

THE SUNFLOWER PROTOCOL

Andre Soares



A Novel



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This novel's story and characters are fictitious. Certain longstanding institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary.

Front cover image by Francisca Mandiola.

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This is a love letter to all black women. The ones who raised me, the ones who fed me, the ones who loved me and allowed me to lead. The ones who suffered harmful stereotypes, profiling, abuse, and endured the pervasive grip of systemic oppression, fighting a thousand battles on multiple fronts.

This is the most genuine expression of my love for you.

*As you inspired my works and shaped my trajectory, I was blessed with the opportunity of exploring the beautiful complexity of your characters, of what makes you, first and foremost, simply...
human.*

The Sunflower Protocol is the outcome of years dedicated to the craft of storytelling; a sculpture of clay reshaped over countless cycles. I truly hope you enjoy it.

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CHAPTER 1

SKELETONS ON THE COAST

15th Revolution

6th Moon

At the edge of time. You. Always.

The body washed ashore, sinking into coal-black sands, denying an aggrieved rip current.

Upon his forehead, a fresh gunshot wound pelted with salt imposed a crater-shaped mark, one oozing darker shades of reds competing with the surrounding pink waters. His eyes opened to an epiphany.

The man was alive, a rogue speck of sand on the Namibian coast, an anomaly among the shifting dunes inevitably pouring into the ocean. A small caliber round exited his forehead, rejected like undesirable foreign matter; the compressed casing splashed the incoming waves and vanished with them.

There was pain in his glacial, steely eyes, yet hope displayed through a liberating smile.

He was a sane madman, a survivor of the treacherous columns of time and space.

But his pale porcelain complexion made him a target in this new world. He was the snake in the garden of Eden, the vector of conveyance for forbidden knowledge.

Soon, a drone boomed in the skies, shaking the dry sands the man painfully crawled to. Shots erupted beyond the dune, foreshadowing another equally painful examination of ballistics.

Someone, or something, was coming for him. *Amahle, please.*

On the brink of exhaustion and severely dehydrated, the survivor fainted, crashing against the hot black sands his hands dug into.



The stranger jolted awake, snatched from a dreamless place by the rumble of an engine.

They were coming. He could barely see, his vision still blurred by a sharp pain that seemed to split his skull in half. However, he could still hear the machines converging towards him, menacing and rabid.

Three, maybe four. He turned on his back, trying to ease his discomfort by soaking in the blazing sun.

Closer. The engines roared, like territorial animals sensing a potential dispute. Soon, they shut off. A commanding voice shouted, “Am... the pale devil. There. Yeh!”

Voices began to rise. Something fine had slipped through his fingers, a reminder he could still *feel*.

Sand. The pink skies above guided the last brush strokes of a strange, otherworldly spectacle.

The voices gained speed. And proximity.

“Assess, Yeh.”

Someone held him in place and locked his jaw with a strong grip. Delicate floral scents starkly contrasted with the roughness of the skin. *An elegant killer*, the man thought.

“Who are you, demon?” she demanded, but her voice held a softness.

The survivor tried to speak, but he was mute. Tears welled up in his eyes. The outline of a second face approached him. *Amahle?*

“His eyes. The waters have taken them. I need the *Isi*.”

He could not move, left at the mercy of giants whose ruthless determination and delicate tones confused him.

Someone spread his eyelids wide, forceful. Another set of hands dropped a sizzling liquid into his damaged optics.

From the short-lived pain soon emerged a divine revelation: the faces of goddesses. The man smiled, tears of joy cuing the end of a state of shock.

He sat, fingers still digging into the soil. Perspectives leveled. The black sands, the pink waves, the red skies... There were six elements, dark-skinned women whose understated elegance screamed royalty. And among them, his love.

He breathed, “Amahle?”

One of the queens stepped forth. Her ballerina frame and tight bun complimented a sepia undertone. He recognized her grace, her reserve; this quiet, underemphasized strength akin to natural leaders.

He remembered the first instances, the glances, the goodbye hugs that quickly turned into morning embraces. She was his and he was hers, and those were the only labels they subscribed to.

However, something had changed. In her stance, in the very windows of her soul.

Here, on this foreign land, she was a weapon, and her beautiful brown eyes did not reciprocate his love.

She towered over him, armed to the teeth, and asked, “How do you know my name?”

“How? You mean the world to me, Ama.” The nickname triggered protests among the crowd. “Your name is engraved *within*, beyond time and space.”

They locked eyes. She was hostile to the contact, further pressing her fingers against his sharp jaw. In more favorable circumstances, he would have found that play more appealing. Yet here, it was rage and indifference that drove her questioning.

“We’ve never seen pale flesh like yours in this world. I do not know you.”

“My name is Rome.”

“This does not tell me anything.” She made him stand with remarkable ease. “Who are you? You speak our language.”

“I am your husband.” The skies borrowed from darker hues. “Something sent me here. I needed to try. I was hoping—”

Amahle slammed the survivor to the ground, applying massive pressure on his frame. She picked him back up. The others remained still, emotionless mannequins from her exhibit.

“I asked for the truth, demon.”

He looked at her, and the joy that had at first inhabited him vacated his soul, deconstructed in the vacuum of her other self. Or maybe her new self.

Rome objected, “I’m no demon. This is the truth.”

Amahle looked behind and nodded at another goddess. This one was even more soulless, purposely belligerent in her defiant stance.

Amahle stated, “Yeh. This is a code one.”

The one called Yeh simply answered, “Yes, Administrator.”

Rome saw the one he claimed was his significant other quickly shift her weight forward, striking his airways. He fell and started suffocating, his tensed neck unable to relieve an invisible pressure applied to his trachea.

Amahle raised her rifle and squeezed the trigger. Shots penetrated his flesh, strategically positioned to shut his vital organs down.

Rome's eyes rolled back. Then, came the darkness.

The killers stood by his corpse, heads down, and mouthed undecipherable words in a litany against fear.

The waves rid his crooked frame of the blood oozing through his open bullet wounds.

His pale flesh almost burst as the bullets shot back out. Amahle and her unit took a few steps back, scanning the nearby dunes and edgeless waters.

The group readied and riddled Rome with a new salvo of perforating shells.

After what felt like a never-ending massacre, the rifles were silenced. The smoke dissipated. An ochre smell lingered, mitigated by the ocean breeze. Rome's flesh was disfigured, bloated with instruments of death.

Another wave washed ashore.

The outer layers of the survivor's skin were frantically twitching, fighting to eject the foreign matters that poisoned his body. Amahle raised a hand to avert another shooting, her eyes narrowing on the scene before her.

Rome regained consciousness multiple times, drifting in and out of collapsing episodes.

Another wave crashed.

Amahle stepped forward. She found hope in his eye flutter, as she bridged the gap between them, uncertain.

She crouched and ran her fingers through the scarred tissues of his freshly healed wounds.

BOOM.

The contact propelled her out of stillness, to a dreamworld of fewer boundaries, in a sequence of impact sounds.

The survivor, Rome, was there too.