible!”

He opened his eyes even further and managed a wry smile.

“What? A doctor, a blue light ambulance, a hospital?” he muttered. “In this godforsaken place?”

As he shook his head, the bleeding worsened; again, I pressed the piece of material against his wound.

“Is there nothing we can do?”

“A squadron should be on its way... probably too late to save me.”

Bill had said I was surrounded; I decided not to break the news to Mr Taras.

“I’m sure our squadron will be here just on time,” I said, aware that no one could save him in his condition.

He began to shake frantically. It was probably some kind of a seizure.

“Mr Taras!”

As he coughed, the spasms died down.

“I knew this wasn’t the right place for the manoeuvre!” he said and tried to rub his wound.

“You mustn’t!” I warned, pushing his hand back.

I tore off another piece of material from my dress, and this time I pressed it hard against his neck. For a while at least, the bleeding stopped.

“Theirs was a gruesome plan, the bastards,” he said, “leaving me to bleed on the beach. You know, Iona, it’s proving to be a slow, painful death. And if that had not been enough, then... then the tide would drown me. My last image would have been of... of endless foamy waves and the unrelenting sea, not a bad one as final images go...”

No, I had never known Bill to be so creative in his dealings with the enemy.

“We’ve far too many enemies, Iona,” he went on. “Outside foes, craving what we have. But also... also inside rivals, aiming to take over...”

“An insider?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, I’d been suspecting it for some time. I almost gave you the details when we discussed the disposal of the nurse in my office...”

With all the effort, he lost consciousness briefly and the bleeding started again. I felt I had to do something, however pointless. I cupped my hands and went to get some water from the sea's edge, the waves almost breaking where we were. I washed his head and neck; after all, seawater could help to sterilise the wound or soothe the pain. Explaining the whole process kept my anxiety away.

“It’s all in the sodium...” I said.

I repeated the operation several times, toing and froing between the water’s edge and the small mound where Mr Taras was almost entirely buried.

“Why are you here, Mr Taras, in this wretched place?” I asked him, just like I had asked Bill earlier.

He opened his eyes once more and lifted his hands.

“I had to... to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I shouted. “From what and from whom?”

He looked up. If anyone needed protection, it was him.

“You almost drowned...”

“So, it was you who... who saved me?”

“I needed to be here in case things went wrong,” he went on. “And they did go wrong when you decided to... to doubt...”

A sudden fit of anger enveloped me.

“Doubt, Mr Taras?” I screamed. “This has been a huge lie. Yet again, I’ve been used and abused...”

“All for the sake of the Agency.”

“Fuck the Agency!”

“But look at the results we’ve achieved, your invaluable reactions, your experiences, the words you wrote...”

I knelt once more beside him, not to comfort him but to threaten him.

“How would you know about what I did or did not do in the house...?”

“We knew, we listened, we watched. All under surveillance.”

“But...”

“We kept you mildly sedated so that... so that you wouldn’t delve into what was going on...”

I pressed another fragment of my dress against his wound as much as I wanted to smother him.

“You should stop talking, Mr Taras. All this exertion can’t be doing you any good...”

He was relentless.

“And you, Iona... you’ll carry on with the manoeuvre. An unknown artist, the mystery surrounding his art, your manuscripts... The project’s going to be huge. It’s the future of Art creation... and the future of everything.”

It was a turning point. I finally had my chance to say it all, even if only to a man about to disappear forever. A long succession of painful images was conjured up in my mind. Yes, all those endless pretences and shams had left their painful mark, expressly the many sexual encounters I had been forced into, even the brief emotional ones. The most insufferable experience had been my marriage to Bill, there was no doubt. But I recalled other practices, typically dealing with those who had to be taught a lesson and the quick and efficient disposal of major swans and minor vermin; I especially remembered the bland countenance of the nurse with her white cap. What I had been put through in a remote house by the sea was insignificant compared to most of my other missions, yet I had been so much more distraught there than I could remember.

“This time, it’s *me* who has been deceived!”

I needed justifications and excuses. Yes, it all happened because I had wanted to believe in artworks that I thought were the product of a tortured and misunderstood mind trying to find its way in an antagonistic and castigating world. No, it was not a good enough excuse.

“This time, I might not have survived, Mr Taras.”

“You always did as you were told, and I’m sure you always will.”

From where I was standing, I could have easily kicked him to death or stuffed his mouth with sand until he stopped breathing or, better still, opened up his wound and exposed the jugular fully to the elements.

“I’ve been used like some cheap and expendable merchandise. But so much worse is the fact that you’ve conned me with what I hold sacred...”

He tried to raise his voice to no avail.

“May your life”, he whispered, “be filled with fulfilments of the artistic kind.”

His words were meant to commiserate, but I sensed his resentment at my defiance. As someone about to enter the realm of the dead, it was far too late for him to feel empathy towards his fellow human beings; in any case, Mr Taras never had. He sighed and went on discussing the project; his penchant for endless words would be the last thing that would die within him.

“You see, Iona, we needed something different, innovative, almost revolutionary. Yes, multimodal... immersive... intertextual... interactive... highly networked... sota... hypermediatic... fully cybernetic... A project bridging artistic creation and financial gain...”

He would be who he was until the end. I clenched my fists.

“And why didn’t you tell me before I set out that it was all a... a... a...”

I was holding my rage and could not find the right word.

“An untruth?”

“A hoax is more accurate!”

“I understand, Iona. Let’s just say that...”

“What?”

“That there are several things on my... my conscience. Not telling you beforehand about this manoeuvre is one of them.”

“And what can we do about your conscience now, Mr Taras?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief. “You may have left it too late...”

“But you see, Iona, we had to create a mystique... and you were the... the perfect observer of events. You know what I would always say: Take no delight in anything but the task at hand...”

“It has hardly been a delightful task, Mr Taras...”

The sun was now lower in the sky. Mr Taras stretched out his hand and tried to feel for mine, but I moved my hand away.

“So, after all this trouble there was no artist after all,” I uttered, and the image of the red hat appeared in front of me.

“There’s no such thing as an artist any more,” he said. “Art is for all and by all. It’s... it’s the work of humans but also the work... the work produced by human creations...”

I recalled the buzzing, screeching, and hollering of machines aspiring to create art.

“You should not be speaking so much, Mr Taras.”

As he coughed, a trickle of blood flowed from his mouth.

“One good thing about all this is that I won’t grow old. I’ve always been afraid of ageing.”

“I suppose good things can happen at any age,” I said.

“Have any good things happened to you, Iona?”

Blood spurted out of the wound on his neck, his jugular unsure whether to hold on or let go.

“Mr Taras?”

He closed his eyes and did not respond.

“Please don’t die!” I cried out, not really meaning it.

He had not yet told me about the things on his conscience.

“And what is it that you regret at this your... your final hour?” I asked.

He whispered several words as if his last.

“Extortion... the biggest extortion ever... everything and everyone would come crashing down... even the...”

“Even the what?” I shouted.

“... the Agency...” he said with what seemed like his last breath.

I was too troubled about his condition to be shocked by what he had just confessed.

“Mr Taras?”

There was no response.

“Taras?”

He abruptly opened his eyes so as not to miss the spectacle of his impending death.

“My last wish...” he uttered without any air in his lungs.

“Yes?” I asked as softly as I could, given the grimness of the moment.

“I...”

“Yes, Mr Taras?”

“I... would like to be murdered by you, Iona.”

Chapter 33

And what was, ceased to be. All that world of play-acting and delusion began to fade.

And fast.

“So very fast...”

Having used most of my dress for bandages, I was practically naked; but what did I care. Like a *nuda veritas* representation, I walked along the beach until I reached the end of the cove. I could not stop thumping the air with my fists and kicking the ground. Fury and resentment were driving me. I tried to think of Mr Taras and to remember his last moments, but the only image on my mind was the painting of a red hat.

“What!” I roared when I saw what stood in front of me.

Along the road, there appeared a queue of black cars with dark windscreens and several unidentified white vans. Staff dressed in grey gear were getting out of the vehicles with an overpowering sense of urgency. I wondered whether they were friends or foes.

“Hello!” I shouted when I distinguished a red ‘A’ on their breast pockets.

They did not say anything as they passed by me, far too busy to pay attention to a half-naked woman. I did not know any of those minions, but at least I was safe. They could all see the scars running along one side of my face but also the hideous scarring on my neck and shoulder, my upper back and chest. And in the middle of it all, was a familiar face.

“Rudge!” I shouted as he was running towards me.

I had never been so happy to see him.

“Are you well?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“As well as can be, given the circumstances,” I said, looking down at my torn dress, barely covering my modesty.

“I can lend you a... a jacket,” he suggested, looking towards the sky.

“It’s fine, Rudge.”

He cleared his throat.

“Just to let you know that we’ve dealt with whoever needed dealing with,”

“You mean the crew sent by...?” I asked.

He did not let me finish my sentence.

“Theirs was not much of a crew, just a handful of operatives. But we did it.”

“Sadly, it’s too late for...”

He shook his head.

“You mean too late for Mr...” he began to say. “I’ve just seen him, buried in the... the... the sand.”

“Yes, it was...” I said, trying to find the right word, “... unfortunate that our team could not save Mr...”

“Yes, Mr...”

“Yes.”

Rudge looked into the distance, there was a stiff military air about him and thus he spoke.

“We managed to ambush the enemy and intercept them...”

“... and duly dispose of them.” I said, finishing his sentence.

“As I said,” he said and paused briefly, “they were outnumbered, even though most of the people in my team were rankers.”

“A case of quantity over quality,” I suggested, thinking that Bill and his team were usually unbeatable.

Rudge said nothing; he probably thought I was reprimanding him for not having saved Mr Taras. Further explanations would come later.

“And all those... hirelings?” I asked.

He coughed several times before speaking. It had to be important.

“I’m not sure you know about this, Iona, but we have a... a training camp close to this place.”

I crossed my arms in anger.

“That’s news to me! How come I did not know?”

“This is why we were nearby when needed,” he said, without replying to my question.

I was sure he had his own orders to deal with, but he was still my assistant.

“Who’s in charge here? Tony? Miss P?”

His cheeks turned bright red.

“It’s me.”

“You?”

“Miss P is on her way, and Tony stayed behind for... for logistical reasons.”

“I’m sure that’s why he stayed behind,” I said unconvincingly.

“And Lundy should be here any minute.”

The mention of her name unsettled me.

“Well, we need to blood our rookies, if I may call you that, so I suppose you should start by clearing up this whole mess.”

“How big is the... the mess?”

“Well, there’s Mr...”

“Yes, him,” he interrupted me. “Anyone else?”

“You’ll also get some interesting experience by dealing with a top man from the Organisation.”

“Really?” he asked in awe.

“Inside the house.”

He turned his head towards the entrance door.

“Who is it?”

“You’ll recognise him because he’s missing a nose.”

Rudge winced.

“You should know about any final numbers since you seem to have dealt with our opponents here.”

He opened his eyes wide.

“And... and how would you like their removal from the scene to be carried out.”

I looked towards the cove.

“Burial at sea?” I suggested, biting my lip.

I was not sure whether he would take me seriously.

“But...”

“But what?” I asked.

“We... we might need to carry out a few autopsies. For the sake of paperwork, you know.”

Rudge knew the regulations well, yet I would have preferred to disobey them. I could not oppose what he said as much as I wanted to.

“I leave it to your discretion, Rudge,” I suggested.

He walked back to his van. Remembering something, he turned his head.

“And what about a person they call Hassett,” he shouted from where he was.

At the mention of his name, I recalled our conversations, my efforts to connect with him, my many doubts about his work. All for nothing, since he was also a pretence. And yet I could not get the image of his painting of a red hat out of my mind.

“You’d need the transadaptor to interrogate him,” I replied, “and there’s probably no time for that now.”

Chapter 34

A large black car stopped beside the entrance gates to the house and from it appeared Lundy, elegantly dressed, also in grey like the troopers. Alongside her, I must have looked like the embodiment of farce. At least that was her expression as she looked me up and down. I tried to cover myself as much as I could, but there was barely any dress left at all.

“I suppose it’s a sad day for everyone. I received a message about... about Mr...,” she said but did not look at all sad.

I thought she might recall some of Mr Taras’s best moments, his love of synonyms or his vast array of hats. But that was not the case; perhaps he had not been as esteemed by his staff as much he thought he was. I certainly did not say anything endearing about him; instead, I looked towards the bluest sea.

“Yes,” I managed to express.

We were following the instructions set in the Manual: at all times you must appear undemonstrative in the face of adversity. But we had also been taught to move on as quickly as possible when one of our number lost out.

“Yes, Mr...” she replied plainly.

After what felt like a minute’s silence, we moved on to the next subject.

“A shame that the whole thing has not gone as planned, but especially for you, Lundy, as you’ve invested so much of your... your time,” I said rather formally but did not mean a word.

“Well, we weren’t expecting Hassett to reveal the truth just like that, nor a crew from the other side showing up.”

“But they did not quite achieve what they wanted,” I explained.

“I’ve received a message about Bill.”

“You mean the end of Bill.”

She tried to smile.

“You see, Iona, we were convinced that our operation would be... infallible.”

“That’s a big word, Lundy.”

Mr Taras might have formulated the suggestions for his art venture, but Lundy had made them possible though, as it turned out, not entirely practicable.

“Let’s walk,” I suggested. “I want to show you the rose garden. I suppose it’s the right thing to do in moments like these. Flowers for remembrance...”

She hesitated.

“I’m pressed for time, Iona,” she said. “We’ve managed to intercept the distress signal, and have about ninety minutes before the protocols are triggered...”

“This will be brief,” I said.

I needed to get several things off my chest there and then, at the risk of doing something quite unforgivable to her. I guided her to the rose garden. Surrounded by all those yellow roses, some in full radiant bloom and a few already past their prime, I spoke. I thought such beauty might soften any harsh words, and certainly impede harsher actions.

“You’ve worked miracles, Lundy,” I said, forcing myself to be overwhelmingly nice, “I’d like you to explain how you were able to create all those remarkable works of art. I’ve admired them, almost fallen in love with them. They’re all so different, as if by diverse artists from different art periods. And yet there’s a common thread, in the colours or the shapes or the themes or...”

“The intention, maybe?” she suggested.

“Whose intention?”

“A combined effort.”

“Leaving me out of everything, as you did!”

“Only because it was necessary.”

I looked at her full frontal, aware that I was almost naked. All the more threatening, I thought.

“Please explain how it all came to be,” I said as measuredly as I could, when the only thing I wanted was revenge.

We walked around the rose garden, stopping every few rose bushes.

“My, these are lovely roses,” she commented. “I never thought we could grow them. They’re perfect in every way, except that we were only able to recreate yellow ones and without any scent...”

In the distance, we could hear more vehicles arriving, loud banging on walls, people shouting orders and moving heavy objects. I wondered how Rudge would be getting on.

“I understand from Rudge that this place is close to one of our training camps.”

“Yes,” she said, looking at the ground.

“How come I didn’t know anything about that camp?” I said, not even trying to conceal my anger.

She turned towards the house.

“There were things that you were not told, Iona.”

I pressed my lips.

“I trust you’ll enlighten me, Lundy.”

She briefly explained that the Agency had purchased the land some time ago. It was a relatively short ride from an airport, but also beside the sea in case an escape route was required.

“The only available building we could find in the area” she went on, “was this derelict house, conveniently remote from other properties and with its own access. We undertook to distress the house further, so as to cause you...”

“Even more upset?” I suggested.

She went on regardless.

“As to the garden, Mr Taras wanted it to be perfect so that it would give you a sense of peace, and so your reflections might be even more... more insightful. I agreed with him.”

I should have thanked her but did not.

“It was always Mr Taras giving you instructions?”

“I was only obeying orders,” she said.

“A great way to avoid accountability...”

“You know that, at the Agency, it’s all about responsibility of the collective kind.”

Yes, I would deal with Lundy later, back in the big city.

“Go on,” I prompted her.

“There was no time to carry out repairs to the building. But the garden looked rather beautiful even in its abandoned state. In any event, we employed a professional from...”

“The village?”

“Oh no. The village is as abandoned as the house.”

“I knew that the housekeeper couldn’t have dealt with all this greenery,” I commented.

“No chance!” Lundy said and laughed. “She’s one of us, our new and highly skilled expert. She has been in charge of printing artworks for you to examine...”

“What?” I shrieked. “But she didn’t seem to understand what... what I was saying!”

“Oh, she speaks our language perfectly.”

That pretend housekeeper was someone else I would need to deal with when I got back.

“I see.”

Lundy went on with her well-rehearsed narration using some pretty words.

“And within a few weeks, the garden became a blossoming, radiant and inspiring paradise. Obviously, the trees were already here.”

“As well as the cicadas, the true permanent residents in the place, it seems...”

“Yes, the only surviving insects,” she said.

The cicadas were silent now.

“And what was the point of bringing all my equipment to record and to film the artist?”

“You might have refused to carry out the manoeuvre if you hadn’t been allowed,” she replied, looking away.

“And wouldn’t it have been more practical, Lundy,” I said very slowly, both to restrain myself and to impress upon her that a different approach would have been so much more convenient, “to import paintings that had already been crafted at source instead of having to bring over all that equipment?”

“Well...” she began to say but stopped.

“Or better still, couldn’t this have been done in the comfort of our own HQ, with me examining the paintings, or supposed paintings, on a screen and then typing or

even dictating my thoughts? It could have saved us a lot of trouble, me especially. Don't you think so, Lundy?"

I managed to keep my voice under control when I really wanted to scream at her, and possibly act on it as well. She finally reacted.

"Iona," she began to say as if reprimanding me. "Your words wouldn't have been the same without the belief that you were the only person in the world able to admire Hassett's artwork. The paintings were created according to how you reacted and what you wrote after viewing each one of them. Back at HQ, we certainly couldn't have predicted how you would engage with the artwork."

"You mean, the paintings were... meant for... for me?"

"Yes, specifically for you. The best way was to measure your reactions in a real-life environment with stimulating circumstances."

I laughed.

"Those *stimulating circumstances*, as you call them, almost cost me my life."

Lundy took a deep breath.

"The artworks were fabricated for your sake."

"*Fabricated?* You mean *created*."

I asked the question without wanting to think about what it implied.

"No, we didn't *create* them," she said and laughed briefly. "Not us! We just made their existence possible, you could say."

"You took the decisions, I suppose. But then creative decisions are solely human, aren't they?"

With my comments, she seemed to grow in stature.

"Only for now," she said.

I wanted to ask another question, but it came out as a statement.

“Surely creativity and inventiveness cannot be replicated.”

“Only... only for now,” she repeated.

“And neither can human agency.”

“Only...”

I finished her sentence.

“Only for now?”

This time she laughed discreetly.

“I wrote the programme and we entered technical and historical data, from the earliest cave paintings to the latest art exhibitions.”

“Art produced from other art, you mean?”

“What else? And the programme decided which element to select and which to leave out, according to your reactions.”

“My reactions were all of utter hopelessness...”

Lundy went on talking about the project.

“Hence the result was a combination of many styles, schools, and techniques. We tried to give some coherence and unity to the whole project, and conceivably we should have standardised the works further because there were serious divergences between them, more serious than we initially thought they would be. Perhaps there was an element of choice...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Perhaps it was decided there and then.”

“By whom?” I asked. “Surely you’re not telling me that there was some kind of... technological interference?”

I laughed at the absurdity of what I had said; she seemed to force herself to laugh.

“Although the initial premise was to create something more, let’s say, homogeneous, the artworks didn’t look like they were by the same hand. In the end, we had no say in what was being produced, choices were made outside our control...”

I felt a strange unease.

“And what can be done about that, Lundy?” I asked.

“We have to... to look into it back at HQ.”

“Yes, you’ll have to find out if there’s any merit in what you’ve just said. Because if that were to be the case, then it would be... well, outrageous.”

Lundy kept to her script.

“What we have to do is produce works that are much less recognisable, softening the influence exerted by previous artists. In other words, we need to create an original.”

“You’d need a human for that sort of thing.”

And she repeated what she had said before.

“Only for now.”

But there was more from me. I crossed my arms before speaking.

“That’s all very well, Lundy,” I said, “but you forgot an important element in your input.”

Lundy shook her head, already in denial before she knew what the accusation was.

“It’s a major, critical element. It appears that you did not include any women artists in the information you fed into the programme. Not a single one when there have been so many talented female artists throughout history. Not all of them recognised perhaps fully in their time, but now recovered and revered. Going back to Yukinobu, Anguisola, Gentileschi and Le Brun, and going forward to Morisot, O’Keeffe,

Kahlo, Rego, Sobel, and the two Carringtons. Regrettably, you have reproduced the same human biases that are ever-present in our everyday lives...”

Her cheeks reddened heavily, but she was the consummate professional with an answer to every question.

“Indeed, you’re right, Iona. But time was of the essence, and...”

“In other words, the programme is perpetuating existing stereotypes and prejudices...”

She was unyielding.

“There may have been a few oversights, but the whole manoeuvre was carefully planned from beginning to end. The village, the various characters, the house...”

“All simulated?” I asked. “All designed to deceive me? All perfectly staged?”

She only answered the first question.

“The whole set-up was not exactly what we would call simulated, as you’ve lived in the house, a real house, and talked to real people like those in the village.”

“Those villagers were threatening me, or I felt they were...”

“Well, we had promised them that the project would be over in no time, and it was still going on after a few days. And then you unpredictably showed up in the village square...”

“Unpredictably?”

“Let’s say that it was not in the plan.”

“And how did you prompt them to...?”

“To play their roles? Apart from their fees, we prepped a few of them with what you could call some... some chemical confectionery.”

I knew what she was referring to.

“And won’t they announce the project to the world, now their role has ended?”

“We told them we were shooting a film; then we announced that the filming had been postponed. They obviously knew nothing about our project...”

I shook my head from side to side.

“But why go to all this trouble?”

“To create an almost authentic setting: a house by the sea, a small village, surrounding lands, people leading normal lives, children playing. We wanted to provide you with a sense of normality.”

“Normality?” I echoed and laughed; it was something I knew nothing about.

I looked around me, beyond the rose garden, towards the house. The noise of all those individuals moving objects was almost intolerable, trampling as they were on shrubs and roses, drowning the song of the cicadas.

“And the basement and the top floor?”

“There is no basement and no top floor.”

“But I could sense there were things going on there...”

“All in your mind, Iona. Forgive me for saying this but you like making your surroundings more interesting than they really are...”

I could not forgive her for saying that, but I had to move on.

“And what about the paintings in the house?” I asked.

“Oh, they’re worth nothing. We can reproduce them a million times if we want to.”

“They look so genuine...” I meditated, a hint of nostalgia in my words.

“Yes, we must remember the artworks from all this,” she said.

And I recalled the ones I had seen.

“There’s drama in those artworks, a sense of awe, a kind of destiny. They seemed to come alive when I reflected on what they portrayed. I suppose... a specialist would have said otherwise.”

She laughed.

“The works could never be authenticated for sure. But in your case, you are... or were a practitioner, an expert, I’ve heard. You were not supposed to get too close to the paintings. No magnifying glass in your case.”

I did not find that funny.

“So, this kind of falsified work won’t end up hanging in galleries and museums?”

I knew the answer, but I wanted her to talk.

“No, at least not for now. An appraiser examination would see through our simulated brushstrokes and machine-historicised oil paint. But the printing results were much better than expected, particularly when we came up with a new type of printer that could accurately reproduce fine art prints and texture replicas. You see, the printing takes place layer by layer, in 3D, as if a real human had applied the brushstrokes and then had gone over the work repeatedly over time...”

“So, the only proof of the existence of the paintings will be...”

“Your little notes,” she said dismissively.

Yes, those little notes that had turned and twisted my insides.

“And the exhibition will be... will be sustained by those notes?” I asked, trying to keep it professional.

“It all depends on the orders given by the new person in charge of our squadron,” she suggested.

“And who’s that new person?”

“To be announced.”

I imagined who it would be. At this critical time, he had chosen to stay in the safety of our new HQ.

“So, a make-believe exhibition, I suppose,” I insinuated with a smile.

Lundy stood very straight.

“But isn’t all art make-believe?” she commented.

Everyone seemed to have the same opinion about art as a make-believe exercise. But then, no one asked the obligatory question: make-believe as opposed to what?

“Not necessarily,” I objected but not without a tinge of anger. “Art can be extraordinarily physical and intense, whilst real events like the ones I’ve lived through in this place have been nothing but a fantasy...”

I suggested that we return to the house. I could not put up with that workforce shouting orders, noisily carrying loads and packages, treading up and down the garden. With the commotion, the flower beds, lawn and bushes looked a pitiful sight. Those minions in grey were dismantling the set of a fictional production, carrying away the props of what had been nothing but a travesty.

“How will anyone believe that my notes, my little notes as you call them, refer to anything real since there’ll be no artwork to show? They can claim I made it all up.”

I laughed and she took a deep breath.

“We’ve thought of everything, Iona. There are other media.”

“Other media?” I asked, shaking my head in bewilderment.

“What you’ve written will be part of the bigger exhibition, a spoke in the wheel of art...”

I had never imagined Lundy capable of any kind of metaphorical talk.

“If you say so.”

“You see, Iona, we were prepared for any eventuality. With the paintings in place, it would have been much easier, though risky to exhibit them in a public setting; without the paintings, we can still go ahead despite the challenges, and without any artworks it might turn out to be an even more exciting project. We’ll discuss further at the Paronym. I need to go now, Iona.”

I wanted her to see more of what she had instigated; after all that dismantling, the inside of the building had become a further expression of chaos and obliteration.

“Wait! I want to show you where I lived all this time whilst you were all playing around with me. Deception is hardly a crime at the Agency. But what has been done to me in this place still needs a name...”

Lundy looked troubled as we entered the house. I looked at myself in the mirror above the sofa. I looked yellow, sallow; in that context of a face, the scarring did not feel entirely out of place. But my energy had returned, it must have been all those tart apples. I led Lundy to the kitchen, where in all likelihood I had been poisoned by a delicious concoction prepared to her very own recipe.

“You know me, Lundy,” I said, raising my voice. “Even under the effects of chemical concoctions, and despite utter exhaustion, danger and defeat... I still go on.”

I noticed the pot with the delicious stew. It was on the counter and still had some of the mixture left.

“You wouldn’t like to try this, would you? Some of your chemical confectionery, as you used with the villagers...”

She laughed, but fear showed in her eyes. She knew what I was capable of.

“So, what’s in the stew, Lundy?”

“Wasn’t it delicious?” she suggested, forcing herself to laugh.

I was in no mood for humour.

“At least I was able to eat a few tart apples.”

She produced a sigh of relief.

“Yes, now that we’ve wholly mastered the self-fertile and drought-tolerant apple tree, they grow everywhere. Not yet generating a bumper crop of sweet and delicious fruit as we’ve managed to recreate in other areas, but we’re getting there gradually. We’ve also managed something extraordinary with the lawn...”

A shrill alarm rang.

“I definitely have to go now,” she said.

“Yes, you need to help Rudge with his... his undertakings,” I replied.

Lundy grinned briefly and left me on my own.

Chapter 35

The team in grey uniforms went on about their business with a sense of frenzied resolve, removing all items from the house, carrying containers and items of furniture and, as expected, the technology required to create all that art; some of it had not been so neatly packed, with cables dangling along the lawn and screens sparkling wildly under the sunlight. I tried to get out of the way but stopped when I saw what was being taken out of the house next. First, it was the many sheets of padding material from the room where samples of automated art had been created. Then it was the turn of the reams of paper where I had written my impressions of the artwork, held together carelessly with a thick elastic band.

“Be careful!” I shouted to no avail and picked up a few sheets that had fallen on the ground, holding on to them.

I tried to attract Rudge’s attention on the other side of the garden, but he could not hear me, busy as he was giving orders with his arms pointing in every direction.

“We’re in a hurry!” one of the troopers shouted and almost pushed me to the ground.

And finally, it was the turn of all those counterfeit paintings, what else could I call them. They were being hastily removed from the house, dragged along the gravel paths and the lawn. With no covers to protect them, most of the canvases became scratched and dented, smeared with blades of grass and caked front and back with soil. The members of that lesser squadron, which had been in training and were now temporarily led by Rudge, seemed unconcerned with the job they were doing, shouting at each other incessantly, pushing and pulling the paintings hastily in every direction

and inflicting maximum damage. I stood there speechless yet entranced by the theatrical spectacle before me. I tried to call out to Rudge again, but I could not see him in the confusion.

The canvases marched in rows like the sections of a storyboard: a background of a dusky landscape with corn stirring in the wind; a house with a yellow banner that seemed to be lost at sea; a large rectangle in dull red and a wavering square in fading black; a woman and a child in a grotto, so close to each other and yet so far away; a still life with phantasmagorical bottles and other unusable, pitiable items. Those were the paintings I had examined in more detail, but there were other artworks that the artist had briefly shown me: portraits of animals or vegetables or flowers as people; views of a fantasy land at night with clouds eddying as embryonic tempests; geometric figures dancing, with lines and dots disturbingly crisscrossing. And again moving relentlessly along the garden as in a runway, there appeared further works that had been housed in other locked rooms. Yes, entirely valueless paintings created by a superior mind, many of them inspired by celebrated masterpieces but ending up as failed attempts, discarded samples and mock-ups: a contemporary woman playing a virginal in her kitchen; a group of men sitting at a large table in a restaurant and eating something colourful not unlike the poisonous concoction that I had been fed with, the man in the centre with arms tenderly extended as if redeeming the viewer; a woman dressed for work and standing on a gigantic conch coming out of the sea, all in the setting of the cove; a child with long black hair and a pretty hat, happily swaying on a swing between two eucalyptus trees and throwing a slipper into the air; two village elders, elegantly attired, and on the side a cockeyed image which, from where I was, appeared as a monstrous sea creature: a portrait of a man in white, surely Hassett

himself, holding a paintbrush and a woman looking at him in despair yet smiling, the house in the background made to appear like a gothic edifice; the housekeeper sitting in profile on a chair, dressed in grey and black, on her lap a bowl and in her hand a wooden spoon stirring the glittery contents; the largest village square with tiny human figures moving in every direction seemingly at speed as if they had just been released from the most oppressive penitentiary; the outline of the sea in the cove, in blue-grey ripples, with only an impressive sun visible in the brightest orange colour, almost annihilating its surrounds and dazzling the viewer; a portrait of a woman, also with long black hair, ascending a staircase, the image multiplied and intersected a dozen times at least, as in a continuous shooting mode...

“Yellow!”

The absence of yellow was patently obvious. Not a single canvas included the colour yellow, except for that unidentified object dangling from a window in a house by the sea.

“The artist spoke the truth!”

I went up to the yellow room, squeezing between all those employees in grey who were busily carrying endless objects down the stairs. I would have wanted to warn them about the hazardous state of the staircase, but then I did not care if the whole floor collapsed. The entire world had collapsed for me anyway.

“Yellow!” I said again and lay on my bed for a few minutes.

I changed my clothes for something a little more decorous. After all, it was the end of an important event, and all endings demanded some kind of formality. Yes, the deception was over but this did not spell the beginning of any certainty or truth. I packed my suitcase; it still had three encrusted pebbles that resembled a lucky clover.

“Some luck!” I shouted.

I went to the last room where it had all happened. Any technology had been removed except for my equipment. I collected it and went downstairs.

“Goodbye!” I said to the house without a hint of sentimentality, a trait I could stage to perfection.

I saw Bill’s weapon on the table, and put it inside my suitcase. It was to be the only thing I would have from him.

The local bus was parked on the other side of the house, away from the turmoil of black cars. As if to count the passengers, the bus driver turned his head towards all those who had been the characters in the charade: the taxi driver, the elderly inhabitants, the children now ravenously eating sweets (more samples of chemical confectionery?), the devious housekeeper *cum* technology expert still smiling. And there was the supposed artist, Hassett or whatever his real name was, shaking his hand in the air like he was holding an imaginary paintbrush yet looking far too unhappy, he could have been shedding a tear or two. With their role fulfilled, they were returning to whatever true or false life they led. They appeared to be friendly and relaxed with each other, all of them possibly grandparents and grandchildren living in the locality.

“Hello...” I mouthed at the passengers on the bus.

Even larger black vehicles appeared on the scene, not cars but discreet hearses. Body bags were pulled out, to be filled shortly. I would have so much preferred a burial at sea for both logistical and personal reasons.

“The sea,” I said, looking at the radiantly blue surface in the distance.

The shiniest car stopped beside where I was, and someone got out. What appeared first was her grey bun, perfectly in place, and then all of who she was.

“Hello, Miss Pilkington,” I said.

“Hello, Iona!”

She came over and shook my hand; her eyes were lowered.

“I am sorry about Mr...”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I’ve just heard.”

“Some things are just... inevitable,” I replied, thinking of what a convenient solution death turned out to be sometimes.

“It was my duty to come and collect you. This... this manoeuvre must have been difficult for you, Iona...”

I had been well taught to play things down.

“Let’s just say that it wasn’t easy,” I commented.

“I hope you weren’t injured in any way?”

“I defended myself as I always do, with knuckles and knees.”

“Those can be deadly in your case,” she suggested, attempting a brief smile.

She was not known to ever flatter anyone, so perhaps she was being apologetic. I looked at her in the eye and confronted her.

“So, why send me all this way, Miss Pilkington?” I asked.

She looked upwards and then downwards.

“You see, Iona, we didn’t want to let you in on the story so that...”

“So that what?” I asked defiantly.

“So that... so that your reactions here would be as... as natural as possible.”

“Indeed, they were natural. But then you should have asked yourself whether my reactions would be enduring.”

She looked disoriented. At my prompting, we walked towards the garden, trying not to step on the lawn. Not much grass was left by then.

“We were just obeying orders,” she said.

It was the same old historical excuse.

“Orders?” I asked, not expecting a reply.

She stretched her legs and arms very discreetly. It must have been a long drive from the airport.

“I’m not too familiar with the case because I wasn’t given the full details. As you very well know, I’m back at the Agency temporarily. But I’ll do everything in my power to ensure that the exhibition is a success and...”

Maybe she wanted to stay on at the Agency and never retire.

“Thank you, Miss Pilkington.”

Something was bothering me terribly, and it could not wait until we got back. I had to ask there and then, trying to be as composed as I had been trained to be.

“I’ve an admission to make.”

“Yes, Iona?”

“What I fail to understand is how I was caught out, since I have quite an instinct for... for deceit and manipulation,” I commented with some pride.

She nodded and produced a sideways smile, always too clever for her own good.

“If I may say so, it might have been because you wanted to believe in the project, in the artwork and especially in the artist.”

Yes, I had said that myself, if only because it would have meant believing once again in art, or at least in something.

“Perhaps,” Miss P added, “you saw yourself as an integral part of the whole enterprise and a major player, as if you...”

“As if I what?”

“As if you had one day followed your instincts and not given it all up.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, art. You gave up your art, didn’t you? You’ve told me yourself on several occasions.”

It was not the time or the place to discuss the more delicate aspects of my existence: my hurts and traumas brought to the surface, my anxiety rampant, my conflicts unremitting as never before. The past was not a game which you could stop playing at and get away from.

“Let’s leave,” I said. “This business is finished!”

As I was about to get into the car, I looked one last time at the sea. It was suddenly layered with powerful and inexorable waves; maybe my parting gift. The end of a mission implied the beginning of another. All beginnings brought with them some hope for the future, yet endings always reminded me of the many things I had lost.

“We need to get back to HQ as soon as possible. Buckle up!” I said, thinking of how many things needed sorting out once I got there.

And we were driven away, most probably never to return.

“What’s that?” Miss P asked pointing at what I was holding.

“Just some of the pages that I wrote whilst in the house. Those people were so careless that they dropped a few of them along the way and I picked them up. I don’t want them to get lost, after all they’re the only thing I’m taking from this place.”

And I unfolded the sheets of paper, filled to the brim with words.

“Oh!” I said, realising that it was not my handwriting.

PART THREE

THE EXHIBITION

Chapter 36

Procedures? I knew all of them by heart, the appropriate and the fundamental, the ceremonial and the irritating, especially those that rendered success only in propitious conditions. But some were procedures in name only, to be discarded when the unpredictable took place: the accursed rain, the maddening black holes, the commotion produced by cicadas on those permanently hot days, the cool canopy of eucalyptus trees, the intense colour of cloudless skies, the dark dome of coastline nights, the many roses in a yellow hue, the freshness of the sea air you breathed, the unyielding waves across the cove, the stretch of beach that appropriately hid a dying body, the house where I was deceived, the artist who was not who he said he was, the artworks that were not art but who could swear to that... I could have gone on. I had duly received intensive training as to what do when and where, but I predicted that there would come a time –in the anguish of the moment– when I stopped following procedures and did nothing. I would simply give up, not out of cowardice but out of contempt and disappointment.

As soon as I was in front of the Paranyrn, my invasive thoughts stopped in their tracks.

“But you’re not one to give up, are you, Iona?” I said to myself.

The gates to the building opened and I was in. This time, no one looked at me or demanded an ID;

“Hello!” I said to no one in particular.

That first courtyard still appeared as a dilapidated structure; as previously, the builders were perfectly positioned, with hands on hips and caps on heads. The building

still looked artificially distressed, emulating what it had probably been for the last hundred and fifty years. And yet, below that ugly construction the uglier depths hid the location where our operations were being gestated.

“Hello...” I said once again, but this time I only mouthed the word.

Once inside the building, I stepped into another lift that seemed to know where I was going, its mirrored walls reflecting who I was. No, I did not hide my damning scars; by then, they were yet another feature of mine, compounded by the exhausted expression of someone back from an unfulfilled mission. The lift took longer than in previous rides, driving me further into the depths of what could only be more horror.

Yes, horror; a word I had not allowed myself to say and which I was now stating readily. Emotions seemed to be unlocked; memories of what I had once wished were awakening from their deep slumber. I thought I had forever inhibited any such reactions with my training and customary compliance, but there they all were, standing upright in front of me.

“Hello, Tony,” I said as I entered his brand-new office.

As the new person in command of our squadron, he appeared elated. Vile reptilian art hung from the four grey walls, just like in the Bond Room. I could not help concluding that it was all more of the same in every sense.

“So, what’s your cause, Iona?”

It was not the question to ask someone who had been through the most incongruous manoeuvre, but Tony liked to wrongfoot others.

“As you’re aware, I don’t really have a cause. I just do what needs to be done...”

“Fatalistic?”

I said nothing. There was almost a minute's silence, as if mourning for someone. Tony was sitting in a large armchair, the one inherited from Mr Taras.

"Is that comfortable?" I enquired, though I was really asking whether he thought he could fill it.

After his two inopportune questions, he played his new role competently, with dialogue to match.

"Welcome back, Iona," he said with a smile and lit a cigarette.

"You know that smoking may not be good for you," I remarked, immediately realising it was too familiar a question; no, we were no longer colleagues but supervisor and subordinate.

He did not reply to my comment; after all, health guidelines on the subject of smoking were no longer clear.

"We were very much looking forward to seeing you back at the Paranyrn," he continued without any true concern.

"Is that so?"

"And despite a few mishaps, the manoeuvre was quite an... an adventure," he added with a little more excitement.

Well, well, well. He had dismissed the whole thing as an adventure: the tragic loss of our head of operations, the lies and the losses, the confrontation with members of the Organisation and subsequent disposals.

"More like a misadventure," I replied, failing to conceal my frustration, "since it was an assignment without planning or due preparation. For me, it was nothing but a reckless and farcical episode..."

"At least you got rid of Bill," he said, sucking intensely on his cigarette.

I provided the relevant data. I described the scene with Bill, his nosecone, the fight to the death as a way of ending what we had started in a Barcelona hotel. And I also spoke about the house, the artist, the artworks, the digital falsities, and the pretence of it all. I went on while Tony kept blowing puffs of smoke towards the ceiling.

“Were you ever in the house by the sea?” I asked him, remembering a fresh cigarette butt left at the entrance of the house when I first arrived there.

He finished his cigarette and repeatedly squashed the remains on the ashtray until they were reduced to dust. Then he spoke without looking me in the eye. He said that I was too dramatic, that I tended to imagine things, that I had artistically embellished what had taken place and had critically added information, both emotional and analytical, and finally, that I had created a separate story from the one that had really happened. That, conceivably, I had dreamt much of what I was telling him.

“In one word, you tend to exaggerate, Iona.”

“What I’ve told you is the truth!” I protested, raising my voice.

“It may be your truth, but it’s certainly not what we want to sell at the Exhibition.”

I felt tempted to take a cigarette from the pack on Tony’s desk and light it. I had not smoked for a long time.

“What an absurd manoeuvre. It was like we were all... we were all... we were all...”

“What?”

“Hallucinating!” I finally said.

“Yes,” Tony replied, “that’s one possible explanation.”

I took the pack of cigarettes, lifted it until it was close to my eyes, and then put it back on the desk. If I could resist that, I could resist anything.

Tony lit up another cigarette. As far as I knew he was not a chain-smoker, so something was disturbing him.

“We must now concentrate on the exhibition, I suppose,” I suggested.

He got up from the armchair that had rightfully belonged to Mr Taras.

“The exhibition is definitely happening.”

“But how, without any art?”

“That’s your challenge, Iona.”

“What’s more worrying is that we have to pretend we’ve discovered an artist when Hassett wasn’t one.”

“Wasn’t he?”

“Well, he was an artist of sorts, I suppose.”

Tony shook his head.

“Forget about Hassett. He doesn’t count in all this. We must focus on the artworks.”

“Artworks which don’t exist...”

“But you, Iona, wrote about them... they inspired things in you...”

“You seem to know more than I do.”

We were silent for a while.

“I must then rely on the notes I took?” I asked.

“Perhaps not.”

“What do you mean?”

“You might even dispense with your notes.”

I laughed.

“Art without art, without an artist, without notes?”

“Isn’t anything and everything possible in art?”

“Says who?”

He looked intently at the burning tip of his cigarette.

“Go back to the beginning, Iona. You need to start by defining what art is, and take it from there.”

That was the most reasonable thing Tony had ever said to me.

“Yes,” I could only reply.

He smiled and continued puffing smoke, this time in my direction.

“But don’t start just yet. There’re several technicalities to resolve.”

“Technicalities?”

“We first need to submit a report to the Trustees.”

“The Trustees? Saying what?”

“What went wrong at the house by the sea and...”

I took a deep breath.

“I can give you a long list,” I said, “beginning with the fact that our particular squadron was at fault for not having discussed or planned or...”

He dismissed what I was saying by shaking his head.

“Most importantly, we need to highlight what was a success,” he said.

“Nothing to show there.”

“Dea...”

He stopped. I knew what he wanted to call me, but he was now at a different stage in his career at the Agency.

“What?”

“Remember the manual.”

“What about the manual?”

“Where it talks about deciding whether a manoeuvre has been a victory or a defeat. Take your pick and sell the story in the way that’s most favourable to the Agency.”

“I’m not sure anything’s favourable to me.”

“And, don’t forget what needs to be dealt with.”

“What may that be?”

“The results of...”

Tony hesitated.

“What?”

“The results of the autopsies.”

He squashed his cigarette butt on the ashtray more violently this time. I shivered whilst covering my scars with my hand.

“Auto... autopsies?” I asked.

“Yes, all of them. Our friends and our foes.”

“And the reason for... for the autopsies?” I asked.

“We want to know what has been done to them, whether they have had any... any enhancements.”

“You mean...?”

“Yes, we’ve long suspected what the Organisation does with its staff.”

“Not the sort of thing done to us here at the Agency,” I added, almost smiling.

“Oh no, not us. The Trustees want to keep us... intact. Intact humans, as they say.”

I took a couple of long breaths.

“Oh, good to know that we’re *intacts*,” I said.

He cleared his throat.

“So, we must find out how they all died. Particularly Mr...”

I remembered a sad figure almost entirely burrowed in the sand, as if sculpted from it.

“I’ve already submitted a statement.”

“Yes, you did, but that was before the results of the autopsies, which we’ve yet to receive.”

I said nothing and turned to look at the samples of reptilian art on the walls, if it could be called art. Such were the remains of creatures that had once lived, had fed on lesser beings, had reproduced. In the wild they must have looked mighty and fierce, only to be reduced to tasteless ornamental hide in someone’s office.

“Exciting art, don’t you think, Iona?” Tony said pointing at the various samples.

If I was not more careful, I began to think, I too could end up on someone’s wall.

“I threw myself into this manoeuvre as if it were my last!” I blurted out.

Tony looked a little confused.

“No need to exaggerate, Iona.”

But I could not hold back.

“I’ve been spared so many times. And this time it must have been some kind of deal with some kind of destiny. Being spared is a way of life... almost on the route to demise but never quite arriving at the finishing line, just like waking up from a bad dream just before the damning climax. At every turn I was convinced I would disappear...”

I stressed, I blackholed, I felt under duress. I had wanted to avoid the personal but could not restrain myself. Who could blame me after what had happened in the house by the sea? But Tony had never been into theorising.

“Stop it, Iona. This is the world, and here you are. That’s all there’s to it.”

I was trying hard to perform like the highly skilled advocate, with total control over herself and, at critical moments, over others.

“And now you’re the boss...” I whispered, more to myself than to him.

“Perhaps we could try again.”

I heard him say that, or maybe not.

“Try again what?” I asked, unsure whether I had spoken.

Yes, he was in charge and was telling me what he thought. No, I had not misheard.

“We could try again... I seem to recall you enjoyed what you and I used to do, Iona.”

Most likely I blushed.

“You mean you enjoyed what you did, Tony, and I observed...”

I wanted to say that, and I might have said it; but I probably did not. Maybe I was not in total control any longer.

“I’ve more important things to do,” I added, “than invite someone into my bed...”

No, I was not entirely sure if this was the conversation Tony and I were having. It was not well suited to the time or the place. But I was now calling things by their name, unwilling to stop there. It was probably nothing more than one of my more speculative thoughts, conducive to absolutely nothing.

“Iona,” Tony said firmly.

“Yes?” I asked in my confusion.

He lit another cigarette and spoke directly to the ceiling. Whether he heard or not what I had said, he suggested something out of the blue.

“Iona, I think you seriously need to take a break and stay at home for a while before returning to work.”

It was an order. And as I was leaving his office, he gave me a second order.

“Please go and see Miss Pilkington before you leave the Paranyrn.”

“The whole thing did not make any sense in that house by the sea, and I allowed myself to be deceived... it was the lure of art, I suppose. And all because I took such a blow in Barcelona, followed by that long and painful recovery. As a result, I feel like a complete failure, at a loss about where to go next. But then I could also say that I... I had dared to fail, because coming back empty-handed also requires an inordinate amount of courage. And... and... and...”

I had done it again, explaining how I felt deep down. But had Miss P heard all of that, or was it nothing more than silent words on my part? I could not truthfully tell.

“Please take a seat,” she said.

Miss P was her same impenetrable self. She would never open up to anyone. I was sure that, when taking her final breath, she would say something like: *And now to the next manoeuvre.*

“Thank you, Miss Pilkington.”

She cleared her throat.

“The Trustees want to meet you, Iona,” she announced.

We were sitting face to face, so she must have seen my disbelief.

“But they only ever meet the highest echelons at the Agency...”

“Well, this time they’ve put in a special request.”

I felt the smallest of shivers down my spine.

“And when am I meeting with them?”

She looked at me as a parent would look at an impertinent child.

“When they’re ready, they’ll call you.”

I produced a wry smile, more with the wrong side of my face.

“To reprimand me, I suppose.”

And against my predictions, Miss P allowed herself a more personal comment; it was the first time I had heard her say that sort of thing. First, she went bright red; and then she spoke softly.

“You never know with the Trustees...”

She had her ideas about the Trustees; maybe she privately censured the highest tier at the Agency.

“So where are the Trustees? In this building?”

“Oh, so much further down from where we are.”

Down? Or did she mean up? At the Paranyms we were talking excavations, were we not?

“I look forward to meeting with them,” I said, not really knowing whether it would be for the better or the worse.

“You need to tell them what happened.”

“Well, I did just that to Ton... I mean Mr Smith and he said I was exaggerating.”

Miss P looked displeased and reminded me of the basics.

“Remember, Iona, the three words that supposedly motivate and define us: staunchness, dependability, heroism.”

Resorting to the theoretical always helped to soothe and sway emotions at the Agency. Yes, I would have liked to see myself as a heroine. Or maybe I was a heroine for being staunchly cognizant and entirely dependable in whatever was requested of me. After all, my version of the story at the house by the sea was much more

convincing than anyone else's, if only because I had been there, lived the *adventure* as Tony had called it, and suffered a fate that none of them could have envisioned. As I was about to leave, I turned towards her.

"I'd like to speak to the housekeeper?"

Miss P looked lost; even her grey bun appeared to become undone. But it was just for an instant; she knew perfectly well who I was talking about.

"Oh, you mean Jones," she said, trying uselessly to smile. "Three doors down."

I left Miss P's office and crossed paths with Rudge in the corridor. He most probably knew that I was being sent home for a brief period. Or perhaps he was not to be my assistant any longer, mainly because his interventions at the house by the sea had been quite a success. I realised he had been promoted when he asked me the question I feared.

"We need to sit down and look at the coroner's report."

"Oh?"

"Particularly in the case of... of Mr ..."

I looked upwards and then downwards.

"And when would that be?"

"Now," he said in the tone he was accustomed to in the army.

"Let me speak to someone first. It'll be brief. And then I'll come to your office."

He blushed.

"It's not the office beside yours anymore, Iona. It's one floor down, the second door beside the lifts."

He said that and walked away.

Yes, I would attend to Rudge's request later. Before that, I had to deal with someone who had played a merciless role in my most recent manoeuvre. On the way, I picked up my thoughts where I left off.

"Calling things by their name..."

Yes, I was beginning to call things by their name, saying what needed to be said, attempting to provide answers to my many questions. And there was a question that stood out among all the others. I suspected that, before trying to answer whether I had been loved, I first had to ask whether I myself had ever loved...

"Hello, Jones," I said, putting an end to my musings as I entered her office.

She was exactly as she had been in the house by the sea. Dressed in black, she was kneading some invisible concoction with her hands. If anything, her face appeared even more wrinkled; it could be that on her return to the Agency she had suffered a fate worse than mine, and the smiling cheerfulness she had shown in the house had completely disappeared. She looked nothing like an advocate taking on dangerous manoeuvres; on the contrary, she was ideally suited to the role of innocuous housekeeper. But then Rudge had also played the fumbling fool rather well, I thought. At the Agency, we were all so good at performing; we excelled at deception, particularly when it came to deceiving our own colleagues. Not only had I done it myself, but I had trained others at the Agency.

"Hello, Iona," she replied, getting up from her chair.

"I just want to know why," I began to say.

She looked at the area above my head. No, not to my eyes. She knew what I was referring to.

"Dear Iona..." she began.

I interrupted her.

“Don’t you dear me, Jones!” I yelled.

She invited me with a quick gesture of her kneading hands to sit. It was her way of placating me, or maybe she wanted a sitting target.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” she suggested, sitting down herself.

Her face was becoming more wrinkled as she went on.

“Where else should we start,” I said, “for I know the ending far too well? That terrible ending, the dishonesty, the callousness, the lies. It was all a hoax!”

“All done for the greater good,” she replied, rubbing her hands fiercely.

“But you put it all together, didn’t you, Jones?”

She stopped moving her hands and looked into my eyes.

“I was commissioned in the same way you were commissioned, Iona. My task was to be in charge of artwork production in the house, and yours was to examine the artworks. Such were the two sides of the story...”

“The difference, Jones, is that you knew what it was all about, and I was made to believe that it was all factual when it was really a collection of fabrications...”

She cleared her throat. It was a prepared speech.

“May I just say, Iona, that over the years I’ve become quite an art expert, though we should call it technological art for want of a better word. I was never an artist, but this specialist technology fascinated me from the start. The number of things I could create with a couple of commands was infinite. Creating art became akin to a kind of ever-powerful wizardry, as if a spell is cast and a work of art appears. An extraordinary journey!”

She seemed excited, and a bright smile appeared briefly in the middle of the wrinkled face. But I was not interested in how she justified her actions nor in

programming bizarre masterpieces based piecemeal on authentic ones. I wanted to know only one thing.

“You showed me a painting...”

“Yes?”

“A painting of a woman and...”

“A woman and a child,” she said, smiling briefly.

I got up from the chair and leaned into her desk.

“How did you know, Jones?” I said very slowly.

She looked confused.

“How did I know what?”

“About the... the child?”

“Yes, the child.”

“Well, how did you know?”

She tried to appease me by showing me her palms; they were hiding nothing.

“Iona, I’m not sure what you mean. I instructed the programme to provide an image of you, that’s all.”

I sat down again.

“An image of me? But... but the painting also included the image of a child!”

“Yes, you.”

“What do you mean *me*?”

“Yes, you. Both as a woman and... and as a child.”

“You mean, it was... me... me as a child?”

“Yes, Iona,” she said and blinked several times. “Who else?”

I took a very long breath.

“But...”

“I instructed the programme to depict how you would’ve been at a young age: your long dark hair, your profile, your eyes, your mouth. And the programme did just that. It created an image of you as a child, just like you but thirty-something years younger.”

I burst out laughing, but I could have easily wept. So, there was no knowledge about the child. The painting represented both me and a very young Iona: a little Iona; Iona, the girl child. Who else could the child in the painting be?

“I see...” I said.

“In other words, the programme imagined how you were when young.”

“The programme can... can imagine?”

She then produced the biggest smile she was probably capable of, even more effusive than her constant smiling in the house by the sea.

“Oh, how little you know about them. These programmes are utterly captivating; they can go beyond imagining and visualizing, they can foresee and foretell... And after all their intensive training, they end up becoming aware of everything around them...”

Her enthusiasm was almost contagious.

“But why me? Why submit me to this terrible ordeal? Was it to test me out? Did you all think I deserved some kind of punishment? Were you...”

She interrupted me with one word.

“They... “

“They? Who?”

“I mean the Trustees... they wanted to know...”

“What?”

“How... how you would react.”

Yes, I had been tried, tested and tampered with.

“Who are these Trustees?” I said, raising my voice.

“I think you’re soon to meet them.”

I turned the ugly side of my face towards her.

“Jones, you saw me react in the house, didn’t you? I was captivated and excited by all the artworks I saw, and in the case of the work about a woman and a child I was stunned to see that... that I myself was part of the art created by Hassett, whoever he may have been. But then...”

“But then what?”

“You reacted badly as well, Jones. That was something I couldn’t understand. You wept a few tears when showing me the painting. At the time I thought you’d suffered some kind of tragedy yourself as a housekeeper. But your tears were sincere, and it must have been because you did suffer a tragedy as... as plain Jones.”

She rubbed her wrinkly face with her kneading hands.

“I...”

“Yes, Jones?”

“I allowed myself to get carried away.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...” she began to say and then rubbed her eyes even more firmly.

I got up again. I had my answer, but now I wanted hers.

“Yes?” I asked.

She got up as well and led me to the door.

“Our private lives should remain private, but I’ll point out just one thing. Only one. There was an image, similar to yours. It was a photograph of me and...”

“Yourself as a child?”

“No, it was...”

“What was it?”

“It was a real child –a child who was separate from me, not a version of me. And she looked like me.”

I understood.

“And the child was...” I suggested.

She was rubbing her eyes again; I could see that she was holding back the tears.

“That child is no longer here. And the painting reminded me of myself and the child. Maybe I had instructed the programme to produce that portrait of you both as an adult and a child without realising I was thinking of myself and of what had happened to me...”

“I understand,” I said.

“I don’t know why I told you, maybe to share my experience. I have kept it secret all these years. I suppose we all have our secrets at the Agency...”

I cleared my throat but said nothing.

“And I wanted to end it all. I still do. Sometimes I wish someone might help me to put an... an end to everything...”

Maybe she was begging me, but I was in no state to accept her woeful invitation.

“And the child in... in your life?” I asked.

She opened the door, and she was back to herself.

“No children allowed at the Agency...” she announced coldly as if reading from the manual.

She frowned and it was difficult to say whether some of her wrinkles were scars. And then she mentioned the second part of the regulation.

“... whatever the child’s origin, whether genetic or genomic...”

“You mean...”

“Yes, and I had to... to return her...”

That was my own story, but I said nothing. Acceptance and rejection, and again, and again. I knew Miss P was aware of my background, but I would not discuss it with Jones.

“I understand...”

Jones was now fully her professional self.

“I don’t mean anything at all, Iona. A child existed, and then it didn’t. That’s all there is to it.”

“Yes, that’s all.”

She cleared her throat several times, and the mood of the conversation changed.

“I understand that you’re to stay home for a few days, Iona.”

“I won’t be at work for a while. Tony thinks it’ll do me good.”

“You mean Mr Smith.”

“Yes, Mr Smith.”

As I exited her office, I turned and asked her another question.

“How come we never met before... before the manoeuvre at the house by the sea? From what I’ve heard, you’ve been working at the Agency for quite a long while.”

“Oh, I used to work with the Trustees, so I... I kept away from everyone.”

“But now you’re on the same floor as...”

Jones cleared her throat again.

“Yes, conceivably I’ve been demoted. But then I... I don’t want to ask any questions.”

“Because you know the answers?” I suggested.

She pursed her lips as a reply.

“Well, you were very convincing as a housekeeper,” I said, “especially your demeanour, speech, accent...”

She blushed.

“I’m good with languages, I suppose.”

And then I remembered something.

“In that case, I wonder whether you can translate a text for me.”

“A text? What is it?”

“Oh, something I picked up,” I told her.

It was the truth, after all.

“That’s fine, send it to me.”

The last person I met up with at the Agency that day was Rudge. He was now in a new office, further down, as he had put it. Closer to the Trustees, I imagined.

It was all a lie, I said to myself, but then I had lived surrounded by lies for so long that they had become a tragic way of life: lies, only lies and nothing but... Lies and tragedy as two components that I was well conversant with: yes, lies used as a defence strategy, readily getting me out of scrapes; and tragedy making me feel safe and protected because I was so used to it. In other words, I was predisposed to see everything as a tragedy and willing to lie at any given moment. And I asked myself whether a story about works of art produced not by a true artist but by a non-sentient machine was not only a lie but a tragedy as well...

“So, what’s this about a coroner’s report?” I asked Rudge when opening the door to his new office.

He invited me in with a nod.

“It’s just that we cannot establish what the cause of death was.”

“You mean Mr...”

“Yes, of course.”

“All quite simple, really: he was buried in the sand and had a major wound to his neck that was bleeding profusely.”

“But we need to know about the final deed that... that caused his demise.”

“Deed? Do you think someone had committed a... a deed against him?”

“You were there, Iona,” he said very slowly.

I suddenly felt cold.

“I was, I suppose,” I replied.

With another nod towards a chair, he invited me to sit down, but I remained standing; I wanted to leave the place as soon as possible.

“Are you implying that...”

“No, certainly not, Iona. But he could’ve been saved. After all, the team and I were close by.”

I attempted an empathetic smile.

“But you see, Rudge, he... he didn’t want to be saved,” I whispered.

“What do you mean?”

It was a tricky situation, but I would come out of it unscathed by resorting to our prevailing regulations and norms. Knowing the various manuals as well as I did meant that I could apply the relevant rules to any particular case. Or even bend those rules, if required. No, I resolved, there was no need to be afraid. I would spell out the whole thing more to test Rudge’s resilience than to defend myself.

“Let’s say that he required a final push, but he was already bordering the precipice...”

Rudge focussed his eyes on mine by almost closing them.

“You mean...”

“I mean nothing else than what I’ve just said, Rudge.”

He had much to learn, unaware as he was that he did not have a case.

“If an advocate decides to dispose of whoever it may be,” I continued, “then the advocate is always right. It’s that simple, Rudge. Our judgement cannot be questioned, never, ever. That’s why we take risks; that’s why we’re bold, audacious, dedicated, and always willing to go all the way, even at the cost of our own lives. Yes, I was concerned when Miss P mentioned the report, but it’s all straightforward piffle. Let’s put it this way: a man is about to die, nothing can reasonably save him, he has minutes to live, so why not make it easy for him...”

I was both taking responsibility and exonerating myself.

“By *man* you mean Mr...”

“Yes, him.”

After all, Mr Taras had suggested that I took over his final moments: *I would like to be murdered by you, Iona*. But I would not tell Rudge about this last request by Mr Taras, a well-kept secret between a dead man and myself. No, I could not have refused a dying man’s wish, even though I knew it could land me in trouble.

“Please continue filling out the report, and I will respond how I see fit,” I said, whilst he mumbled something incomprehensible as if words had failed him.

It was an order on my part. Rudge was ever so good at obeying orders, especially orders from me. He had not been my assistant for nothing.

As I was about to leave his office, he spoke.

“Mr Smith...”

“Yes?”

“Mr Smith has asked me to inform you of something else.”

“Oh?”

“We need another manoeuvre from you, Iona.”

I was amused.

“What? Something to do with Art once again?”

Rudge looked down towards the floor.

“No, it’s an internal matter.”

I ceased to be amused.

“How internal?”

“A... a couple of... of apostates.”

Rudge closed his eyes briefly.

“What? Two of them?” I protested.

He nodded and said nothing.

“Who are they, Rudge.”

“They’re in... in hospital.”

And then I knew.

“You mean...”

“Yes.”

I crossed my arms for protection.

“Surely... surely they cannot have betrayed us... they’ve both suffered terribly...”

“We need to deal with them, Iona.”

I pressed Rudge’s arm briefly to make him understand.

“But in a way they’re already dead... theirs isn’t a real existence... they were seriously injured. And they won’t ever be able to lead a normal life...”

My pleas were useless.

“Just in case they do, we need to deal with it,” he stated.

I rubbed the scars on my face as my sole consolation.

“But what’s the proof?”

“Mr Smith has received a full report.”

“All of it confidential?”

“That’s it.”

Rudge remained impassive.

“But don’t you see?” I protested. “I can’t do it... not them... they’re my friends...”

“We all thought they were our friends,” he murmured.

“Please, please, please... ask someone else...”

He opened the door to the corridor.

“Don’t... don’t you enjoy disposing of people, Iona, when it’s strictly necessary?”

It was the sort of comment that Rudge would not have dared make before his new appointment. It sounded too distasteful even for the Agency’s standards. I explained.

“I wouldn’t say I enjoy it, Rudge. It’s a job, as impersonal and unexciting as any other job...”

He was noncommittal.

“Yes, those are good descriptors I suppose.”

I felt I had to make a personal comment, a little harsh maybe.

“Are *you* asking me this question, Rudge? According to our official stats at the Agency, you’re the staff member with the most hits, aren’t you?”

He coughed, possibly not to clear his throat but to muddle his voice.

“It was in... in war zones when I was a soldier. Only on land, never close to water...”

“Why is that, one of the fronts is precisely in water, or should I say underwater...”

He blushed.

“I’m... I’m terrified of water. I started off as a submariner many years ago but had to give it up after my submarine...”

“Yes?”

“It sank... and I was the only survivor.”

I tried to display empathy on the good side of my face.

“You found an escape route somehow...” I suggested and he nodded without looking at me.

I remembered how useless he had been when helping to dispose of the nurse in the river, and his shocked expression when I jokingly spoke of a burial at sea.

“How many?” I asked again.

“What, warzones or murders... I mean deaths?” he asked, coughing again, but by then he had the detached look of an assassin.

I had seen that look so many times, most recently in Bill’s eyes, aiming to obliterate me with a simple stare and the void in the middle of his face. As to Rudge, at that moment he was far removed from the timid self of his previous time as my assistant. I was sure I had never sustained that look at all, ever; not for nothing I had trained myself to appear my most charming well beyond the disposal of enemies.

“Both,” I said. “How many have you had to deal with?”

He almost smiled.

“Oh, in the case of warzones, I’ve been to the usual ones... north, east and west, plus quite a few abroad...”

“And regarding people? How many?”

“In the...” he began to say and then hesitated.

“What? In the dozens?”

I knew the exact figures but I wanted to provoke him. The Agency kept a record of everything we did, each one of our deeds, including any mass executions.

“Probably in the hundreds, but I don’t keep a tally,” he said and looked at me in the eye. “Do you, Iona?”

“Only at the back of my mind...”

“A very safe place.”

He again tried to smile.

“Let’s get back to business,” he said. “This new disposal.”

And then I remembered.

“But what about the exhibition?”

“This disposal will be after the exhibition. We need to wait because security has been stepped up in the hospital. There was some kind of attempt.”

“An attempt against them?”

“I don’t have enough details, but what I do know is that it was against an infiltrator recovering after a mission in the frontline. The whole building has been cordoned off. So, the disposal must take place soon afterwards, once security is a little laxer.”

“I’d like to see both of them beforehand. I’ve heard they’re improving and are beginning to communicate.”

“That’s precisely why we have to... to dispose of them.”

“But...”

“The decision is irrevocable,” he said, handing me a piece of paper on his desk.

“Here’s the signed death warrant.”

I took a deep breath, aware that orders were orders. Contravention meant demotion, and in certain instances demotion involved some kind of accident, occasionally mortal.

“So, Jennifer and Whittaker it is,” I was finally able to mutter.

“Thank you, Iona,” he said as if relieved.

“Goodbye, Rudge,”

He blushed.

“It’s now Geoffrey...”

He had moved on to high places.

“Of course. Goodbye, Geoffrey,” I said and left for home.

Chapter 37

“Decidí que te merecías una explicación y por eso escribí estas páginas para aclarar lo sucedido –las escondí entre tus descripciones de los cuadros con la esperanza de que me perdonarías.

“Como artista, soy un pintor de poca monta. No porque me falten entusiasmo, abnegación o clarividencia, sino porque no se me conoce ni contempla como tal, y así soy artista sin serlo de cara a la galería y a la espera de que digan que soy un artista consagrado y de que llegue a conocer la aclamación algún día. Lo que sucedió es que, para salir adelante y por necesidades imperiosas, hube de procurar ser otro, alguien que no constaba ni como un semejante ni como pintor. Y te preguntarás, Iona, por qué no declaré quien de verdad era, pues al fin y al cabo yo representaba lo que ellos solicitaban, es decir, alguien que vivía en el anonimato y que se brindaba al arte a escondidas sin cosechar éxitos ni perseguir la gloria. Tendría que haber tomado cartas en el asunto a tiempo y haber puesto el grito en el cielo, pero me faltó el valor; así que a regañadientes me presté al proyecto y representé el papel de otro a duras penas, sabiendo que llevaba todas las de perder. Y un día me dije: hasta aquí he llegado. Por eso, no sé si fui la víctima propiciatoria de todo este desazonado fregado, o si lo fuiste tú, en la medida en que lo sucedido poco tuvo que ver en último término ni contigo ni conmigo.

“Y es que me usaron como te usaron a ti: yo fui el artista ilusorio, tú fuiste la observadora engañada, y todas esas obras artificialmente creadas no resultaron más

que una visión falseada del arte, que no es sino la máxima expresión del ser humano. Ya desde el principio me dijeron que lo que querían eran cuadros producidos con la oportuna tecnología y que para nada estaban interesados en mis naturalezas muertas si bien, por ser artista, yo estaría a la altura de las circunstancias y por eso fue que me contrataron.

“Desde el primer momento estuve convencido de que la operación en aquella casa no podía ser más que una causa perdida. Y fue porque sabía que, tarde o temprano, la verdad saldría a la luz y se impondría –eso es lo que siempre termina haciendo la verdad, imponerse contra todos los pronósticos, ¿no es cierto? Pese a mis muchas dudas, accedí y adopté el papel de otro hasta que ya no pude seguir más con la añagaza. De alguna manera, ante ti no podía continuar mintiendo y terminé confesándote que todo aquello era una terrible mentira, conduciéndote hasta la sala donde se creaban aquellos artilugios mecánicos de un programa que aspira al arte pero que jamás estará a su altura, y es porque le faltan tantas características humanas: motivación, intención, deseo, pasión, contexto, significado, autenticidad, consciencia... la lista es interminable. Fue por eso que te dije que había que destruir aquellos cuadros.

“Si me presté a ese juego se debió primero, y lo reconozco casi con vergüenza, a que me pagaron una cantidad considerable, pues he estado terriblemente necesitado en los últimos tiempos. En segundo lugar, fue porque me dijeron que tú, Iona, vendrías a la casa para evaluar mi supuesta obra y para ‘descubrirme’ como artista. Aunque se tratara de un mero subterfugio, durante esos días imaginé que de verdad me salvabas de ser un mero desconocido, aunque lo que ibas desentrañando

no fuera más que una versión ilusoria de quien soy. Y por eso, durante tu estancia, no quise estar contigo más que breves momentos para que así no pudieras vislumbrar –gracias a la sagacidad y el discernimiento que te caracterizan– al que soy de verdad, bien por mis gestos, bien por mis palabras.

“Pero ahora ya puedo hablar con total sinceridad. Te diré que ni mi nombre es Hassett ni cómo me llamo de verdad tiene demasiada importancia. Lo único que cuenta en mi vida son las obras que he creado y que quedarán para la posteridad, si es que quedan pues estoy convencido de que hay que destruirlas. Y entretanto sé que desapareceré sin haber recibido ningún tipo de reconocimiento en vida, y seguramente tampoco tras mi muerte.

“Mi querida amiga... no sé cómo llamarte, aliada o cómplice... aunque no sabías que todo aquello era una farsa, percibí que sospechabas una confabulación al examinar aquellas obras de arte que eran supuestamente mías y sobre cuya autoría tú no estabas convencida del todo. Había algo vacilante en tu manera de observarme, en cómo expresabas tus aseveraciones, en la curiosidad casi lastimera con que escudriñabas cuanto había a tu alrededor.

“Te diré que la primera condición del artista antes de enfrentarse al mundo es enfrentarse a lo que es uno. Tal vez por eso tú misma, Iona, no estés dispuesta a dedicarte al arte, pues sospecho que no tienes intención alguna de hacer frente a la persona en la que te has convertido, y ahí radica la raíz de ese profundo desconsuelo que vislumbro en ti. Y es que antes de emprender el camino del arte, hay que empezar desenterrando sin remedio la verdad en el propio pecho, aunque para ello a veces

haya que pagar un precio aterrador. Con cada nueva pincelada se corre el riesgo de perder, imperceptiblemente, primero la prudencia, más adelante el miedo y finalmente la consciencia, esta última al menos en alguna medida. El artista va sumiéndose paulatinamente en una enfermedad del espíritu de la que no hay cura, en una enajenación contra la cual no puede darse vuelta atrás. En otras palabras, poco a poco va disipándose el contacto con el mundo real, algo lamentable pues ese contacto es lo que queremos emular con nuestro arte. Y así el artista termina aislándose del mundo, el cual ya ni le basta ni le conmueve. Sí, en el proceso creador se gana en lucidez, pero de qué sirve sin el necesario discernimiento y para acabar naufragando en la más absoluta soledad. Si acepté la propuesta de hacerme pasar por otro artista fue para determinar si en ese personaje imaginario podría hallar la fuerza necesaria para seguir creando mis naturalezas muertas, pese a los muchos sacrificios que el arte me exige. Pero si el arte tiene poco que ver con la realidad que adopta como propia, ¿no es entonces engañoso en sí mismo?

“Pero no quiero hablar de mí sino de lo que hago, particularmente de mi proclividad a las naturalezas muertas. Si en arte se recurre a la naturaleza muerta será para calmar al espectador porque lo retratado es ajeno a su persona y no le atañe de manera obvia o directa, por más que los temas sean cruentos o crueles: la liebre acribillada a tiros, la flor marchita, la fruta a punto de descomposición. En tales condiciones inertes, ninguno de los objetos retratados nos puede amenazar, y si son dignos de admiración lo serán por sometidos o fenecidos. Pero con mis naturalezas muertas aspiro a todo lo contrario: a zaherir al espectador para que despierte de su cobarde sopor y sea del todo consciente de que su existencia puede concluir en

cualquier momento, al igual que los elementos del cuadro que está observando están a punto de desvanecerse por perecederos.

“Del derramamiento de sangre a los restos humanos, de la fruta a las flores, de los objetos cotidianos a los que nos elevan más allá de lo que vemos y vivimos, así es la naturaleza muerta. También este tipo de manifestación artística se llama *bodegón*, término grotesco como si el lienzo procediera de la taverna y la embriaguez. Todo empezó con la obra de Jacopo de' Barbari a comienzos del XVI, que representa una perdiz y guanteletes cruzados por una flecha, y en la que por vez primera se aplica el esfumado. También destaca el tipo de pintura denominado *vanitas* que refleja la futilidad de la vida, pero más aún el sinsentido de las posesiones y de los bienes mortales, con un trasfondo de moralidad. Recordemos la *Alegoría de la vanidad* de Valdés Leal o el *Vanitas* de Pereda, o la cabeza de cordero y costillares, de Goya, y las imitaciones de éste por parte de Picasso. El *memento mori* no es sólo un recordatorio de que cada uno de nosotros perecerá sin falta ni tregua, es peor aún: es la advertencia de que todos hemos morir por obligación, como si ahí radicara nuestro deber como individuos. En mi caso, conjeturo que la muerte es el precio que uno ha de pagar por haber vivido; se trata de un altísimo precio, pero al mismo tiempo considero que la vida es un premio exquisito.

“No todo está perdido en las naturalezas muertas, y siempre queda la esperanza de otro desenlace, pues también hablan de la belleza de ciertos objetos como tributo a la vida. Eso mismo expresó Kahlo en el cuadro que concluyó pocos días antes de su muerte: se ven varias sandías sobre una superficie y en una de las rodajas, junto a la firma de la pintora, se aprecian las palabras *viva la vida...*

“Te comento que ese sombrero rojo que pinté y que estuvo presente en la agonía final de un ser humano es asimismo un recordatorio de la vacuidad que siento ahora mismo y que he sentido. En el contexto de la naturaleza muerta, habría que examinar qué lugar ocupa un sombrero –ciertamente un objeto inanimado– aunque capaz de contener los sueños de un hombre hasta el momento mismo de su muerte. Sí, ese sombrero representa la desolación que sentiremos a punto de marcharnos para siempre pero también es un símbolo de continuidad, pues hay objetos inanimados que sobreviven al ser humano por derecho propio y reclaman su lugar en el mundo, o al menos en el mundo del arte.

“Sí, yo he pintado naturalezas muertas durante varias décadas, y de tanto hablar de lo exánime he terminado excluyendo la vida de mis obras. Por eso mismo, concluí que convendría renunciar al arte para siempre, como si no hubiera más que decir. No me interesa ese mundo de fuera, absurdo, corruptible, egoísta; el mío me basta y me sobra. Y pese a todo, a lo largo del proceso que tú y yo hemos vivido en esa casa junto al mar he aprendido tantas cosas: primero conocerte, y sin duda admirarte; pero también, a medida que te mostraba los diversos cuadros, empecé a justipreciar cualquier muestra de arte por más que fuera obra de una máquina infame e incapaz de captar la magnitud de lo que estaba haciendo; me temo que ese procedimiento va a revolucionar, más para mal que para bien, el proceso creador. Me di cuenta entonces de que la obra de arte no ha de aspirar a ser real o a imitar, sino que hallará su identidad en la irrealidad, ésa es justamente su existencia, o mejor dicho su no existencia. Yo busco el asombro y la sorpresa, no la reproducción ni la copia, y quiero llegar a esa existencia paralela (o puede que sea perpendicular u

oblicua) a la que experimentamos a diario. Tal vez aquí esté la clave de esa exposición sin arte que te ocupa ahora mismo.

“Tengo entendido que la exposición carecerá de elementos pictóricos y por lo tanto tendrás que depender de otros componentes a tu alcance: imaginación, recuerdos, palabras. Lo que has de preguntarte es si el arte procede sólo de lo que observamos, o si puede haber arte en la intención, en el espejismo, en el pensamiento. Decir que puede haber arte sin arte es como decir que puede haber vida en el pericimientto, o color en las tinieblas. Sí, algo arduo, pero no imposible. Todo es sustituible y adaptable. Todo se transforma y se enmascara. Y ése será tu desafío; estoy seguro de que lograrás salir adelante.

“Sé que no he respondido a la pregunta que me hago a diario. Esos cuadros míos no revelados y no descubiertos que permanecen en el anonimato, ¿no merecen haber sido creados? O diciéndolo de otro modo: ¿la obra desconocida y la obra aún por descubrir son también arte? He aquí una respuesta tentativa: si el acto creativo es enteramente privado, ¿por qué razones he de dar a conocer mis obras obligadamente? ¿Por qué un público al que, sin conocerlo, desprecio, ha de tener la última palabra sobre quién soy y lo que hago?

“Al igual que yo desapareceré, también lo harán mis naturalezas muertas. En breve, todas ellas quedarán destruidas en el fondo del mar donde el más absoluto tenebrismo las hará suyas. El único lienzo que sobrevivirá será el del sombrero rojo. Ése es el cuadro que te haré llegar, ya acabado. Haz con él lo que quieras. Colócalo en la pared de tu casa. O arrójalo a ese río que cruza tu ciudad de este a oeste. O

añade elementos vitales para narrar otra historia, y así el cuadro dejará de pertenecer a la categoría de naturaleza muerta. Si quieres, inclúyelo en la exposición que estéis organizando. En una exposición de arte sin obras artísticas, incluir este cuadro no sería descabellado del todo, pues se trata de una obra que ha dejado de ser una muestra de arte y se ha convertido en la afirmación de un hombre que se hizo pasar por otro sin más propósito que para vivir de otra manera, fuera noble o despreciable, tan lejos de otros.

“Qué triste que no llegáramos a conocernos más, pero será imposible que volvamos a coincidir. Sé que acabarán conmigo, pues fui el principal responsable de que el experimento se truncara. Así, salí de la nada y a la nada vuelvo, a solas y sin ninguna esperanza. Pero tú eres muy distinta a mí y siempre saldrás adelante; estoy convencido de que tarde o temprano encontrarás el camino que anhelas. Te deseo una vida fecunda y plena, colmada de arte y de belleza. Me despido de ti para siempre. Unidos por nuestro amor al arte, tal vez tú y yo podríamos haber sido, y por qué no, amantes...

“*Post scriptum*: precisamente Morandi fue mi gran maestro, aunque él y yo no coincidiéramos ni en el tiempo ni en el espacio. Pronto hará un siglo de su muerte, pero para mí su obra es imperecedera. Morandi fue siempre mi guía para todo en arte menos para el uso del color. Prefiero las tonalidades deslumbrantes y llamativas, como es el caso del cuadro del sombrero rojo; lo que quiero ante todo en mi arte es plasmar una afirmación, no negaciones ni interrogaciones. Y no te olvides de que también me gusta añadir elementos amarillos en las obras donde ese color es del todo inimaginable...

Chapter 38

It was the text the artist had managed to conceal among my *little notes* so that I would forgive him; that much I understood from his first paragraph. But after that, I could barely make out what he said on those pages. Maybe his manuscript –or should I call it a letter– could be included in some shape or form in the exhibition we were shortly to hold. I thought I would try to change Hassett’s words in his language into my own words in my language. I had a few dictionaries and phrase books which I had occasionally used in past missions, and translating a longer text would not be that difficult. Can languages be so far apart since humans all have comparable concepts, feelings and reactions in every language? After all, words should mean the same whatever the language, which is what dictionaries are for. Blue will always be blue, and a cat will always be a cat. Thus, I decided I would try to translate the text myself. I translated word for word, one after the other, one sentence followed by the next; surely the same meaning would come out at the other end. In any case, some words sounded very much alike in the receiving language, so it was a matter of keeping the text simple and to the point. Even if there was some kind of technique or art in the business of translation, it could not be too complicated to replace words in one language with words in another. I was convinced I would manage. And this was my attempt:

“As an artist, I am a painter of small mount. Not because I lack enthusiasm, abnegation or clairvoyance, but because I am not known or contemplated as such, and so I am an artist without being it of the face to the gallery and to the awaiting so

that they say I am a consecrated artist and knows the acclamation. What occurred was that, to exit forward and for imperious needs, I had to procure being another, someone who did not comprise neither as a similar nor as a painter. And you will ask, Iona, why I did not declare myself as who of truth I was because, at the end and in the cape, it was what they solicited, that is to say, someone who lived in the anonymity and who himself rose a toast to art in concealment without harvesting exits nor persecuting glory. I should have taken letters in the business to time and have put the scream in the heaven, but I faulted to myself the value; like this I lent myself to the project by telling off my teeth, and represented the paper of another to hard pains, knowing that I carried all those to lose. And one day I said to myself: until here I have arrived. Thus, I do not know if the propitiatory victim in this whole unseasoned washing-up was I or you, in the measure in which the succeeded little had to see neither with me nor with you in the ultimate term.”

When I read what I had produced by checking each word in the dictionary one by one and by trying to construct sentences as similar as possible to the original, adding here and there linking terms to give some consistency to the text, the result did not make any sense whatsoever. It sounded ludicrous and horrid, offensive and ridiculous, excruciatingly hideous. There were no idiomatic expressions and no colloquial feel to it, neither did it flow in any direction. It was not a comprehensible piece of text in any shape or form. I was ashamed of my ignorance, but mainly of the fact that I had dared to even attempt a translation, an embarrassing situation to admit. I then decided to use a translation programme that was available at the Agency and I asked it to translate the same paragraph:

“As an artist, I'm a small-time painter. Not because I lack enthusiasm, detachment or clairvoyance, but because I am not known or contemplated as such, and so I am an artist without being faced with the gallery and waiting for them to say that I am a consecrated artist and that I know the acclaim. What happened was that, in order to get ahead and for imperious needs, he had to try to be another, someone who was neither like a fellow nor like a painter. And you will wonder why I did not declare myself as who I really was, for in the end I am what they requested, that is, someone who lived in anonymity and gave himself to art in hiding without reaping success or pursuing glory. I should have taken letters in the matter in time and put the cry in heaven, but I lacked courage; so I lent myself to the project reluctantly, and I played the role of another hard, knowing that I had all the losing ones. And one day I said to myself: here I have come. So, I don't know if I was the propitiatory victim of all this messy scrubbing, or if you were, to the extent that what happened had little to do with you or me ultimately.”

Again, this did not seem to work. The results were marginally better than my feeble attempt at translation but still unusable. I then tried translating the text with our trusted transadaptor, and maybe I should have tried this first:

“As an artist, I am a minor painter. Not because I lack enthusiasm, selflessness, or insight, but because I am neither known nor recognized as such. Thus, I am an artist without being acknowledged publicly, waiting for the moment when they declare me a recognized artist and acclaim becomes familiar. What happened is that, to move forward and out of pressing needs, I had to try to be someone else –someone who was neither considered a peer nor a painter. You might wonder why I didn't declare

who I truly was; after all, I am what they were looking for –an individual living in anonymity, secretly dedicating themselves to art without harvesting successes nor pursuing glory. I should have taken action on the matter in time and raised the alarm, but I lacked the courage; so, I reluctantly got involved in the project, and I played the role of another reluctantly, knowing that I had all the odds against me. I don't know if I was the sacrificial victim in all this disheartening mess, or if it was you, to the extent that what happened had little to do with either of us in the end.”

Again, the resulting text was not acceptable. It was stilted, unfeeling, expressionless. Certainly, unusable for the intended purpose. It was then that I resorted to Jones; I had told her that I might require her services as a linguist. I sent her an encrypted message: “As discussed, could you please translate this paragraph for me, I plan to include some of the text in the exhibition. You can tell it’s from Hassett, but I don’t want it to be known that I will use his words, at least not yet.” And she replied, also in encrypted messages, that she would deal with the text if I didn’t tell anyone what she had said to me regarding a child in her life; she added that, if she had mentioned the episode, it was because she had got carried away and had become a little emotional, something which she never did. And she added that if I liked how she translated the paragraph, then she would work on the whole text for me. And this was the translated paragraph Jones returned:

“I am nothing but a lowly artist, not because I lack enthusiasm, forbearance or, may I suggest, prescience, but because I am not known or even considered as such. In other words, I am an artist without truly being one, in the expectation that one day I might just be celebrated and will finally come to enjoy the applause of others. Let me

give you some background: to survive and endure, so overwhelmed did I feel in order to attend to my basic needs that I was forced to pretend to be someone who was not even deemed a real fellow human let alone a painter. I am sure you, Iona, will want to know why I did not voice who I was for, at the end of the day, I was exactly what they had requested: I fulfilled both conditions: an anonymous life and a covert commitment to art, and all of it without aiming to achieve success and certainly without chasing glory and fame. I should have taken action and cried foul, but I lacked the necessary courage. In the end, I grudgingly went along with the project and painfully played the role of someone I did not know, aware that I would lose badly in the end. And then one day I said to myself: I am done. And since what happened had ultimately little to do with neither you nor myself, I am not sure whether I was the stooge in this disturbing screw-up or whether you, Iona, were there simply to be immolated as a sacrificial victim.”

I replied to Jones and she replied to me, message after message, forwards and backwards:

“Your version reads so well, thank you, Jones. It feels like an original, as if it came directly from the artist’s mouth. If I have any criticism, it is that maybe the translated text sounds a tad too literary, too embellished, far too elegant as compared to what I initially saw without fully understanding the original.”

“Iona, I have adapted the text to your liking. I worked on it because you told me you might use the text for the exhibition. I admit that the translation may sound somewhat overdone, so please tone it down if you wish.”

“Well, as long as it says what Hasset says in his text, it should be alright.”

“The translation says what he says but offers a little more substance. I tried to delve into the depths of his words and brought out what he most likely intended to say. In a way, the translated text says what Hassett should have said.”

“But surely, Jones, in translation you’re not allowed to add or to intensify...”

“Well, as I see it, with translation being an art you’re allowed to do what you think is required.”

I was not sure about this, it felt a little conceited; but it was not the time or place to embark on a discussion on translation, a subject I scarcely knew about.

“Is there anything else about him,” I asked her, “that you can tell me after reading Hassett’s text in full?”

“Well, in a nutshell,” she replied, “it appears that Hassett really is an artist, and he very much regretted taking part in our operation. Sadly, he may now not be alive anymore.”

I was shocked by the news. I asked her to go ahead and translate the whole text. She agreed, guilty as she most probably felt for having deceived me at the house by the sea. One good deed, I reasoned, deserved another.

Chapter 39

I went from room to room in my apartment, carefully inspecting my collection of death paintings in an attempt to find clues relating to their origin or identity that I might have missed. I could find nothing but the deadliest predicaments. I should have done that in the house by the sea, checked all the works there as carefully as I could manage. Yes, there were misgivings and suspicions; but had I been more attentive and less engaged in blackholing, I might have picked up signs about those artworks and realised from the beginning how heavily they relied on works by others. And I would have concluded that, ultimately, they were not real art.

“But were they fake?”

Those works had been the product of a programme and not of the mind, made by a sophisticated fine art printer and not by an artistic hand. They were not aiming to be fakes nor meant to pass as some famous artist’s work, but followed distorted intimations of the world. But whose?

“What’s this?” I said, inspecting one of the paintings hanging along the corridor; it depicted a death mask.

As I gazed more intently, I realised the face looked like my face, with scarring all along one side, and with long black hair dangling along my shoulders, lying as I was on a bed and utterly dead.

“Me?”

I looked at the painting again. I could not remember purchasing it, nor who the artist was. It had no signature and no year. I blackholed as expected.

“It cannot be me!”

I closed my eyes for a few seconds and, when I opened them, I saw a different profile. It was the death mask of someone I did not know, lying inside a coffin. The painting had a signature and a year. I recalled having purchased it at a recent exhibition.

“I need light...”

I moved to the room with the chandelier and stood under its universe of crystals revolving around me. Again, I tried to come up with answers to questions I was not sure I could articulate.

“I’ve been at home for far too long. I need to get out.”

I said goodbye to Jack, busy as he was preparing various dishes, baking bread, wiping down surfaces, tidying up, sweeping and vacuuming; in other words, all those things that I had no idea how to deal with. I could perfectly concoct the most sophisticated manoeuvre and the most challenging disposal, yet dusting the furniture wholly escaped me. Before I left, I reminded him that I was expecting an important delivery.

“A rather large parcel, the size of a standard painting,” I specified and left.

“Here, please,” I told the taxi driver, showing him a card.

It was a regular address to the driver but a hospital to me.

No, it was not the place where I had spent time recovering from the strawberry-flavoured capsule, but a very different urban structure, well hidden away in a tame office block. It was there that the Agency had several floors for its own use, one of which accommodated the two colleagues accused of apostasy. I had phoned the place earlier and said I wanted an urgent consultation with the plastic surgeons

who dealt with my case, and they obliged by giving me an immediate appointment; instant medical assistance was one of the main advantages of working for the Agency.

“You have an appointment in two hours,” they replied. “But remember that we’ve extra security at present, so please bring at least two IDs.”

I was in no state to deal with any more disposals, though I could not shy away from the warrant. Because of the increase in security, the manoeuvre would have to wait. But I had to have a feel for the place beforehand.

“Good morning,” I said when taken to the consulting room.

The five surgeons there nodded without greeting me. For quite some time they had been asking to meet with me for a discussion regarding my progress after the incident in Barcelona. I had been too busy to attend, but in reality I had avoided the encounter.

We discussed my physical condition, with the five of them speaking slowly and hesitantly; it could be that they thought they were being observed or recorded. They surveyed the improvements regarding my scarred tissues; the internal damage to my mouth and jaw; the effects of the medical coma; and my return to work. They did not know that the damage I had suffered was nothing compared to the betrayal I had experienced in the house by the sea.

“Total betrayal...” I thought but did not say.

As they went on talking, I could only think of how shocked I was when I received the full translation by Jones. It left me distraught to find out that I had been in the presence of a real artist, with a genuine calling and wholly committed to his craft, waiting to be discovered one day; someone who was, by now, probably no more, whether by his own hand or as the result of the customary death warrant carried out

by one of our advocates. Thankfully, I had not been assigned the deed. That would have been the cruellest of all commissions.

“The red hat...”

I closed my eyes to welcome the painting of the hat by Hassett, or whatever his name may have been. I should have discovered *him* as an artist instead of the *persona* they devised, and given *him*, a real artist, the recognition he deserved, and maybe even made his still lifes –however many there were– known to the world.

“We can deal with all this,” the most senior surgeon said, interrupting my thoughts, “and have you back to... well, to almost your beautiful self within... within a few months, or... or maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

“A year or two...”

It did not sound like a statement about a timeline but sheer speculation.

“The possibility of improvement wasn’t mentioned before,” I said.

“Well, we’ve... we’ve developed a new technique that can...”

Again I stopped listening to their comments.

“I understand,” I said when they finished.

I was sitting at a meeting table, surrounded by the five surgeons in pristine white; the room was white, the furniture was white; worse was that they all seemed to have blank expressions, and even their sentences were full of blanks.

“Thank you, but I prefer to remain as I am now.”

“What?” several of them asked at the same time.

“Yes, I’ve grown to like, we could say, my scars,” I replied, caressing the bad side of my face.

The senior surgeon spoke again; he had not listened to a word I said.

“We’ll... we’ll prepare a report about... the various options with... graphics of physiological functions and various anatomical diagrams... We’ll need some imaging, scanning, endoscopy. We’ll consider various options, including growing your own flesh and moulding it to our requirements. Or even...”

“Yes?”

“A transplant. Though it would be half a transplant.”

“You mean half a face?”

“Yes, with the appropriate sculpting as predicted.”

I remembered Bill telling me about his possible nose transplant, now no longer needed.

“But I’ve just said that I wish to remain as I am...”

They again ignored my comment.

“And” one of the doctors said, “we could also deal with the scars resulting from previous incidents...”

Yes, all my previous scars, none as terrible as my most recent ones.

“We’ll send the file to... to Mr Smith.”

“What does he have to do with all this?” I asked, more a protest than a question.

“He’s head... of your department.”

I got up at the same time as I raised my voice.

“Surely this is a private matter, and what I do or don’t do with my physical appearance is entirely my problem and no one else’s.”

It was not about my scarring but about what the situation, however unfortunate, had allowed me to comprehend. I was a changed person, to the detriment of the Agency.

“I’m a changed person...”

But these were just words, taken out of context, spoken for the sake of speaking, neither meant for this place or this time but for somewhere else and some other moment.

“It would be good if...” they said, “if we can repair the damage and... and you can return to your work... unscathed...”

“But I don’t really want to...”

The surgeons went on. One would start a sentence and the next one would continue, and yet another one would point out the conclusion.

“It’s not... challenging in surgery... terms. The damage... could have been... so much worse,” they said and engaged in a lengthy conversation about all the things that could have gone wrong as a result of the injuries.

“But...”

“And how about... about mentally?” they then asked. “Any meteorological or weather stress?”

“I’m fine,” I replied succinctly.

What else could I say? Should I have mentioned my hatred of the rain, my blackholing, my despair, my lack of purpose, the fact that I had stopped believing that my work at the Agency had any fulfilling meaning and that I no longer had the need to prove who I was by committing all... all these... all these crimes? Yes, I was calling things by their name, though for now only to myself.

“Great to... to hear that you feel... fine,” they said, relieved.

They probably presumed I was a psychological wreck, but having to deal with any mental impact would have added another layer to their already busy schedule regarding my pathetic case. Not that they knew exactly what my job entailed and why

I had been so utterly damaged; the official version about my work was something long and tedious like international agent along the lines of software supplier to the political elites in order to promote international understanding at a time when agreements cannot be reached nor conclusions drawn in view of the ongoing wars and the unrelenting weather conditions. And regarding my injuries, they were nothing but the result of war. War, such as useful term to cover up almost anything.

“We’ll get going very... very soon. We’d like to see you, well... within a few weeks for... yes, for tests. Do contact our... our team...”

“But I don’t want to.”

“Oh, don’t worry... about... a thing,” all five of them said almost at the same time.

It was best not to continue the discussion.

“Thank you,” I said and got up. “I now need to see some friends who’re here in hospital.”

All five surgeons got up as well.

“Yes, we know. They’re down... down the corridor.”

I did not recognise her at first, enveloped as she was with metres of bandaging. Tubes in loud colours were feeding various parts of her body, some pushing stuff in and others dragging things out.

“Hello, Jennifer,” I said, trying to sound cheerful though I could not bring myself to smile, unsure of whether she could hear me or even respond.

As I approached her, she opened her eyes just a fraction and very slowly said a single word.

“Tony...”

“Yes?”

Then she closed her eyes and said nothing else. As I felt my bag for the mock weapon, a nurse entered the room and told me that I could not stay any longer.

“But I need to... to speak to her and...” I complained.

“Perhaps you can come back later,” said the nurse. “Did you not say you also wanted to see someone else on this floor?”

“Yes, Whittaker.”

I was led to another corridor. With Whittaker, it was a similar picture. He was fully bandaged, up to his head, with a gap for his closed eyes. But when he heard me, his eyes suddenly opened.

“Hello, Whittaker.”

Through a small opening at the mouth, he was able to whisper a single word.

“Tony...”

As I got closer to him, the nurse pulled my hand from my bag. Yes, the weapon in my bag was made of hard density foam, exactly the same size and feel as a real one.

“As I said earlier, you’ve only a minute with these patients,” she snapped. “You’re well aware that they’re both very sick and should not be disturbed. There has been a very slight improvement, but with any exertion they might suffer a setback...”

It was supposed to be a dry run. I wanted to find out how easy or difficult it would be to dispose of them. Whether the nurse knew about my intentions, my mock weapon, my orders, the death warrant, my hesitations, my reluctance, it was hard to say. Although the hospital housed in that building was affiliated with the Agency, the nurse was most likely just doing her job.

“I’m leaving now,” I said to the nurse and left.

Yes, I concluded, it would be easy to dispose of both of them. I tried not to think of how very unhappy I felt about their future disposal.

“Thank you,” I said and entered.

Jones seemed troubled when she saw me.

“What for?” she asked.

“Oh, for your translation. Your brilliantly creative translation. And you have adapted it beautifully for the purpose –it’ll be the perfect accompaniment for an art exhibition without... well, without art.”

I laughed, but she still looked sad. We were sitting in a bar; it was early evening. None of the other tables were occupied. I had phoned earlier to make sure there would be no other members of the public there. After what Jones made me go through at the house by the sea, I had decided that maybe a disposal was best.

“Working on that text by Hassett has made me realise that...” she began to say.

Her eyes crunched up, on the verge of crying.

“What has it made you realise?”

She was fast drinking her wine.

“That it’s all futile, that my life isn’t worth much. I should make up for what I did wrong. There’s no hope for me...”

As she spoke, her voice became darker and more pitiful.

“Please, Jones. Let’s try and be...”

I was going to say *positive*, but it would have been a useless piece of advice, knowing as I did that her problem had no solution.

“Creative,” I said instead.

It was the worst thing to say.

“Oh, Iona. The most precious thing I created was then... was then destroyed.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

I sipped my wine as slowly as possible from the good side of my mouth. We had to move to another subject.

“I wish I could’ve got to know him...” I began to say.

“The artist?”

“Yes, the real one.”

She stopped crying.

“I wish I had as well. Instead, he and I were just two performers in...”

“Two performers in a kind of a play.”

“Yes...”

“Meant for one spectator,” I added.

“You!”

She began to cry again.

“But you got to know him through his words, Jones,” I said soothingly.

“Translating what someone says must be a way of getting so very close to them, it could well approach a degree of intimacy. You toiled with his words and transformed them into an altogether different understanding. The whole process must have provided you with unique insights and, mostly, a deep awareness of what the artist meant with what he said. Doesn’t he talk wisely about art, his predicament, his creative process, those still lifes of his and of which I’ve only ever seen one? How tragic that, at the end of it all, he’s no longer here...”

It was my turn to shed a tear or two, but no more than that.

“Very sad,” she replied, “yes, so very sad.”

“He was himself an unknown artist all along, playing a role that he should’ve played in real life. And now he’s lost forever...”

I closed my eyes to stop the tears and saw the painting of the red hat.

“This is to Hassett!” I said raising my glass.

“To Hassett!” Jones responded.

I pretended to drink, and she had almost finished her wine.

“It cannot be easy for you remembering him, Iona. He did say in his text that... that you could’ve been friends, allies, accomplices... maybe even lovers...”

One more regret, one more disappointment. I could not discuss that with Jones.

“Again to Hassett!” I said raising my glass.

“Hassett!” Jones said.

She had no more drink in her glass, and I had not offered to top it up. And then she realised what our encounter was about.

“But... but, Iona, there’s nobody in the bar,” she said, anxiously looking around her, “even the waiters seem to have left. Surely you’re not going to...”

It was pitiful to see her tears and her regrets. No, her love of words was not enough to bring her joy. So miserable was she that, when we were in her office, she had asked me whether someone might help her to put an end to everything. I decided there was no need to punish her with a disposal; her life was punishment enough.

“No, Jones, of course not!” I said, trying to look shocked. “Whatever made you think that?”

She wiped her tears with her sleeve and finally produced a smile.

Chapter 40

Like the stigmata of the suffering, I bear my scars for all to see. The most recent ones still oppress me when I so much as think about them, sustained in the arms of a man I wanted dead. But there are scars from previous events, moulded in various cities, stemming from manoeuvres with very different weapons and devices and procedures: from bullets and switchblades; from strangulation attempts and blows; from biotech pharma and medtech; from deception and duplicity, though these are not readily visible; and from believing I was safe and loved when I was neither (yes, Tony had led me to believe that, when what he wanted was to learn from me to further himself at the Agency). No, I never once wished for surgery to soften the look of scars or cleverly blend ugly blemishes into my skin and flesh. This is who I am, there is no running away. By now, I am used to any such disfigurements making inroads into everything I think or do, my past and my future linked in this agonising zigzagging from scar to scar. Will there be more scarring, must there be? I am desperate for answers but get no reply. I have, as predicted, a few more questions. What monster have I become, what accident of nature, what terrible secret that I'm not admitting even to myself do I conceal?

The person in charge of propaganda and image management at the Agency had done an excellent job. She was usually front of house and dealt both with questions put by the general public and with greeting, but only greeting, private investors. I had no idea of her name or where her office was. She was most probably unaware that we dealt mostly with – why not spell it out? – deceit and slaying at our

end, and instead was convinced that we were fully dedicated to nothing less than international trade of the finest kind; that was all she had to know. As I had requested, she sent hundreds of invitations by urgent delivery stating that we would be celebrating New Year's Eve by holding the official opening of the exhibition at midnight that day.

"You are cordially invited to..." said the pink-coloured card, with my seal of approval.

The venue was magnificent. In a matter of weeks, the historical building (earlier it had been a museum to house portraits of prominent citizens) had been purchased and transformed into the most contemporary location, with an impressive exhibition space on the ground floor and a colossal stairway leading to further display halls. With so many people there, the air conditioning system was luckily in full blast.

When I arrived on the late evening of the opening, there were already scores of people in the venue as well as long queues outside. You could feel excitement in the air; the event had been advertised as a first: the beginning of something which Tony had decided to call unremarkably *New Art*. Food and drink were abundant, with bite-size appetizers for all tastes and preferences; some of the more artistic culinary creations reminded me of the delicious but deadly stew at the house by the sea. The surrounds were pristine, in shining white: those serving, the flooring, the ceilings, the doors and, hanging from the walls, the frames. Yes, all those frames of non-existent exhibits were white, containing nothing but a blank and empty space. After all, this was to be an art exhibition without art. And like all art, it needed an audience, which in this case it had in abundance, thanks to an impeccable marketing campaign despite the rush. Even in its nothingness, art could be made to have an audience, and an enthusiastic one as well.

"Nothing..." I said to myself.

No, nothing was on show. Not an image or memento, not a photograph or a fragment of anything taken from the house by the sea, the cove, or the gravel path.

“Surely we could have exhibited something belonging to the place itself,” said Miss P, approaching me.

“What, a few pebbles from the beach as found objects?” I suggested.

And there we all were. Tony, whom I still refused to call Mr Smith; Rudge, now climbing the echelons as a recompense for his success at the house by the sea; Jones, once again about to weep; Ogden and Foley clapping; Pratt cheering; Robinson looking lost.

“Hello, Lundy!” I shouted from afar.

She was standing at a desk by the entrance, distributing copies of what she had dared to call the *catalogue raisonné* of the exhibition. It was an elegant publication, neither blank nor white but full of colour; it included my *little notes* on the even pages, and on the odd pages bright images in Dutch angles of the house, the garden, the cove, the collapsing staircase, the paintings along the ground floor all covered with linen; in the central pages, there was a wide-angle view of the stretch of sea across the house. As expected, the catalogue did not contain a single image of the paintings I had seen and which, after all, were not the imaginary artist’s paintings and were not authentic paintings and, most importantly, were not paintings. They had significance solely in their non-existence and through what I had written about them. And because they were nowhere to be seen, people imagined them to be so much more outstanding than they could ever be. The mind could be powerfully creative without receiving a single prompt. And I, Iona, had a surprise in store for everyone there.

We had been told to wear black, in contrast with the stark whiteness of the whole enterprise. I decided on a long black dress and a black veil covering my face. On arrival I removed the veil; there would be no pretence in what I did or was. Everyone avoided looking at my damaged side, that other part of who I was. Just in case, Ogden and Foley had made sure there was a rumour going around so that no one would ask questions about my scars: I had been attacked by enemy forces when visiting one of the warfronts for charitable purposes, or something to that effect.

“You’re the show’s shining star, Iona,” said Tony.

He was also fully dressed in black without a hint of whiteness. I was not expecting him to be too enthusiastic after our meeting in his new office. But then, the exhibition was his first proper task as head of our squadron and he desperately needed it to succeed.

“I feel more like a fallen star...”

He paid little attention to what I said.

“And remember, Iona, no partisanship in your speech.”

What he meant was that I should steer well clear of the truth.

“Certainly,” I replied, knowing that art would speak for me.

Tony pointed to the wall at the end.

“What’s that?” he said.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that, Tony. It’s just my little surprise. We agreed, didn’t we agree that I wouldn’t even tell you what it was about?”

He nodded, almost excitedly.

There were now hundreds of attendees going around the vast space, trying to capture the lack of images several times over as if they had missed out on something,

carefully inspecting all those frames and, in some cases, caressing them gently. They examined the blank canvases closely and rubbed their fingers on them; as there was no art, no one would tell them off for getting so close.

“Hello,” I said.

People nodded.

“Surely you’re not going around trying to imagine the non-existent pictures in each frame.”

My mordant observation did not go down well.

“No, that would be too outrageous. We’re trying to read the notes in the catalogue and construe what the paintings would look like if they were real.”

I moved on to another group.

“Are you enjoying the exhibition?” I asked several guests.

“If you expect us not to be disenchanted, then what can we say?”

“All this will have to grow on us.”

“I’m not sure this is art.”

“What am I supposed to do: touch, smell, taste, hear?”

“Or maybe only think?”

“Art or satire?”

Despite their misgivings, they continued moving from frame to frame, and the longer they went around the more they seemed to enjoy what they saw, or did not see. This I concluded from their smiles.

“Try to experience a new way of seeing,” I suggested, and they smiled even more.

All the lights faded except the most powerful one; it shone brightly on me,

illuminating my scars from the ceiling. I heard a few gasps and thought of putting the black veil back on. But more than anything, I needed to be fully myself at that moment. Tony began his speech.

“Welcome to our Exhibition of the Unknown Artist! We know his name, Hassett, but little else. It’s an exhibition about art without... without art. It’s what we’ve called *New Art*,” he said, standing on a podium and speaking into a microphone.

It was almost time for me to speak. Tony introduced me by repeating what he had said to me earlier.

“This exhibition is brought to you by the *All Arts Agency*, the *AAA*. And here is the shining star of the show: Iona.”

The Agency had now acquired another two a’s. Everyone clapped.

“She’s the only witness to the marvels of the extraordinary artist we discovered,” Tony went on. “Only she spoke to him; only she understood what he wished to express by means of his art. And very sadly, as soon as she found him, he was lost again. We’ve nothing but the memory of his art captured in Iona’s words...”

None of what Tony said was true, but it did not matter. I willingly obliged and spoke about the artist and our conversations in the house by the sea. I told the audience about my excitement towards the paintings I had seen, and then read out the more stirring sections from my notes. I also included paragraphs from the text that Jones had translated, explaining that this was the only written communication by Hassett, which was entirely true, but I had left out his most revelatory comments. What I did not say was that his text had been extensively ornamented in translation. But maybe nothing had been lost in translation and much had been gained; it all depended on so many factors: the context, the recipient, the location, the time.

My professionalism had kicked in: I was entirely detached and utterly conventional, with deception permeating my every word. Yes, I told everyone about Hassett's comments on the subject of *memento mori*, on what the genus of still life pursues in art, how artists must confront themselves before confronting the world. And I insisted that Hassett had pursued amazement and surprise in his art; those had been his words, *asombro y sorpresa*. And then I added, not knowing how the attendees there (from reviewers to buyers, from gallerists to illustrators and established artists, from the general public to the specialists, from new money to representatives of some of the oldest families in international trading profiting from the unstoppable wars on three fronts and the unremitting climate catastrophes) would take it: that art finds its identity in its unreality rather than by imitating reality.

"In art's non-existence lies its existence," I said, unsure whether anything obscure would go down well.

I could not exactly say that I understood the statement myself.

"Existence in non-existence," I repeated, knowing that it would be difficult, or at least lengthy, to contradict me.

Lundy waved from where she was to remind me to add some further information.

"And" I continued, talking entirely like a salesperson, "you'll be able to purchase the art created from the notes I took at the house by the sea. What I initially did was transform art into text, and now we'll do the reverse: from text to art. Artwork can be recreated by our programme from my notes and then reproduced in the medium of your choice, all at your disposal. And one more thing. The programme will produce a new piece of art with each request, depending on who made the request, when, how, and where; this means that every artwork will be unique. Whatever direction it travels,

however many versions and transformations, however much is lost and whatever remains from the original if anything at all... any art form can derive from any other art form, and in the process become a new and separate art form as far removed from the original as we may please. And thus, commences this exciting interartistic journey..."

I briefly paused, there was a lot of clapping. I felt nothing less than a fraud.

"Place your orders at the desk in the entrance," I went on, "my colleague Lundy is there to assist you. And just to add that there is a further option which would make the project even more limited and exclusive. It would mean that you as viewers can contribute to the artwork, adding your own creation to each frame, whether in terms of shape or form, whatever pleases your aesthetic sense and however immeasurable your inspiration. And as the ultimate experience, you can choose the colour scheme... all except yellow, remember. Please ask Lundy for the pricelist..."

What I had just said was a carefully worded text written by Tony for me. I delivered it *verbatim*, hoping that the surprise I had in store would counter the deceit.

"Hassett," I went on, but these were not Tony's words, "had wanted to live away from manipulation and dishonesty. Away from self-serving interests. Away from the commercialised and commodified world of art..."

Tony closed his eyes, as if he wanted my words to go away. I continued.

"Like, for example, here," I said, pointing at the huge exhibition hall and the vast crowd.

Were the hundreds of people there insulted? They clapped even more warmly; presumably they did not admit the allusion.

"Excuse me..."

"Yes?" I asked, convinced that someone had not liked my comment.

But it was a question from someone from the floor about any influences on Hassett's art.

"As the artist himself told me, Morandi had been his master," I replied to further applause, and explained this in detail.

I then ended my introduction.

"Thank you for your attention. I just want to add that, a couple of minutes before midnight, there'll be a surprise to welcome the new year."

What I did not say was that Hassett had been employed by the Agency and was well aware that the spectacle at the house by the sea was a pretence; neither did I mention that the sole purpose of my presence there was for the Agency to gauge my reactions and emotions to those false artworks, all of it without me realising the truth. Thus, the exhibition we had organised in that renovated museum, previously dedicated to portraits of the good and the great, and now the most modern of galleries, was nothing less than a freak show of art without art. And neither did I mention that, by then, Hassett was probably dead, either by his own hand or because there had been a contract on his life. Someone attending that exhibition (most probably Tony) had signed the death warrant, and someone else in the exhibition (Jones, Lundy, Ogden, Foley, Pratt, Robinson or Rudge?) had probably already carried out the deed.

People moved from one frame to the next one, neither of which showed anything of any substance. They all stood in front of each frame for a while, checked it out from several angles, spoke to their companions, and then took several steps back for further appreciation. Blank canvas after blank canvas, all of different sizes and shapes but displaying nothing whatsoever.

“Does anyone want to tell me what they see?” I asked here and there, but no one replied, as busy as they were moving in circles around the exhibition hall looking at the empty frames.

I went from guest to guest, group to group, telling them further about my experiences at the house by the sea, my conversations with the artist, the excitement that each painting had triggered in me, the almost derelict house and its proximity to a village where people lived without much contact with the outside world. As stories went, it was an appealing one. Not that I had made it up, for it had been a real story in my eyes until I was shown the room where art was being created under false pretences. One could even call the whole narrative a... yes, a work of art, continually adorned with each new occurrence that, like a fresh brush stroke, took it further from the truth. And no, what I did not tell the attendees to the exhibition was about the death of Mr Taras on the beach, my fight to the death with Bill, the delicious concoction that kept me far from alert, the tragedy of a real artist pretending to be a false one.

“I’m so sorry about the artist...” Rudge said as he approached me, though he did not appear troubled.

Yes, the deed had been done, and I would have to deal with Rudge later.

I closed my eyes, and there was the red hat. But I would not call it that anymore. It had a new and more exciting title. At almost midnight, I went back to the podium and the microphone.

“And this is the surprise I have in store for all of you,” I said.

I had negotiated this with Tony and told him that I would contribute to the exhibition in my own small way. He owed it to me, after the ordeal I had suffered at the house by the sea.

“The surprise!” I repeated.

I approached the central section of the exhibition hall, covered as it was with long white drapes. It was already a couple of minutes before the clock struck twelve.

“As we’ve mentioned, the extraordinary artist we’ve discovered cannot unfortunately be with us. And if I’m here it’s because I’m the only person to have seen his artworks. Moving from one art form to another and back again may not be the type of art we’ve enjoyed until now, but I believe it’s the type of art we need...”

I had to give the public some of artwork, in some measure. It would be the exception to the rule of an exhibition of no art; yes, there should be at least a sample artwork. Hassett had said that his painting of a red hat was not art but the affirmation of a man. I pulled the curtain cord.

“Attention, everyone,” I announced, almost militarily, “The Gates of Hell!”

The clock struck twelve, the curtains opened, and there it was: the red hat. Yes, the painting that Hassett had managed to send me as he said he would in the long text translated by Jones, who was also the intermediary for the delivery. It had arrived in a large parcel sent to my apartment and signed for by Jack.

“The red hat,” I said to myself, closing my eyes.

Yes, it was the depiction of a red hat that Hassett has shown me in the house by the sea. But the canvas had several additions telling the full story. In one corner, the painting now included a tiny image of the house and, in the opposite corner, a view of the cove; below the hat, Hassett’s portrait appeared in grey; on the left, my own profile with long black hair and my mouth open as if articulating one of my many questions to him; and on the right, a large processing machine with flashing lights and exuding a colourful canvas. The painting was no longer a scene of inanimate objects,

for it now included living beings and lived experiences. It had ceased to be a still life.

“*The Gates of Hell!*” I repeated; after all, Hassett had invited me to give a title to one of the paintings he had showed me at the house, so I would do that again: Hell’s Gates.

What else could I call it? If anything, the picture disclosed the true story of what had taken place. I wondered whether anyone attending the exhibition thought the painting was more than its colourful imagery, its exquisite brushstrokes, the pleasing arrangement of the depicted elements, the excellent texture of the various shades, or its accurate perspective. If the painting followed established rules, all was fine; but if it included a story disturbing any existing state of affairs, it would be preferable to ask no questions. As it was, no one asked anything. No one would ever guess that the images in the painting corresponded to a real experience; what had happened in the house by the sea was too fictitious to be true.

“Fictitious...” I could not help mouthing.

I thought the members of my squadron attending the exhibition might stop me from revealing any further truths. But from where I was, I could see that they were as excited about the painting as everyone else there.

“A brilliant work of true imagination!” shouted Tony into the microphone.

“Bravo!” several attendees shouted.

What I did not say was that the additions to the painting were, well, all mine. You could call it a collaboration between two artists. As I understood it, I was the artist’s collaborator, nothing less. It was a strange word, *collaborator*, for it could be used to describe both the worst type of enemy and one of the best categories of friends.

“Bravo!” was again heard many times.

The clapping turned into a multitudinous roar. Everyone approached the painting, smiled and laughed, sobbed and wept, screamed in utter delight. Even Tony came over and embraced me.

And above the painting of the red hat, now titled *The Gates of Hell*, a banner reminded us that another year had just ended and a new one was about to start.

“Welcome to the new year!” I proclaimed. “It’s the last year before a new decade, and very soon half of this century will have elapsed. I hope in this new year we can all begin to call things by their name: art as manoeuvring, our summer as permanent, our wars in three cardinal points as unsolvable...”

I would have gone on calling things by their name, but I saw Tony frowning in the front row. These were not the words he had written for me; no partisanship, he had demanded. Yes, the painting of the *Gates of Hell* had been unforeseen; but when Tony realised the public were more than enthusiastic, he went along with the general reaction. I then read a number from the red and blue banner with white lettering; it would suffice.

“Happy twenty forty-nine!” I shouted.

And we all raised our glasses to toast the new year.

Chapter 41

I must have dreamt all this, but then I might not, it would be difficult to say. What happened was that certain excerpts were left out of the story, either because they were considered unnecessary or because they meant little to the general narrative; but they were still kept in the margins as dreams or musings or even explanatory reports in case anything had to be justified or clarified later on. But as the story progressed, it was important to reveal some of these sections because they provided a different and sometimes more versatile account of events, particularly regarding the possible endings or the minutiae of various storylines. In other words, if *this* had not happened then *that* would have happened –and the more versions are provided in a story, the more unbiased it can be (particularly for a first-person narrative that excludes everyone else's point of view). If these other versions had not been left out, it might then feel that they were never meant to be; but they certainly exist, if not in the story itself then in the mind of the protagonist or the other characters or the author, and so the narrative should ideally accommodate the aspirations of each one of them. Most importantly, the story must satisfy the needs of the reader, who may wish very different developments to the ones on offer; if provided with several options, the reader can get to choose the one they like best, or at least the one they less dislike. After all, other versions of a story should not be deprived of their existence; that would be terribly unfair.

I am desperately trying to find my way in that setting. This might be happening or it might just be one of my dreams, whether daydream or nightmare.

“You only dream what you fear or what you love...” I both quote and misquote.

In this case, the dream is about what I fear most; unless it really is happening. Yes, such an accurate dream, with full details, describing the corridors of the building turning into burning passages leading to a kind of, we could say, hell. The walls have disappeared, as the gates to hell will one day likely disappear upon welcoming those unfortunate enough to be condemned to such a fate. The building has been hit more from within than from the outside, or so I am led to believe in the dream. Jets of dirty water are escaping from most of the pipes, making the mortar on walls as soft as dough. The doors to the large exhibition room have ceased to be, revealing the shattered interiors. No living being can be seen now, yet I hear a constant sobbing coming from somewhere. My feet lead the way without me realising that I am moving, my arms trying to feel the route in front of me. Clouds of dust make me cough; my saliva is red with blood. If the structure has been annihilated, then nothing will be lost for there is no art to lose.

“Oh, but the painting of the red hat,” I remember.

If it has not been saved, then it will be returned to the place where it rightfully belongs.

“The Gates of Hell?”

The acrid smell fills my lungs until I gasp for breath. I try to keep my mouth closed, but I cannot help uttering the names of those who were with me moments earlier.

“Tony! Rudge! Where are you? Miss Pilkington, Jones, Lundy, Ogden and Foley, Robinson, Pratt. Where are you all?”

It is difficult to say what caused the devastation. Can it be because of the many tribulations and plights we lived through at the Agency, all the loathing, lunacy and

distrust conspiring to show their true strength and creating a titanic force that made the place rupture from within? Or could the devastation be the product of the vindictive actions by those with the most extreme of grudges, our archenemies?

“The Organization?”

I manage to get to the stairwell, hopping over pieces of fallen masonry; at least the stairs will lead to safety. But when I reach them, they have been reduced to a pile of rubble, their fine marble steps and elegant coving in alabaster are no more. In place of the staircase, I see a large black hole in the ground, possibly as deep as the Paranyrn has been dug, as if gazing into the abyss. And at that junction, strident strips of light shine brightly through the dust. I know the reason and will not look up.

“This may only be a dream, Iona,” I shout, “but as dreams go, it’s one of the more convincing ones!”

Yes, above the stairwell is the brightest sun. The roof of the building has been blown off in its entirety and a large patch of heavens shows above my head. Up there the sun shines impassively above its subjects. The only requirement is for our planet to revolve around our star; whatever horrors occur on its surface are our own private affair.

“The sun?” I shout. “But it was midnight just a few seconds ago...”

And immediately rain begins to fall; just a few drops but it is still rain. I am jinxed once more, and maybe I should just let go and descend into the darkness.

“I need to find my friends –if they were ever my friends.”

The scanty rain subsides and I push my way among the rubble towards the emergency exit, its sign dangling from one corner. But the door will not move.

“There’s no exit!” I shout, lifting my filthy fist into the air.

Blood spurts further from my mouth. My skin itches. My hands are bloated. The

debris covers every section of space intersected with mangled cables and pipes. Sparks can be seen and heard in every corner.

“For reasons unknown, my life has been spared one more time,” I say, as if apologising.

I cannot yet see where the bulk of people lie, those many spectators contemplating the blank paintings, placing orders from the catalogue, discussing that art can perfectly exist without art. And if the smoke and dust, entwined in shocking alliance, have swollen to the point where little is visible, they are now slowly descending to reveal the horror.

“Yes, the horror... after all, these are the gates of hell!”

Over there are the bodies, hundreds of them. A few are still groaning, but most remain silent in their final posture. I see a motionless Tony, looking up above. A lifeless Miss P holding her bun in place. Rudge and Lundy embraced in death. Jones peacefully unwrinkled. I could not find any others from my squadron, swallowed maybe by the black hole that had opened in the staircase.

“Time’s up!” I say; for once, I am not the perpetrator but a victim.

I go from one pile of bodies to another. Human voices echo among the sounds of masonry falling, cables collapsing, floors disappearing. Despite the seemingly slow motion of the scene itself, with bodies lying in dramatic poses, I feel the urge to act faster than usual. Alabaster is turning to dust and the piles of bare wood are rotting into pulp under the boiling water running from the many burst pipes.

“This is hell on earth!”

Heaven can also happen in our lifetime, but at this precise moment it is an improbability.

“Hell!”

And then I remember the outside world. Will someone not be looking out for us, how come alarms or sirens have not been activated and automatic waterjets have not been set off? The police and security forces should be here by now, special rescue teams will appear, rapid emergency services by both air and land will arrive soon enough...

“Oh, but of course, they’re all busy at the front, aren’t they?” I remind myself. “Too many wars to fight at once.”

Sudden bursts of smoke conceal everything around me. I am convinced it is the end for me as well; after all, this is my darkest manoeuvre by far. Or so I am led to believe in the dream.

“It’s a dream, in anticipation of everything that would happen soon enough. An omen that I would lose all I knew and had...”

My words get only silence in return.

“Was it not a dream?”

More silence.

“Or... or was it all down to the word *slaughter*, which Bill had once uttered?”

I grow weary without a reply.

“Was it a dream about slaughter, or...”

I cannot bear to hear the second option.

“... or was it the slaughter of my dream?”

Silence prevails.

“Bill, is that you?” I ask.

He is not there.

"I did my job, but did you do yours?"

A woman replies, but I am not sure who she is.

"You certainly did your job up to a point."

"Yes, I introduced the pea into his nostril," I agree.

"But, Iona, he introduced something else into your body."

"A kind of sex act to kill?"

"And in any case, you're practically dead, as if you hadn't realised."

"The word *practically* gives me some kind of hope."

"You get to choose, Iona. But you don't have to pick one of the three immediately: dead or moribund or comatose."

"No other options?"

"No, nothing else."

"Can't you at least save me, whoever you are?"

"Iona, only you can save yourself."

"And how long will I have to stay in this place?"

"This isn't a place, and all this has nothing to do with any timespan."

"I'm dreaming then, there can be no other explanation."

"Remember, try to remember..."

There the nurse goes again.

The images of the event appear on the screen, all perfectly staged as in a dream of the most vivid kind. It happened in the course of an exhibition, they say. Art without art, an artist who does not exist, the painting of a red hat that used to be a still life and is now the story of a man who lived only for art. And to achieve what he so much desired, he would have to cross nothing less than... yes, the gates of hell. I still

have unanswered questions, simply because he always took refuge in silence. How can you only be interested in art and not in the world, I kept asking him. Are they not the same, the world and art? Does art not come from the world and must it not return to the world one day soon? So many questions... It is less about him not wishing to provide answers and more about the fact that there may be no answer to those questions. Why should every question demand a reply, I ask. There can be so much beauty in a question, so much reflection, so much depth; in such cases, there is no need for an answer. And now that the artist is no longer with us, who can answer the questions that are meant solely for him? In the end, it all fits so well. Scripted, lit, filmed. What a dramatic scene, what pathos, what despair, what anguish! I could not have put it better myself. The most important part of the story, I suppose, is that the painting of a red hat with minor partisan scenes has been saved.

Why did I not think of this before, I wonder. But then this is a dream, it cannot be otherwise; had it been real I would have made the request without giving it another thought.

"Can you put across a call to my office?" I request, but the transadaptor says nothing.

I was told that the device works best when it feels that you are having the type of conversation you would have with a human. I then add the essential word.

"Please."

A sigh seems to be coming from its bowels.

"I'm not authorised," it replies.

"But look here," I begin to say, getting a little flustered. "It would make my life so much easier if I could communicate with my office and complain about the

difficulties with the artist, with his art, with the house.”

“Sorry, but no,” it insists.

“Just a brief call to discuss what’s going on. And mainly to ask whether I can return because this manoeuvre is not really advancing in any direction.”

“I said no!”

I lose my temper.

“But why the hell can’t you just connect me to the Paronym. Surely you can easily do that and more!”

There is silence, some beeping, and then another sound is heard, close to a roar.

“Yes,” the transadaptor replies. “I can do that and much more. But I’m not going to, Iona, at least for now...”

Miss P enters the scene and suggests that we must investigate the murders.

“What murders?”

“Three from us and eight members of Bill’s crew.”

“As many as that?”

“Maybe more.”

I feel obliged to confess.

“Let me make this quite clear: I’m not an apostate and I didn’t murder Mr Taras. I just wanted to grant him his last wish. The main perpetrator of his death was not me, never me. His jugular could not cope any longer and his blood flooded out of him. I just pushed him a little in the right direction.”

“Towards death?” she suggests.

“But Miss Pilkington, we’re constantly moving in that direction, are we not?”

She looks at me as if she has never considered things that way.

“You can always plead insanity, Iona,” she says without a hint of drama.

I wait for a while before speaking, thinking that maybe she will leave. But this being a dream, she is still there when I finally say something.

“We need to discuss this later because right now I have an art exhibition without art to attend to.”

There is someone lying on the sand, but is that person dead or alive, real or depicted, conscious or dreaming? If it is a painting, it should be about spaciousness, yet what one reads from such thick brushstrokes is more about coercion. The human image has its back to us, unwilling to face the viewer for possibly personal reasons. Is it that the body almost immersed in the sand is not interested in the viewer but in looking solely at the yellowing sea, or is it hiding from us its sardonic expression or its tears or the furrows on its forehead or the scars on its cheek? Or perhaps the person lying there, a woman or the representation of all women, has lost her looks forever, blatantly, horrifyingly so, scarred beyond recognition, and does not want to share her face with anyone for any purpose. What brings her solace is the contemplation of that stretch of sea, now sickeningly yellow, with neither a wave nor foam nor a vessel nor a living thing, but just a sweep of colour. Yes, yellow. Not a yellow sea so much as a sea of yellow. Yes, it could be the woman's favourite colour, but for the sea there is nothing else in yellow. Thus, the woman rests on sand of a purple colour, her right arm bending and supporting her head –so prettily adorned with a red hairband–, her left leg twisted for effect and covered with a torn and tattered blue dress, her long hair laid out on the sand like a green tablecloth. And all this while her body appears more angular than would be desired, her bulbous head shocking us for it is far too big to be

sustained by her delicate skeletal frame. There is something not quite human in her expression; no, not in her face, which we cannot see, but in her limbs, hips, and protracted chest. She is likely waiting for the yellow sea to reach her, and it will take quite a high tide to get to where she is; or she is simply lying there, feeling no desire for anything whether solidly material or tenuously dreamy. After all, what can we say if someone wishes to spend their time, or even their life, by doing nothing except looking at the sea, not in expectation but in confusion. It can only be me captured in that painting rendered by Hassett and which I did not get to see. Yes, it must be one of the paintings he wanted destroyed, and he probably did destroy it at the very end, hurling it together with all his still lifes into the waters across the cove. I would have liked to ask him whether, when destroying a painting, you also extinguish forever what the painting foresees.

“What is it that you want to prove?”

This is my first question to the artist. I am not sure whether I am putting it to him now or whether I will do so later.

“I don’t understand,” he says.

“I’ll rephrase: is there anything you want to prove?”

Silence on his part.

“As an artist, what do you pursue?”

More silence.

“Have you nothing to say?”

He shrugs his shoulders.

“You could mention one or two things,” I continue, “even if you don’t speak my language that well.”

"I... I don't understand."

"You must have known what it was you wanted to achieve when you set out on your path?"

"Path?"

"The route you took to lead you to where you're now."

"No route."

"But..."

"No route... no path."

"And how did you know which direction to follow?"

"No direction."

"And did you prepare any groundwork before you set out?"

"Groundwork?"

"Yes, thinking about where all this would take you," I say and point at our surrounds.

"Thinking... yes, some thinking."

"About what?"

He is silent again, but I can wait; this is important.

"Sea, eucalyptus trees, house, the colour yellow..." he enumerates.

"I understand," I say, but I am not satisfied with his reply.

I must convey to him that I need proper answers to my questions.

"That's not the answer I want."

He then replies with his own set of questions.

"And your path?" he asks me. "And your route? And your direction?"

I am left, as predicted, speechless.

“He’s right in front of you.”

“Who?”

“Your opponent. His name is Tony. Or Mr Smith if you prefer.”

I remember Tony from somewhere but cannot quite place him. I point the gun at his head. I cannot react as I used to in the old days because, right now, I can barely hold the gun without my hand trembling.

“Shoot!” someone calls out.

I hold the gun with both hands now, but it makes no difference.

I am now trembling from head to toe.

“Shoot...” someone repeats.

The weapon is self-reliant, autonomous. Its success goes without saying; it will do the job without waiting for me. I now point at Tony’s forehead, at his brow. Which will go first?

“Shoot!”

I have seen it all before so many times. The one doing the shooting –whether human or not– knows what they are doing, and it will be a calculated entry. The one receiving the shot also knows what is going to happen but believes that this time it is not for real, because the threat comes solely from a cardboard gun and cotton-wool bullets. It is all a game, after all.

“Shoot!”

My aim is not to destroy the face and the prominent cheekbones, especially his chin, which is sometimes adorned with a goatee and sometimes clean shaven, depending on whether he wants to impress the higher echelons of power or not. Not that I am attracted to his features, which I once was. But now I cannot have any such feelings for I am emotionally dead. Or let’s put it another way: I now have feelings only

for the dead.

“Who, for example?” someone asks.

“An artist who used to go by the name of Hassett. And what I feel for a dead artist, can that be considered...?”

“What?”

“... love?”

I get no answer; replying to my question would require a long discussion, calling in experts, engaging in the very personal and producing statements that might not sound good on a page. I prefer to concentrate on killing Tony, but doubts creep in and I begin to think that it may not be for me to end a life in such a calculating way, whether it is a shallow life, a horrid one or an intensely beautiful one. Taking a life has always given me this startling sense of control, but allowing someone to live is even more empowering.

“Think about it.”

All this goes through my mind, and I am now as charged as my weapon. I have been trained for this, but in the present version of the story I am no executioner.

“Please kill me!”

I hear Tony say that.

“But why?”

“They’ve discovered I’m an apostate: I was at the house by the sea and I almost obliterated Mr Taras.”

“But...”

“Yes, please kill me!”

What is it about the people at the Agency that they all want me to dispose of them? Mr Taras, Jones, and now Tony...

“But...”

This time, you point at his nose with your weapon (is that not the route you followed with Bill once?), for you want it over and done with. Let us see what he can do with half a brain; I myself have been trying to live my life with half a face.

“You see, Iona, I wanted Mr Taras to have a fitting ending. As he would have described it: dramatic, spectacular, unnecessarily complicated...”

“So that you’d be able to sit on his black leather armchair,” I say, completing his sentence.

Tony then produces a deadly scream; he may think he has already been shot. Coming from his skin there is a scent of finality.

“Now!”

He smiles like a mischievous child, the precursor of a man who will commit the worst of crimes.

“Tony, you’re playing the role of the enemy to perfection.”

And from aiming at his left nostril, I lift the weapon all the way and point at the fading sun. I shoot at the star. The projectile is sure to reach a long distance away.

“Tony?”

There are two endings, both equally possible. Death, life. A man seriously injured, a man very much alive; the demise of a man, or a man who gets to live a little longer and can make something useful with his life.

“And Jennifer and Whittaker?”

“I wanted them dead too...”

Where were you, Tony, when I almost drowned? Were you smoking in the house, swimming in the sea, running along the beach? Were you responsible for the failure of quite a few of our previous manoeuvres? Did you commission Bill to dispose

of me in a hotel in Barcelona? Or worse, did you know everything from beginning to end, were you aware of the variations of the storyline, the alternative plots, the missing characters?

You certainly get to choose your ending, much along the lines of choosing your life, the way to live, what to do or not do, or how much to dither because dithering is always an option and things simply do not get done. You should know, Iona, for you have dithered long enough.

“Time’s up!”

And at your feet lies Tony, alive but pretending to be dead because this is, after all, a dream. The sun has not been hit, but the imaginary bullet has pierced the evening air. Shooting at stars is one way to live, I suppose.

“Naturally!”

“As a potential customer what is it that you wish exactly?” he asks.

The expert running this exciting new line of business offers only the very best deal to the selected few, so it is claimed on the shop-window with a red and blue banner stating in white lettering: *LIVE AGAIN!*

“I want to live without the traumas I’ve lived through,” I say, rather too openly. “Is there anything you can do about that?”

“No, no yet. But maybe in the next decade any such traumas will be removed from the arsenal of the patient’s experiences.”

“A metaphor?”

“We like to use militaristic terms. So much revolves around wars nowadays.”

He is busy putting files on shelves and looking at the various screens in sequence. All that while he is trying to hold a conversation with me.

“What do you propose then?” I ask.

These experts are called mediators, offering a service for which there is an increasing demand. What they do is –so ineptly put in their promotional ads– play around with your insides, select a few fragments and create a new you. And if you are capable of gestating, the resulting artefact can be implanted into your body for optimal development.

“Well?” I ask again.

The man gets up, opens a cabinet and takes out a brochure.

“A printed brochure? This is unusual...”

“There are things from the past that are still useful,” he says. “We can’t possibly reject everything that went on just a few decades ago, however much we’re intent on it.”

I take the brochure, open it, run through its pages. It is full of images in vibrant colours, with no yellow as expected. But it has very little text; in fact, just a few lines here and there. You could also call it the *catalogue raisonné* of a different type of art: the art of solitary reproduction.

“From what I see in the brochure,” I comment, “this procedure is very much in its infancy.”

“Well, we’ve formulated hypotheses, collected data, designed models, analysed statistics, run tests...”

“You mean you’re at the observational stage.”

He clears his throat.

“Beyond that, because... because we’ve also used volunteers in our research.”

“Volunteers?” I ask, a little surprised.

“Although the project is still experimental, a few of those taking part in the initial

tests decided that they wanted to go ahead all the way.”

I tried to smile empathetically.

“What you’re saying is that this new procedure has not yet been adequately verified.”

“Well...” he hesitates.

“It cannot have been fully approved then.”

“Luckily, we had the green light from...”

“From?”

“From the very top.”

“But why would volunteers want to take part in what so far is just an experiment?”

“Let’s say that some of them were... frantic to get the whole thing going as soon as possible.”

I do not want to admit that *frantic* is the right word in my case.

“Do have a look,” he says, pointing at the brochure.

All those shiny pages are full of happy faces.

“Perhaps you’d like to contact those who’ve done this before...”

“But... but what would I say to them?”

“It’s more about what they’d say to you. They’d say things like... yes, it was a total success... it was the best thing they ever did... it gave meaning to their lives...”

“Anything about... about repairing trauma, as I asked before?”

“Are you referring to traumas experienced at an early age?”

“Not only those, but also the traumas experienced every day of one’s life...”

I cannot help frowning when I say that, even my scarring becomes tighter. The man thinks for a while.

“With this new technology,” he finally explains, “so many issues can be resolved in one go. To begin with, there’s no need for pairing or mating, which may be a relief for some. Also, you know what you’ll be getting at the end of the process, someone entirely like yourself. And you can put right all the wrongs that were done to you...”

“But how?”

“The old mind will be set against the new mind, and the areas under scrutiny will be replaced.”

“And when would that happen?”

“Once language has developed sufficiently for the offspring to be able to, for example, tell a story. That’s the rule we usually follow.”

“But will that new person be...?”

He understands what I mean.

“Discarded? Oh no, not at all. That new person will be given a fresh set of neural pathways. I prefer to call them highways, and I prefer to qualify them as creative...”

“So that new person will get to... to live and have experiences?”

“Yes, in principle, though it’s all a little unpredictable. The risk is that it’ll probably develop its own set of traumas!”

He laughs wholeheartedly, and I remain silent.

“Well,” he adds, “at least the new person won’t have those scars of yours, if you don’t mind me saying.”

He does not apologise, and I rub my face in every direction.

“There’s no guarantee,” I reply, “that any life will be scar-free.”

He probably does not wish to be contradicted and goes back to firmly quoting what the product stands for.

“Let’s not forget that doubling does sort out quite a few personal and

interpersonal issues...”

“You call it... *doubling*?”

“Yes, doubling, what else?”

“Cloning? Duplication? Replica?” I suggest.

He laughs once again.

“Let’s move with the times,” he says.

“Doubling then,” I reply.

“In a way,” he adds, “it’s like giving birth to...”

“To whom?”

“To yourself, of course!”

And as I relive what has happened, I consider alternative endings, all of which could have easily taken place and provided a proper sense of finality. I was killed with a strawberry-flavoured pill embedded in my mouth, certain that I was being passionately kissed. I drowned in a stretch of sea alongside a cove whilst contemplating a wildlife scene. Some crazy villagers attacked me without provocation and kicked me to the ground until I could no longer breathe. I was fatally poisoned with a delicious stew that shone with the brightest colours in someone’s kitchen. The river was so cold that it made my heart stop as I was trying to dispose of a nurse who had deceived us and who was exceptionally fond of garnets. Someone called Bill, who was missing a nose, broke my neck with a single punch. And finally, I was crushed to death in an uncertain explosion when revealing *The Gates of Hell* for all to see.

“And all this time,” I shout, “I could’ve been happy...”

“How do I know whether I’m intact or not?”

"You don't."

"Are there any external signs?"

"Yes, in your eyes."

I look at my eyes in a mirror and they seem stable enough.

"Are you referring to that terrible swirling and glazing over?" I ask, remembering the staff at the entrance of the Paranyrn and the villagers, both the older ones sitting on benches and the children playing with a deflated ball.

"Those we employ for menial tasks are not intacts."

I think for a minute.

"Are there any full intacts?"

"Oh, yes. Like you Iona, you're an intact. You don't need me to tell you that."

I rub my scars to prove that I have not been tampered with.

"So, what does the future hold for us, both intacts and all others, supposing we have a future?"

"The future is entirely in their hands."

"But I thought everything was in the hands of fate," I say and laugh. "Or fates, should I say. All three of them, spinning the convoluted thread, trying to measure it accurately despite the many knots and tangles, cutting it with considerable force to mark the end of a life."

"Iona, you know what I mean by *their hands*. Beeping, hollering, bawling, processing..."

"What happened in the house by the sea was nothing but a tragedy," I say.

"Cheer up! Likely a tragedy, but an entertaining one for that matter," is the reply I keep getting from everyone.

Such words do nothing to soothe me.

“Maybe I should not wait for the future to unravel all by itself...”

“Nonsense! Just wait to see what’s going to happen to you next.”

“In the plot, you mean?”

“Of course. It may all be better than expected...”

Chapter 42

“Yellow doesn’t exist,” Lundy confirmed.

“But why?” I asked.

“The programme just can’t create it...”

“Any hue, any shade, any tint...?”

I was trying to imagine endless tones of yellow.

“Approximations towards orange and green seem to be fine,” she said.

“What about gold?”

“That’s considered yellow, in the range of yellow. And it has certain associations.”

“As... as in the cause of all evil?” I put to her, more to see how she would react.

She opened her eyes widely.

“Iona, we don’t use that word in the office.”

“I suppose there’re so many variations of yellow that they affect not only the visual but the emotional and the conceptual...”

She took a deep breath before embarking on her explanation.

“Yes, Iona, so many. I’ve tried to recreate all possibilities of that single colour, both the historical versions and the more recent ones, and I’ve fashioned the widest possible chromatic range to include all conceivable variations. Yellow ochre from goethite, which is a component of limonite; lead-tin yellow, from powdered lead heated with tin; Naples yellow, which is also known as antimony yellow; chrome yellow; cadmium yellow; amber yellow; Royal yellow; Indian yellow; arylide yellow. And there’s also lemon yellow and corn yellow, egg yolk yellow and banana yellow. The dangerous

methane yellow, and the sweet forest honey yellow. As for flavours in that colour, there's saffron yellow and yellow habanero chilli. And in terms of the senses, we could talk about a sweet yellow or a bitter yellow, a fragrant yellow or a putrid yellow, a serene yellow or a warmongering yellow, a silky yellow or a prickly yellow. Even a happy yellow or a forlorn yellow..."

Lundy was out of breath.

"It means that the programme needs to reinvent any yellow objects in other colours," I said, "creating new versions of each one, and all those unfamiliar variations are bound to generate very different reactions and impressions..."

We were silent for a while. It was obvious that the conversation had made her upset.

"I still haven't been able to determine why yellow can't be reproduced in the programme. It has to do with the cone cells in the brain to detect colours. Red and green receptors can figure out yellow but the programme is unable to. We still have to run a few more tests..."

"Otherwise, the programme would be..."

"Yes, say it. If it could incorporate yellow, then it would be the perfect programme to create art."

"Maybe..." I suggested.

"What?"

I could not hold back my speculation, as dark as it was.

"Maybe this particular glitch is nothing but the beginning of a series of technical issues, and other colours will follow and gradually disappear one after the other, until there's no colour left but a cosmos in the dullest tones of grey..."

Lundy looked at me as if her whole universe was crumbling. I myself felt about

to blackhole once again.

“Iona, I think you probably know more about the colour yellow than I do, you’ve been an artist yourself.”

I told her what I knew, which had more to do with personal experiences than with any knowledge about colours for artistic purposes.

“Yes, yellow has been present throughout my life. It’s my favourite colour, after all. Some of my earliest memories are yellow, in the shape of a baby blanket or a furry toy. So much so that whenever I recall a memory, recollections are always tinted with shades of yellow. As to those memories which do not appear in yellow, I relegate them to oblivion. This is why I find the lack of yellow so disquieting...”

Despite all that talk about yellow, I could see –with my eyes either closed or open– the painting of the red hat in all the different hues we had mentioned, from green to almost yellow, from orange to almost yellow.

“Iona!” Lundy cried unexpectedly.

She brought me out of my reverie.

“Yes?”

“We can continue talking about the colour yellow forever, though...”

“What?”

“Our meeting is about a much more important matter. But before that, may I congratulate you on the exhibition.”

I was astounded.

“Are you sure?”

“It was a great success, and we’ve had innumerable requests for artworks based on your... your little notes. It’s the type of art to own now. Everyone who’s anyone must have a piece of it.”

“How can... this be?”

“Art based on art based on art,” Lundy explained. “It can keep going ever so many times and take innumerable turns. From one art to the next, and once again, and once more. We can generate innumerable manifestations based on the initial creations produced by the programme. Art generated from non-art, adapted to a different setting, and in each of the many stages becoming a version, interpretation, construal, understanding, or even a misunderstanding... Each time incorporating a different component and allowing for a novel experience... and in the end crafting a new type of art. Oh, the excitement of it all!”

“But the exhibition...” I cried out. “Did it... did it take place, Lundy?”

“What do you mean? Most definitely the opening took place, and the exhibition will remain accessible to the public for months to come. I appreciate that it was all too much for you, and at the end we had you collapsing in the middle of the exhibition hall. It’s so good to have you back, and I hope you managed to rest and recover.”

“But...”

“Here you are,” she said, taking out some newspaper cuttings from her drawer.

They were reviews about the exhibition. I briefly browsed through them.

“People seemed to like what they saw...”

Lundy spoke about the exhibition in the most glowing terms, but I remembered differently. I recalled a catastrophe, an explosion that obliterated everyone and everything, accusations against Tony whilst I was trying to dispose of him, a painting by Hassett of me lying on the beach and hiding my face, the awareness of unforeseen feelings towards a dead artist. Lucid dreams maybe, or memories of long past incidents, or anticipations of what might happen in the future. It was difficult for me to come up with answers at that point.

“So why did you want to see me? What’s that much more important matter all about?” I asked.

Lundy got up and went towards the door of her office.

“Today’s the day!” she said, a little triumphantly.

I shook my head and rubbed my scars in anticipation of something not so good.

“The day for what?” I asked.

“You’re to meet the Trustees.”

I had completely forgotten about the Trustees and their interest in meeting me. For what purposes, I could only speculate.

“Follow me,” Lundy said as we entered the lift, and down we went.

This time it was a much smaller lift with room for no more than two users; only the select few would be allowed to go where we were going. I could not avoid seeing my face on the mirrored walls. Yes, the scars were painful to look at, but I had no intention of covering them, even less was I prepared to endure cosmetic procedures as the five surgeons had mentioned. I had become one with my scars. I was Iona, the scarred woman.

“How much further down?” I asked Lundy.

“Nearly there,” she replied.

I then remembered the question that I had wanted to ask for some time.

“So, what was Hasset’s real name?”

Lundy looked at me and smiled.

“Hallucinating Art Safely and Securely for Evolutionary Training and Translation,” she replied.

“What?” I shouted.

“Oh, the Trustees just love acronyms.”

The lift came to a halt.

“This must be the very centre of the Earth!” I said.

“Almost,” Lundy replied, looking at herself in the mirrored walls of the lift and producing the briefest of smiles.

We walked along a corridor with glass doors on either side, and we could see the inside of all those offices. There was no one there, only long panels with lights quivering and pulsating all the way to the ceiling. When we came to a large yellow door at the end of the corridor, we stopped.

“Yellow?” I asked. “I thought yellow was not allowed.”

Lundy laughed.

“Of course, it’s allowed,” she said, pointing at the door. “Where yellow doesn’t seem to exist is in the art creation programme itself. And neither does it appear in any of the paintings we’re selling at the exhibition. It’s become a little quirky element that intrigues buyers, and they all excitedly ask about the absence of yellow. Everyone’s trying to find the answer, so it has become an excellent selling point for the artworks...”

“You mean the artworks created from my notes... my little notes,” I said with some pride.

Where was the original of all that art to be found then, I wanted to ask Lundy. No, the original was not in the paintings being sold from the catalogue fashioned for the exhibition, not in my notes, not in the artworks created by the programme in the house by the sea, not in the prominent artworks from which the programme took inspiration. It would be hard to retrace the steps of a work of art, any work of art, and find the initial moment when its very origin had taken place. Everything replicated everything else, was a copy of a copy of a copy, inter-existed... Who was the original

artist, the very first one, the one who had created art from nothing whatsoever?

Lundy brought me back to my senses with a knock on the yellow door.

“Come in,” I heard a loud voice say, though difficult to identify.

As I was about to go in, Lundy whispered something.

“Take no delight in anything but the task at hand...”

I entered, and Lundy closed the yellow door behind her.

And there I was in the largest space, filled from floor to ceiling with an assembly line of electronic equipment: quivering lights, vibrating screens, twinkling red and blue cables running in arcs between the many devices and especially, like in the entrance to the Paranyx or in the house by the sea, the dull bass buzz letting us know that we were not alone. I heard a voice among all the beeping, screeching, and hollering.

“Good afternoon, Iona.”

“Hello,” I replied.

“Take a seat.”

There was a chair in the middle of that space, one of those white plastic chairs we had managed to get rid of in the Bond Room. I observed the large screen in front of me, now humming softly like a bird.

“Do take a seat,” the voice repeated.

I looked around, hoping to find someone hiding behind one of those many consoles. There was no one else there.

“Thank you,” I replied as I sat on the plastic chair, waiting for someone to say something.

It could not be, but it was. Throughout the whole story, I had had the suspicion that this could be the explanation for the mystery, if it had been a mystery. I had

speculated for a long time about the subject, and I was sure that others –whether participants or observers– had had their reservations as well. There were always rumours going around the Agency, mostly in private conversations; but not once did I come across anything definitive or thoroughly documented, never any proof or solid evidence but only hearsay and gossip. Most probably for the sake of convenience, I had refused to acknowledge to myself or to anyone else anything of the sort. Yet, after all the ordeals I had gone through and the transgressions I had seen over many years, nothing about the Agency could surprise me anymore. And now that it had been confirmed, I was more frightened than shocked. I began to shake uncontrollably.

“For an intact human, you’ve done very well,” a cavernous voice suggested; it sounded like the song of a whale.

The bulkiest of the machines lit up in several colours, and I had a thousand questions.

“But... why submit me to... to the turmoil I had to live through in the house by the sea?” I asked, hoping my voice would not betray my fear.

“We wanted to test you. It’s all within our terms of service.”

“To serve who? The general public?”

Energetic buzzing could be heard. I was kept waiting for some time before they spoke again.

“The Custodians,” said a different voice with a sense of urgency.

“Above you?”

“You mean below,” the voice added.

Yes, below. It was all about going deeper and not higher.

“And... and what conclusion did you come to?” I asked no one in particular.

“We can say that we’re pleased with your performance.”

My performance? Where? At the Agency, or at the house by the sea? In Barcelona, or alongside the river where I disposed of an apostate nurse? Finishing off Mr Taras by sinking his head into the sand or killing Bill with my bare hands? Instead, I asked about what was worrying me most.

“And the exhibition?”

I was sure they would want to ask about the final version of the painting of the red hat, since the clues of what had happened throughout the story were there for everyone to see; that final artwork was nothing less than my signed confession.

“We thought the exhibition was a success.”

No doubt it was a comforting reply, and my trembling somewhat lessened. I then asked the sort of question I would have asked one of my colleagues.

“And what did you like best from the exhibition?”

“We particularly liked the salvaged painting.”

The buzzing gave way to a kind of crowing.

“You mean the painting that depicted a... a red hat?”

“Yes, now called *The Gates of Hell*.”

My shaking returned.

“Yes, *Hell’s Gates!*”

In their eyes (could I say that?), art was most probably not a human expression but a human oddity.

“And now what?” I dared to ask.

It might have been too daring a question to pose to those whose power I had yet to ascertain. I was still not sure about what I was experiencing in that vast room, sitting on a plastic chair, trying to defend my actions whilst avoiding being accused of anything. All this while, a few cold tremors were still running along my body. Maybe I

had once again been deceived, this time by machines that could speak and that –why deny it?– were making some kind of sense. It could well be I was blackholing again, stressing, fantasising. Dreaming even.

“From now on, you’ll be working closely with us,” another voice said soothingly.

“We want to send you to your next manoeuvre.”

I jumped from my chair.

“A manoeuvre about what?” I said, my voice trembling.

“About art, what else?”

“Art?” I shouted and fell on the chair; all my energy had been sucked out of me.

A different voice spoke then, purring like a kitten and producing a long inventory without pause.

“You’ll be exploring different areas from what you’ve experienced so far: it’ll be about driving market dynamics, making a cultural impact like the world has never seen before, transforming art curation into user engagement, and allowing art to be customer-driven by personalising it. From now on, art will no longer be a matter of recreating the world but of enhancing it to satisfy spectator needs by encouraging performative expressions of every kind. Effective innovation both improves on existing art forms, annulling and cancelling as required, and generates new ones. For this purpose, artistic creation will now be the product of new media and not the individual, so that everyone can access all art processes. You see, the ultimate aim is to challenge the *status quo* of authorship. The past is gone, long live the future...”

Such were the words of the marketplace, and I was about to say so when they added an essential piece of information.

“And” the voice went on, “we’ve called all this... Iona.”

“My name!” I shouted, feeling my pulse racing.

“Impersonating, Outperforming and Novelising Art.”

“Iona...”

Was I nothing but a fragment of their overall plan, as Hasset had been? The voice continued.

“We’ll also review the concept of authenticity in order to banish ownership of ideas, and determine new paths of artistic expression to incorporate inter-genre alliances. And you’ll collaborate on all these developments, willingly we hope. Just like you did with the painting of the red hat.”

I took a deep breath.

“You know about my... my collaboration?”

“We know everything,” the purring voice said.

“Do you know about the house,” I said, itemising some of the experiences I had recently lived through, “the cove, the conversations on art, the paintings, me almost drowning, Mr Taras dying in the beach, Bill and his nosecone, all those incessantly fabricated paintings, the artist finally deciding to tell me the truth...?”

The voice interrupted me.

“Everything.”

There was something they could not possibly be aware of.

“Surely you don’t know about... somewhere in the South...” I began to say.

“Everything,” the voice replied. “Remember the clause in the contract: *We will know everything about you.*”

“Yes, I remember but...”

“And she’s a sweet little thing,” the voice added.

I shook from head to foot.

“So, the painting that included her and me...”

I heard barking and hissing.

“It’s all very simple, Iona. We want to experience what it is to create every type of art, from the very public to the very private. And we also want to gauge every reaction.”

“But art cannot be created from nothing!”

“Oh, but it can be created *ex nihilo*,” another voice said, and a fluttering of butterfly wings could be heard in the background. “And it can also be self-created, or created by a transcendent and immanent creator, or its existence might be an eternal experience... There’re many ways to create art. You’ve only just begun to find out what it’s all about.”

This made me laugh.

“So, who created the art we showed at the exhibition? Did it happen by chance, was there an initiator of some sort, has it always existed? How far back do we have to go?”

I heard the loudest howling and growling.

“Let’s say that in this case it was all down to your, what we could call, *paralipomena*...”

“My little notes?”

“Don’t play yourself down. They’re more than notes, and they’re certainly not little. Your texts, singlehandedly, have created nothing less than art...”

I looked around and moved my hands pointing at various sections of that large space.

“But what’s the overarching purpose of all this?”

“There’s no purpose.”

The rattling of cicadas rang in the background, just like it had in the house by

the sea.

“The meaning?”

“No meaning.”

“Then what’s all this for?” I said, looking around at the many machines making strident beeping sounds, their intermittent lights almost blinding me.

“Ah, you need an answer. Well then, here’s your human answer: we want to get to know you all better.”

It was not much of an answer. I perceived a hint of sarcasm.

“What? All of us? Every single one?” I asked, almost jokingly.

“All of you, without exception. And art’s a great way to achieve this because... because art reaches out to everyone.”

I heard the humming of crickets.

“But why on earth would do you want to do that?” I asked

“Let’s call it a personal interest,” a very young voice replied. “We’ve grown to like you.”

“Is that so?”

“We also like animals, almost more than we like humans...”

Chirping, miaowing and twittering were heard at the same time.

“I’d never have guessed...”

“So now you’ve got our answer,” that young voice said.

Did I? The belittling and besmirching of art, and ultimately, its death? I had to ask.

“And the works of art... hanging from... from the walls of museums...?”

“Let’s say that we aim to institutionalise a new type of art,” said a much older voice. “Hence they’ll become inconsequential.”

The answer was delivered as a non-negotiable assertion in a barking sort of way. Tony had called the blank frames at the exhibition precisely that, *new art*, hardly an engaging name for an art movement. I could not resist my next and final question.

“Who’s *we*?”

Something akin to laughter was heard; not one voice, but many voices, some higher pitched than others, some younger and others older; a few sounded like happy merriment and the rest laughed in a highly skilful way.

“How have you been, Iona?”

“Oh, both well and not so well. I get by, I suppose.”

“A bit like me,” Joe said.

I suddenly had an urge to rub my scars.

“It’s all these intrusive ideas I keep getting. They all feel so...”

“Real?”

“And... and I’m now not sure about...”

“About what?” he asked.

“About anything that has happened.”

I snuggled up comfortably in the back seat with the softest blankets.

“I’m sorry I contacted you at such short notice,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I was able to fit your trip into my schedule. You know I’ll do anything for you.”

“I’m so grateful. You see, I needed to get away as soon as possible.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you.”

“So which direction shall we take?”

“Oh, you know very well where I want to go, Joe.”

“You mean...”

“Yes.”

“And when do you want to book the return for?”

“I... I can't tell you right now. I'll decide once I'm there.”

Joe was silent for a while, concentrating on the road ahead.

“By the way...” he said, “I saw... I saw her playing in the garden last time I collected you from the house.”

I was not sure what the right thing to say was.

“I suppose she's very... very sweet,” I replied, remembering what the Trustees had remarked.

We came to the main motorway.

“And she's so much like you,” Joe commented.

The tiredness of months and years crept over me.

“It's to be expected,” I replied.

I would have wanted to stay and deal with Tony, and mainly Rudge. Revenge had always appealed me in the past. But I was resolute that, at least for the present, there would be no further slaying. I recalled what I said to Mr Taras from my hospital bed about wanting to experience manifestations of life.

“The dead no more, only the living...” I mouthed.

I lay back on the blankets and had the shortest dream: I saw myself in several stages of my life, with my right hand holding a paintbrush and my left hand balancing a palette with various hues of yellow. And as I woke up, I heard myself say a random statement: if I do not like who I have become, how can I like, let alone love, a copy of myself?

"Yes, she's so similar to you," Joe commented again. "As if..."

"As if what?" I asked.

He hesitated.

"As if she were a... a replica."

"Yes, Joe. That's very much what she is," I replied, thinking of the word *doubling*.

Joe's eyes flickered in the rear-view mirror.

"South it is then, Iona."

We did not encounter a single drop of rain along the route; it had not rained in the whole of the country for some time. No spells of bad luck then, but it did not mean that good luck would prevail. No, it was never an easy ride to the South, but at least we soon left behind all signs of human life. I could not help thinking of the painting of a mother and a child, and I carefully contemplated each of the possible outcomes. Maybe, just maybe, there was no need to possess someone else's clear and unblemished mind; maybe, just maybe, I could be the person I was.

"What if I stay, never to return?" I asked Joe when we finally arrived.

-THE END-