

A close-up photograph of a man's face and upper torso. He has dark hair, a beard, and is wearing glasses. He is shirtless, showing his muscular physique. He is holding an open book with a red cover. The background is a plain, light gray color.

Alexander vs. Darius

Elias Toumasatos

Alexander vs. Darius

*Two men, two cultures, a love affair in an era
of crisis*

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*To all human beings that keep on fighting for their
rights to life, love and dream unconditionally*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Darius' image on the cover of this book was created by an AI application called Imagine AI Art. The rest of the book is created by my own imagination. May the tools we use to create always assist us in the best possible way, but never replace our own creativity, spirit and imagination. The limits of our imagination are the limits of our freedom.

The entire plot and all characters in this book are fictional. But people like those may be around us, regardless of country or time.

1 | DOWNTOWN

Imagine walking through a dark alley in the center of a metropolis that's gotten darker in the last decade. Well, it might just be his own darker mood that throws a shade on the street he was born, grown up, getting 55...

This could just be the storm of the 2010s. The sandstorm that swept away whatever resembled the Greek Dream of the early 2000s. Athens was then the capital of a nation that falsely believed that was strong and thriving. Fashion and computer stores and fancy cafés were spread around his block, a noisy beehive of downtown Athens, once a residential area for middle class Athenians, but all those somehow bought bigger apartments with a garden and a parking space in the fancier suburbs up north. What was left behind in the center of Athens was a cosmopolitan scent coming from the older Bauhaus blocks of flats built in the 1930s, mixed with ugly and architecturally tasteless buildings that appeared like a chickenpox epidemic in the late 1960s and seventies.

His house was an exception to all the rules. A small

one storey building built somewhere in the mid-1950s by his father, who had then moved to Athens, like half the population of Greece did after World War 2, looking for a better-than-staying-in-his-village chance in the capital.

Mr. Yannis had a high school degree, a rather uncommon certification for a villager of that time. Grandpa Alexis had some really useful connections in the first post-civil-war governments, considering that he had provided the National Army with extremely useful information against the Communists. Pappou Alexis wanted nothing for himself, but he visualized a brilliant career for his son in the public sector now that the war was over and economic growth was expected to come like a heatwave, or at least he thought so. He pulled the right strings and Yannis found a place in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a few trolley stops away from the house that was considered an extra bonus for pappou services to the nation. A true bargain, he used to say, a statement not really far away from truth, since the house was a communist doctor's office, whose discipline did not manage to save him from going to exile in Makronesos, with a bunch of his comrades.

The doctor did not manage to survive and there were no relatives, so it could indeed be considered a brilliant chance for investing in real estate. Pappou didn't throw away the furniture and neither did his son Yannis.

So, there is some kind of reason in the feeling that the doctor's spirit was continuously hanging around, probably inside the bookshelves in the sitting room. Pappou had sold all the books that could create suspicions about his attitude towards Karl Marx and his pal Engels but kept all the books about Medicine.

He dreamed that, if his son was able to become a senior officer in the public sector of Greece, his grandson would definitely become a brilliant doctor, probably a professor at the University of Athens. He would have his name, but they would call him Alexandros, to honor Alexander the Great, and of course his grandfather the Great Alexis, the communist eater.

Well, Pappou's dream partly came true. The grandson was baptized after him and took the historical name Alexandros. But this 55-year-old man living in this old small house in a dark alley of Central Athens never became a doctor.

He didn't even try, despite Pappou's desperate efforts. He finished high school, but his grades were not as high as those required to be accepted in one of the Medical Schools of Greece. His dad then took a decision that shook the family like an earthquake. If Alexandros really wanted to become a doctor, he could be sent to study at one of the medical schools of Bulgaria or Romania, then still under a communist regime. That was an enormous shock for Pappou who started screaming that he did not kill the goddamn communists back in the civil war to see his grandson becoming a communist doctor.

Well, this was just nonsense. Alexandros never wanted to become a doctor or study abroad in a country without blue jeans. He was a mediocre student, but he was respectful, trustworthy and hardworking, if he would have the proper instructions given by whoever was his boss. This sounds more like a good soldier, not an ideal leader. His father was now as ambitious as his pappou, but he realized that soon. In that common and awkward conversation between father and son concerning the latter's future, Yannis

was perfectly clear.

“Listen, son, I don’t really know what you really want to do with your life.”

“Well, dad, to tell the truth, neither do I.”

So Yannis made an offer. And Alexandros took it. His father after twenty years of decent public service and a few phone calls made by pappou had become General Director of the Ministry, practically the highest degree of hierarchy for a public servant. So, there was a big opportunity for Alex. If he didn’t feel like going to college he could offer him a job as a clerk in the Ministry, right after finishing his military service.

Alexandros accepted. He never applied or took exams for college, and the day after his graduation he started what was the only thing that should be done to earn his place in the Ministry. Grandpa made the appropriate phone calls for his grandson to remain in an Army camp near Athens for his entire 18-month service, so it was a matter of a good radio taxi service to enable Alexandros to sleep at home every second night.

Alexandros was determined to play his part. He was an exemplary soldier in a time of peace and at a place that no enemy would step on unless the entire country was conquered. And a couple of days after the end of his service, his position in the Ministry was waiting for him. It was in a different department from dad’s one, so he won’t be feeling uncomfortable with me hanging around above his head, as Mr. Yannis was saying. A nice desk with a computer, a rather rare facility for the Greek public sector in the early 1990s was the place where Alexandros would start, continue and probably finish his career.

No promotions, you see, he never applied for one,

despite dad's proposals. From his very first day at work until this afternoon he has been a silent hard-working clerk in the Department of public administration. He has learned his job so well, and nothing but this job. So, for the organization he was irreplaceable. That's probably why he was never offered a promotion. Nobody could do his job better, with such patience and willingness. Plus, if he doesn't want to change, why should anyone even consider offering him another position?

Governments and Ministers changed through the years, his father retired, but Alexandros was still there, like a pillar that no one would ever dare to move. And he kind of liked that. Actually, he liked every single detail of the routine included in his daily schedule.

If he was proud of something, that is his schedule. Not a really complicated one, but definitely a stable, almost changeless succession of things that he used to do for years with absolute discipline, from early in the morning till early in the night, because a man with a schedule is not supposed to stay up late at night.

On the contrary, and as you can understand this is happening today, what had remained undone of this schedule are the following:

9:00 pm. Light dinner (yogurt or toast with light cheese and gluten free turkey)

9:30 pm. Watching an episode of my favorite serial on Netflix.

10:30 Turn on the boiler for tonight's bath, while waiting read the newspaper, answer messages and take a pooh.

11:00: SBSS (Shower, brushing teeth, shave, sleep with 20 min maximum available time).

If Cinderella was afraid of midnight, Alexandros

had his own personal curfew at 11:20. Of course he could excuse some exceptions, for example when he went to the movies or for a drink and chit chatting with colleagues, but he really cannot remember how much time has passed since such a thing happened for the last time.

And now it's 10:55 pm and he's in the bathroom, half naked, trying the water to check whether it's warm enough, because he really hates it when the water is too hot or not as warm as he prefers it. Another day is over, he has turned off central heating and secured the front door and windows for the fear of all those immigrants that are living around the hood and seem to have woken up some kind of rather racist reflexes such as "I'm not racist, but since they have settled here all crime indicators have become higher. I don't really blame them – when you're hungry you may steal or even kill to survive."

No, he's not racist, but these new immigrants are so much different than those in the 1990s, the ones who came from the Balkans after the collapse of communist regimes. Those were Caucasian and, to a great extent, Christian, but these people from Asia and Africa look scarier to his eyes. They have darker skin, different habits, they dress in a unique way, plus, they're Muslims or something similar, anyway they're not Christian. Older blocks of flats in the entire center of Athens are now inhabited by those people, and Alexandros, though peaceful and quiet, sometimes feels that he is threatened; he, a citizen of Athens for half a century, sometimes feels like an alien in his very own city. Nobody has done any harm to him, but look what has happened to so many people around the neighborhood... But he'd better be careful, so locking

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himself inside is another everyday ritual of crucial importance to him.

He feels like he has a moment to stare at himself in the mirror. Gray hair... Getting more and more out of shape... Losing hair... Well, he should drink less beer with this belly. He doesn't look that bad, but don't tell anyone I said so. He looks younger than his age, his quiet office job is a protective factor for remaining generally calm, although he claims that sometimes he feels overwhelmed by a rather creative stress that keeps him working hard and effectively. You're not that bad Alexandros, losing a little weight and a little more exercise than walking to work or to the supermarket could enormously help.

Worthless shower thoughts, one might say, those repeatedly coming back and forth when you are at home, alone, tired, and have really nothing to make you feel a little angry with yourself or anything that made your life harder during the day. I really wouldn't say the word worthless, sometimes they are more valuable than you can imagine, especially if they come across your mind, just like almost every day, and, when you feel that you're diving deep into their boredom, something awkward suddenly scares them to death and eventually chases them far away.

What if that something has the strength to change everything forever?

What if this unexpected factor of change is a sudden scream coming from right outside your door?

2 | VIOLENCE BREAKS THE SILENCE

He could taste the dirt. He could feel its little, tiny bits on his tongue, but this wasn't actually a problem, considering his general condition. He knew he was bleeding, but he didn't know how many scratches could cause him that enormous pain inside.

He couldn't think, and he quit the efforts to scream for help, nobody was listening, and even if someone did in that dark alley near the Queen Victoria Square in Athens, it would be a surprise if there would have been a courageous fearless person that opens his door after hearing some kind of trouble going on right outside it.

Some might even switch some door lights on but that would be nothing scary for these four huge guys that are kicking somebody's ass. He must admit he would probably (not) react the same if he had heard people arguing and fighting. But, alas, that somebody outside the door was now himself.

He could no longer hear what they were saying. They were four and he was one, well, literally half a person. They had guns, he had nothing but his feet.

He tried to run away when he realized that two motorcycles were following him from Omonia Square, almost one kilometer away. He tried to get lost in the narrow streets around the square; there used to be more life and action when he first walked them for the very first time, but that could have been a dozen of years ago.

He was twelve then, and his mom was holding his hand to cross the uneasy October 28 Street. Everything was looking huge and fancy when he was staring high, but so dirty when his eyesight met the ground.

Athens was not a beautiful European town, at least it didn't look as he was expecting it to be when he was reading about Ancient Greece in elementary school, back home. What he had experienced so far was a noisy town, with huge traffic problems and narrow pavements, at least where he and his family lived, a few blocks away from Omonia Square. Descending St. Constantine Street, right after the fancy building of the Greek National Theater, it all looked like the Greek element of Athens was withdrawing and giving in to a colorful but poor patchwork of all the new generations of immigrants that had started to flow in Greece since the early 1990s.

You could tell from the signs on the stores in various alphabets, Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic, even Armenian, Georgian and Chinese. He can remember trying to guess where the people of each store were coming from. Of course, mom always knew the answers.

“This is Chinese. They come from China. Or maybe Japan? Mom? China or Japan?”

“Darius, this is Chinese”.

“How do you know, Mom?”

“The Japanese don’t need to migrate to earn their living. They are rich.”

“So, the Chinese are poor?”

“Would they leave a country as huge and powerful as China if they were rich?”

“So, mom, are we poor too?”

“We are not Chinese. We are from Iran.”

“Iran is not poor. It has oil. So, mom, we are not poor, are we?”

“You’re asking too many questions Darius”.

Indeed, he was a curious kid. But he never managed to learn why they left Iran for Greece. He could understand their country was at war, but he felt so protected in the environment of his family. Dad had an accounting office, mom was raising Darius and his three sisters, all kinds of trouble seemed to be safely locked out of their doorstep.

Well, there is no cocoon that is entirely safe, and sometimes it breaks so suddenly that no-one can tell why, how, or what’s next. Dad’s explanation was that mom should take the kids for a small trip abroad; they had even brought maps and read stuff about their somewhat long vacation in the capital of Greece.

And, right here, right now, so many years later, here’s Darius, laying on a dirty pavement, with a couple of boots pushing his chest, surrounded by six more feet ending up in muscular bodies. He has given up trying to resist and has no longer any more breath or even hope to ask for help.

“Please... I didn’t do anything...”

There’s always something one can say to break the ice in such awkward situations. But the four musketeers above his head didn’t seem willing to communicate in an effective way.

“Shut the fuck up...”

Not a quite optimistic development in a negotiation with a profoundly weak part. They didn't listen. But he was telling the truth. He didn't know why they were after him, why they stopped him, why they literally dragged him to the dark alley of the ghosts, why they started cursing and punching.

Darius was not lying. But they didn't care at all. They kept punching and kicking, and now they weren't speaking at all... Since he was not telling, there was no reason to do anything to cover his screams.

“Please... I'm not the person you are looking for. You must believe me.”

The result of this last desperate effort was just a hand over his mouth. Now it was even harder to breathe. His limbs were paralyzed, it was beyond any doubt that he could do nothing but hoping for mercy. Without even asking for it.

“Shitting your pants will make you no good mother fucker!”

A mumbling voice feels like digging inside his ear. This is just a warning, coming. That was the last thing he remembered. Plus, one of the four lads grabbing him by his arms, and another pulling his pants down.

And this was also just a warning.

3 | [IM]MORTALITY

Athanassia (Αθανασία) means immortality. But what can make a woman with this name immortal? Probably nothing, her mother thought. That's why she used to call her Nassa since she can remember herself. This nickname might not guarantee a place next to the immortal gods of Olympus but might well sound like an indication for a career in aerospace engineering.

We should never trust appearances, though. Nassa didn't conquer our solar system, but pursued a rather challenging career as a lawyer, specializing in criminal law. An unusual field for women, one might say, but not for Nassa. To her, defending freedom of the innocents was her crucial motivation for visiting the country's correctional institution more often than her own law office, somewhere near the Areopagus, the supreme court of modern Greece named after its ancient predecessor.

Nassa's idealism was stronger than the pursuit of a career that could offer her high earnings. But her dynamic temper was a compelling cause for a flirt with

publicity and fame. Many people recognized her while on the street... They had probably watched some of her stormy debates on television, with her arguing with persistence and enthusiasm in favor of people she considered not guilty and sometimes had even volunteered to defend them free of charge.

Her male colleagues, as one could easily predict, called her a rhetorical bitch, but she didn't really care. She was fighting for the right, or at least she thought so. Her instinct was her strongest weapon. Well, a lawyer cannot only rely upon instinct.

Her instinct may have been a guiding light for her discipline, but it cannot work as a panacea for every disease, especially a chronic one like marriage. She trusted her instinct when she saw that polite and timid (yes, and somehow handsome if that counts) guy that she met in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Unlike most of his colleagues, he was eager to provide her with all the documents that she requested almost immediately. Alexandros was a kind guy with no plan and no serious ambitions and a profound willingness to do his best to prove the theorem that it is possible for the Greek public sector to work for the interest of the citizens instead of taking some time off every couple of hours for a cup of coffee or a chicken sandwich, or to pay bills.

Nassa found that Alexandros' behavior is quite patriotic, and that made him even more amicable in her eyes. A clerk with empathy for the citizens, combined with a sense of duty, could be a quite shining example for their children.

She was wrong.

No panaceas. Remember?

Anyhow, no regrets for Nassa. After the divorce

Alexandros returned to his parents' house, that sad one stored old fashioned tiny building lost among gigantic concrete monsters attached to each other like passengers in the Athens Metro at 8 o'clock in the morning. She hates that house, as well as her ex-husband's parents, especially that satanic grandfather that wanted to rule over everyone's life.

"Not my life, sir."

Those were her last words to him. To grandpa. Her moment of separation with Alexandros was an enormous five-minute silent interval between their marriage and their freedom. They lived in silence, they split in silence. No arguing, everything was done *comme il faut* with politeness and tact. That was Alexandros: A polite Mr. nobody. Whatever...

Their children stayed with her. Yannis (named after her ex's father) and Rosa (named after Rosa Luxembourg, Nassa's archetype for a continuously fighting woman) were her only treasures. She would never let them stay with their father. He politely agreed with her terms. Anyway, the kids are now in their late teens, it is a matter of time to stop wanting to spend time with any of their parents. But she won't panic about this. She will enjoy living with her children for as long as they want to be with her. When they no longer do, she'll think what to do. Alexandros will not be as happy when they no longer want to go to the movies with him every second Sunday.

But now there's no time for negative thoughts. Duty calls. She has a trial tomorrow and it's certainly going to be lots of fun. A drug dealer was sued by his wife for physical abuse, and it is actually the first time that he appears before a court of law, as nobody ever managed to file charges against him. Some district

attorneys were transferred a couple of days before submitting their report, another one was accused of corruption, plus, most witnesses refused to testify in court. But now Judy was determined to send him to jail, though not for his main profession.

It was common sense that whoever tried to blame Menelaos for anything had undoubtedly a truly bad karma. But Judy, his unlucky wife and Nassa's client, wanted him behind bars, therefore she had persuaded her lover, Tony, to testify that he had seen Menelaos abusing her quite a few times. Ok, I know what you're thinking right now. Judy has a lover. So what? Is that a crime?

Well, Nassa, there you go, in the dark streets of the center of Athens, for a final meeting with Tony, who needed a tutorial before trial to avoid messing everything up. It's almost midnight and she also has to print some final documents for the court.

When she gets text messages at that time, it is quite possible that there's a good reason, to be more accurate, a reason not so good.

Yes, it's from Tony.

It's impossible to come tonight. We'd better have a video call from your office. There is a serious reason why.

What reason could be more serious than defending his girlfriend against her husband?

No, Tony, you don't plan the schedule. Your lawyer does. It's almost midnight, I'm tired and I'm really trying to help you and your girl send that bastard to jail. Don't play with me.

Texting is never sufficient. She calls his number.

"Tony, what happened? Did he threaten you?"

"Not exactly. It's complicated."

“I must remind you that you have to testify tomorrow and it’s absolutely necessary to discuss our defending line. Do you want Judy to lose the trial? He will kill you both.”

“He will definitely kill me.”

“Listen, we don’t have the luxury of resting our case. Where are you now?”

“I’m home, and I suggest you do the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had set me up.”

“Who? Menelaos?”

“Don’t speak too loudly. They might still be there.”

“They? Who are they?”

“I knew they were coming for me. Please, get the hell away from here. Go home. They are still there.”

“Who are they, for hell’s sake?”

“I saw them. I was coming to meet you.”

“So why the fuck did you leave? We should have finished by now.”

“Instead of me... They got that guy that was wearing the same Metallica shirt. I saw them following him... They got close and grabbed him ...”

Poor guy...

“So, please leave, they might come to get you too.”

“Listen, Tony, this is getting serious. So you saw them attacking someone and did nothing? You didn’t call the police?”

“You must be kidding me... I pretended I didn’t see and disappeared on the next corner.”

Poor guy.

“So, you don’t know what happened to him?”

“Is this our problem?”

Actually, it was.

“Do you think they hurt him?”

If so, this is another proof that Menelaos is not only trying to intimidate the witnesses, but he also tried to make them disappear.

“I’ve got to find that guy, Tony.”

“You are fucking crazy. They probably killed him. Instead of me, do you understand? If I testify, I’m dead.”

“No, you are not. Do you remember where exactly you saw them following him?”

“Please, Nassa, get out of there! They are fucking dangerous. You don’t know how dangerous they can be!”

It wasn’t really a matter of saving one’s life that was challenging for Nassa. The main thing was to find proof that there’s a plan to make all witnesses disappear. Well, not exactly a proof, as the poor guy was not exactly a witness. But, let’s call it an initial clue, a first step in the long-running challenge to uncover Menelaos. Well, regardless of what happens next morning, this is an awesome challenge.

“Listen, Tony, I’ve got to hang up. Please make sure that you are outside the courtroom before nine AM.”

“I don’t really think I should come.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear this. Yes, you should come and sing your song before the court.”

“Will you please go back home? You are at significant risk.”

“I promise I’m out of here.”

She was partly truthful. She would leave. It’s not exactly smart for a woman to walk around those streets at this time, but she can pay a visit to the police station instead.

It was only a couple of blocks away anyway. So it was a matter of time to get there and ask whether

anything significant was reported. Or she could even call Nikos at the Central Police Administration.

“Hey handsome...”

“Nassa... “

He sounded preoccupied. Or is it just too late?

“Did you...”

“Didn’t you see the news?”

“I’m still on my way...”

“Your client...”

“What’s going on Niko?”

“Judy Thomaidis is dead.”

4 | DO SOMETHING, MOTHER FUCKER

Sometimes quiet people are facing a challenge that might put their integrity into a test. It is that awkward moment when something unexpected happens right outside your door, right next to your border with the rest of the world. A threat for the sobriety of your little kingdom, that sobriety you have tried to establish and endure for years and years, in an endless effort to find yourself in some kind of bearable balance. It's so annoying to have everything neatly done and, all of a sudden, a storm breaks your window, your unbreakable glass of waterproof solitude.

Alexandros wishes he had never heard that man yelling a few meters outside his door. It's been half an hour since he heard his voice for the last time. A voice asking for mercy. A voice interrupted violently, presumably by a hand shutting his mouth. Nobody spoke a word after that.

The only voice he could hear was the one inside his head.

“Do something, mother fucker!”

For about fifteen minutes he did nothing. Nothing but feeling guilty for a life that he could have saved but did not. Just because he couldn't decide to do anything. Just because he couldn't even dare dial a number on his phone.

The motorcycles left with a horrible noise that put an end to all this silence, but it was only a few seconds... The house faded away soon, and there he went again.

“Do something.”

Let's start with something easy. Wear your trousers and a T-shirt? If you're calling the police or getting outside to see what had happened, you should be decently dressed. Well, and slippers. Or maybe your sneakers. Sneakers might be a better choice. Then, should you call the police first or get out? Does it really make any sense to call the police, or you should better call an ambulance? But how do you know that there's somebody injured or dead outside? And what if they ask you why you didn't call earlier? Could you get in trouble? Well, you are in trouble with your conscience anyway, so that's no big deal... But what the hell should you do first?

Well, maybe just do nothing. It's so annoying when something fucks your schedule. Alexandros should have been sleeping by now, there's a lot of things waiting for him next morning. It would be so much better if such a thing had happened on a Saturday night. He wouldn't be at home. Saturday is movie day with the kids and after having pizza and getting them back to mom, another movie for him that would finish after midnight. Then, a cab back home... but...

Even then, if there's indeed a dead body out there, he would have found it anyway. But there's a good

chance that somebody else might have found him. Plus, he wouldn't have heard the entire thing outside his door. He wouldn't feel as guilty as he feels right now.

“Do something. Open the door!”

Now he's standing in front of his door, trying to persuade himself to open it and see. Wait a sec. You may have to take your cellphone with you, in case you decide to call the police. Or the ambulance. Damn it. You should have downloaded that flashlight app. You need a flashlight. Should you also take something just in case you need to defend yourself? But can you really defend yourself? Anyway, you don't have something that could help. A kitchen knife wouldn't help, you can't imagine yourself stabbing someone, you have never taken part in any kind of fight, but they are gone, aren't they? Maybe an umbrella could help, but, what if the victim is alive and dangerous? What if he deserved what happened to him, but who are you to judge, Alexandros?

He opens the door.

He doesn't have to take another step. The man is laying down right in front of his doorstep.

Shit!

A man is dead on your doorstep. Now you're in trouble. Now you should call the police. Or the ambulance. They're going to ask questions. Well, you'll say you were taking a shower and didn't hear a thing. But you didn't take a shower. Can they tell? Never mind.

He shuts the door.

What if he's drugged? What if he attacks you? You don't know who the hell that man is.

He was naked.

And bleeding.

Alexandros opened the door again.

Alexandros is getting on his knees. What the fuck.
Will he faint as well?

“Should I touch him, or they ’ll find my fingerprints?”

“I’d better not. I’d better not.”

Now you’re thinking out loud Alexandros. You’d better not.

He’s a young man. He doesn’t move.

A naked body on your doorstep. Keeps getting better and better.

A car passed fast. No, it doesn’t stop. Nobody cares.
Decide before you’re in real trouble.

The naked man starts shaking from the cold. He’s alive.

Alexandros gets up, shuts the door, goes inside. To the kitchen. Gloves. Where are the gloves? Here... the garden gloves...

Should he take a towel, cover him and leave him outside? But what if he dies out in the cold?

He should call an ambulance. He walks to the phone. Yes. He dials. He hangs up.

He wears the gloves and opens the door again. He touches the shaking naked body. The man’s hair is messy and tangled over his face. He has blood on his face. Bruises all over his body!

His skin. Dark hair and skin. Is he Greek? What if he’s an illegal immigrant?

He’s bleeding. There’s blood on his doorstep.

“Help...”

The man opened his eyes.

They gaze at each other. Who’s more frightened?

“Please...”

Alexandros grabs him from the arms. He drags him inside. The naked man doesn't resist, he seems to have no strength at all.

While dragging him, he can see a line of blood drawn from the doorstep to the tiles of his hall. White tiles. Mom was always saying white tiles are big trouble for the proprietor, but dad insisted that they make the house look brighter.

Well, there's more cleaning up to do, and it must be done tonight. Tomorrow afternoon the housekeeper will be here exactly at four o'clock. He is the one that insists that she's accurate.

You should mope before it leaves stains. But first you need to do something with this man. He's naked. He's bleeding. Well, not any longer as it seems. He's still shaking though. Well, he must be in his early twenties or maybe even younger. What kind of scumbag deserves such a humiliating punishment?

And who knows whether those people will return or not.

He leaves him gently on the floor, watching out for his head not to bang on the tiles. He gets the mope from the bathroom and cleans up the doorstep and entrance. He looks around. Nobody. Just a T-shirt in the middle of the street. It must be his.

He closes the door fast and locks it. Then he puts the mope away and there he is, standing above the poor guy.

Alexandros, this is maybe the most idiotic thing you've ever done in your fucking life.

Maybe you're locked inside your house with a murderer, a burglar, or maybe just a junkie that just sells his body for a gram of cocaine.

He had noticed where the blood came from. Poor

guy...

“Can you hear me? Do you understand Greek?”

“Thank you...”

“Should I call the ambulance or the police? What did they do to you?”

“Please, don’t...”

The poor guy burst into tears. And he was still shaking...

“I swear, I didn’t do anything...”

“OK, that’s OK dude. Take it easy. Can you stand up?”

He couldn’t believe he was saying that to someone that he was actually afraid of.

Darius didn’t respond.

“Are you Ok?”

Darius opened his eyes.

“I’ll be fine... please, don’t call anyone. I have no papers.”

Well, this is kind of ironic.

No papers. He’s indeed illegal. Alexandros took another look at the naked guy still lying on the white tiles. Then he couldn’t help staring at the poster on the wall of his little hall.

KEEP GREECE GREEK. MY HOME IS NOT YOURS.

Capital letters. Blue color. A Greek flag and the Acropolis in the background.

What the fuck?

5 | THE PARTY

It was not really some kind of racist ideology that made Alexandros an active member of the far-right party. He was not really that type of guy that admired Hitler and his Nazi clan, his history knowledge was competent enough to prevent him from something like that. He has never been aggressive to foreigners just like some people from his party did. He admired the ancient Greek miracle, and he was a religious person as well. The far-right party had won many voters by hiding his neo-Nazi past behind a curtain of passionate love for Ancient Greece and Orthodoxy, though the latter two could never really love each other. Since he had read many ancient Greek writers, the party had offered him the chance to give speeches about the glory of Greeks against the Persians, and, of course, the conquests of Alexander the Great, whose name his grandfather and himself carried.

In his mind, illegal immigrants from the Middle East were either Muslims trying to invade Christianity by settling down in Greece and creating colonies, or

Persians dreaming of taking revenge for their losses two thousand years ago. He didn't hate them; he just didn't want them in Greece.

"I don't hate anybody. I just love my country".

That was his main argument when discussing the matter. Maybe it was a little bit a matter of DNA. His grandpa feared and opposed the Communists. Now the new Communists are these dark-skinned people from the Middle East. What if they were in war? What if they were refugees trying to save their lives from the bombs falling on their heads? They should stay in their country and fight. They betray their own country; how can they love ours?

Well, his animosity against the immigrants was exclusively theoretical. He felt uncomfortable to sit next to them on the train or see them walk around or rent houses in his neighborhood. He believed that they should be all expelled from the country, but he had never shown any kind of verbal or physical abuse against any of them. On the contrary, he felt bad inside when people from his party attacked or abused immigrants, but never had the courage to argue against it before his comrades in the party. He was suffering silently, but this is not a good reason to prevent him from feeling guilty.

"When you keep silent, you declare acceptance".

Those were Nassa's words. And this was another reason for their marriage to collapse. He wasn't voting for the far right when they first met, but when the Greek crisis began in early 2010s, he became one of the many Greek citizens that found the "shocking truths" that they wanted to hear in the demagogy of the far right. Democracy has failed. Europe wants to enslave us. Our nation is threatened by the invasion of

strangers. Christianity is threatened by Islam. And all these corrupted politicians cannot guarantee any kind of solution, as they are just puppets of the Great Powers. A good scenario for angry people who were meanwhile losing half their salary, or even their job, and couldn't afford paying their loans because they counted on their pre-crisis income.

Of course, Alexandros had never imagined getting a loan, but a lot of his colleagues had, and some of them kept begging him to lend them any amount of money he could, in order not to lose their homes. That was becoming annoying to him, since a couple of years before the crisis they looked enormously proud and content for the awfully expensive apartment they had bought in the suburbs, leaving him alone in the hood with all those immigrants.

The neighborhood had indeed changed, and it was never going to be the way it had been back then. What an optimistic person might describe as a "colorful and multicultural area of a modern Metropolis", was to him a saddening scenery of decadence, with so many invaders from other cultures that were not just seeking for a new shelter from war or poverty. They were part of a plan to eliminate European culture.

He was always fearing that he might become a victim of theft or burglary like all those poor people that he watches on TV almost every day. Sometimes he even thought that those would finally be his own fifteen minutes of fame. "A lonely man murdered by illegal immigrants for 20 Euros and a cheap mobile phone".

And there we go, Alexandros, you've carried that naked man inside your house with your own bare hands. He looks so helpless and weak, but maybe that

was part of the plan to enter the house without leaving any traces of breaking in. But something doesn't seem to work well here. He's hurt, and he's naked. How the hell is he going to escape? You're such a fucking idiot, Alexandros, it is obvious! He'll steal some of your clothes after he kills you. But now he's shaking... And, hey, look at him, he's crying...

“What happened to you? Who are you?”

“Please... I don't want anything...”

He feels so sorry about him, and at the same time he's so scared to leave him alone just for a few seconds, just to go to the next room and get a blanket and some clothes. But he must do something. Maybe open the door and kick him outside? Well, that doesn't sound very humanitarian. Maybe tie him with a rope and then go inside and bring him something to wear? Well, that doesn't sound a clever idea, either, plus, he doesn't have something to tie him with in the room. Well, there actually is something. The belt of his bathrobe. He takes it off. He ties Darius's hands. As tightly as he can. His hands are trembling. He hasn't been violent to anyone in his life so far. But now he's defending his life, or at least he thinks so.

“What are you doing? Please...”

“Shut the fuck up. I'll get you some clothes. But don't you dare make a move, or I'll kill you – Make a move and I'll fucking kill you with my gun, you scumbag!”

Of course, he didn't have a gun. He looked at Darius's eyes. I wish he knew what that naked man was thinking.

But Darius wasn't thinking anything at all. He was as scared as Alexandros..

6 | A GHOST WITHOUT A NAME

No, this can't be happening. She cannot be dead. That bastard Menelaos should rot in jail. Nassa was in a cab with her head buzzing like a beehive. Why did she let that happen? She was heading to the Police Station of Kolonos, a historic but rather poor region of old Athens. Judy's body was found in the ruins of an old warehouse in Dracon Street. What an irony, Dracon was one of the most austere legislators of Ancient Athens. Nikos was waiting for her outside the station door.

"She was shot in the head. You don't want to see the body. Menelaos came and recognized her. He looked devastated."

"The bastard got rid of her. The trial was tomorrow morning... Did you arrest him?"

"Of course not, Nassa. With what kind of evidence?"

"Isn't that obvious that he can be a suspect? Tomorrow she was going to testify against him."

"Well, that would make him a very apparent suspect

for all of us.”

“What are you implying?”

“That he wouldn’t be such a jerk to kill her the day before the trial. It’s like telling everyone “Just in case you didn’t notice, I had a great motive to kill her”.

Well, Nikos had a point. But Nassa was too furious to put his argument into any kind of consideration. This battle was between a dominant husband with a criminal background and a weak woman that was trapped in his poisonous web. Nassa felt she could have given her a chance to rip the web and escape, but what was the outcome? The spider was faster, and obviously relentless.

Well, they could have become friends, if she was not Judy’s attorney. Nassa could very well recall the day Judy came to the office, in their first appointment. Nassa was extremely busy at that time, so when she first heard her story, the first thing on her mind was just to claim she has no time, but of course she was willing to recommend an exceptionally good family lawyer that would presumably win the case. But the very moment that she realized that this molested lady was Menelaos’ wife, some kind of electricity sparked in her fingers.

“Of course, I’m interested. I think this is a matter of women’s pride. There’s got to be some kind of solidarity against patriarchy”.

Bullshit. The patriarch himself was the matter of interest. One of the most powerful men in the country that nobody really knew much about, Menelaos was a low-profile criminal with a wide range of activities. For the Tax Service, he was the owner of a low-activity international courier service. Not anything that could attract the attention of the authorities in Greece or

abroad. He was living a modest life, in a mediocre suburb of Athens. All the profit from the drugs were silently transferred to off-shore companies in Cayman Islands – after a labyrinth of several hundreds of transactions, that it was almost impossible for the Police or the D. As to trace, the money was invested in the real estate market in countries with low taxes and prominent levels of corruption.

Without any kind of social presence, Menelaos offered his wife a very convenient life, but not more convenient than what was expected for the owner of a courier service company. Judy couldn't complain, nor could their daughter, Emily. A cozy and convenient house in the suburbs, a fancy but not flamboyant jeep, and a good (but not extremely expensive) school for Emily, not more than the average middle-class family could afford.

Menelaos knew that the best way to act without any exterior disturbance in whatever you want is always avoiding looking anything above mediocre to your neighborhood, your friend, the entire country. This entire country included his own family. He was so cryptic that no one in the house could understand what his real activities were.

He had knitted a warm and cozy blanket above his house, so thick that nobody could even imagine the density and length of his network of drug-dealing. Not even a phone call from his partners was allowed after a certain hour, during the time he was supposed to spend quality time with his wife, and, especially, his daughter. They should never find out, that was his decision from the very beginning. The money he had invested would provide Judy and Emily with enough money to continue their average middle-class life, even

in case he was killed this very same day. And, after his death, they would find a letter left at his trusted Notary, to inform his widow and daughter that they have inherited a huge amount of assets thanks to the will of his uncle Christos that had left Greece for Zimbabwe after the war.

Of course, Uncle Christos wouldn't have appeared unexpectedly. Menelaos had planned that many years ago. Although uncle Christos never existed, there were almost a dozen photos of him in the house, and more than a hundred times that Menelaos had mentioned Uncle Christos on several occasions, stating how much he loved his nephew, at least before he had left for Africa, without any news since then. The man in the pictures was Menelaos' mentor, the man who had shown him how to pull the strings in this extremely profitable, as well as risky, business.

So, what was he doing that for? He would never have the chance to enjoy the outcome of all his struggles. Menelaos didn't have a certain answer. Of course, he wanted a future for his wife and daughter. But that's not an efficient motive to encourage someone to get involved in such crimes. The truth can be deciphered if one could look at his past. In his twenties, Menelaos considered himself an anarchist. He was arrested a couple of times for smashing the windows of banks, as an action of resistance to capitalism and his earthly representatives. But there always comes a time that the rebel realizes that this fucking capitalism could only be undermined from the inside. It didn't take him long to find that out – and this discovery shaped a rather extraordinary resistance plan into his head.

It was the time that cocaine was being gradually

established as a high society's drug. It was more expensive and therefore was popular among those who could afford it: the rich and famous. What could be a greater victory for a revolutionary than killing the rich and taking their money? Guns were not really his type, so he decided to specialize in the cocaine market. "Uncle Christos", (whose real name was Elpidoforos, meaning in Greek "the one that brings hope") was the man who introduced him to this peculiar kind of revolution, though he did not share the same ideas. For Uncle things were simpler and clearer. You can, you want, you try, you've got it. Four steps to achieving your goals that he learned about in "Streets University". Uncle helped him with his initial connections, while Menelaos was working for him as a trainee. Menelaos was a good learner, because he could, he wanted, he tried hard, but Uncle got most of what Menelaos should have gotten. What Menelaos has tried to achieve. And Menelaos was not made to work for others. By ideology, he was made to fight against the rich. So, it was a matter of time to rebel against his mentor.

That is the first stage of social change according to Marx and Engels. Revolution of the workers. The worker stood up for his rights. The capitalist (Uncle) lost power (and his life, just like the Czar), and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was established. With just a slight difference. There was only one worker in this small working class. So, after "uncle" was gone without return in the depths of the Aegean Sea, when his helicopter accidentally crashed, Menelaos became the one and only worker-dictator.

But this dictator was unknown to the public, beyond a small circle of leaders of that market. Even

Nassa would know nothing about him, if a coincidence hadn't knocked upon her door. The father of one of his colleagues that accidentally died from a heart attack after a good deal of sniffing, considered this (and who can blame him?) a planned elimination. Menelaos claimed that an entrepreneur in the field is not supposed to be a consumer (and he was true about himself, but not for many guys that wanted a personal taste of their product). But the poor father didn't believe him, so he swore (deep inside) revenge.

He started collecting data that could be used against Menelaos and was desperately trying to find a lawyer to represent him. Both were really hard things to do. There was always something getting in the way. Lawyers refused to work on the case, and people seemed unwilling to speak. Nobody knew Menelaos, but everyone seemed to be afraid of him, or, to be more accurate, of his allure. They knew that a man with great power had a good share in this kind of market, but this man was more of a ghost. A ghost without a name.

Nassa wouldn't have known his name, if that poor dad hadn't come to her and told her his side of the story. Initially she was astonished to find out that this meticulously organized but rather not extremely competitive courier service was the curtain hiding an enormous network of illegal drug deals. What she found months after trying to trace any kind of evidence, was that it seemed impossible to get all the way to Menelaos. There was always something missing in this chain, he seemed untouchable.

She kept searching and searching, and she was impressed that neither Menelaos nor any of his partners ever tried to contact her, to warn her, or even

threaten her. She was just always finding a dead end in any way she was trying to search for evidence. Until, one day, her client stopped calling her. She never managed to get through to him after his silence. She just read in the papers that he (a rather well-known Athenian broker) decided to move to Paris to get over the loss of his beloved son, quitting all his activities in Greece and trying to start a new life there as a business consultant. It was obvious that Menelaos had all the cards. He shared, he played, he won.

“But not now. You won’t get away with it this time...” – sometimes thinking out loud makes no sense.

“There is also a thing you should know, Nassa”, said Nikos.

“What?”

“They say he’s devastated. He had a small stroke a couple of hours after he was told”.

“Bullshit. He’s just acting”.

“I’m not sure about that Nassa... I might say you sound a little prejudiced”.

“He’s going to pay Nikos... This is a matter of women’s pride”.

This time, it looked like it really was.

7 | EVERYBODY HURTS ALL THE TIME

“Trust me, I’m not going to hurt you, man...If you want me to help you, let me first feel that I’m safe”.

Alexandros had tied Darius’s arms and legs and he was pulling him towards the guest room. A room never used for many years, once used by the handmaid of the house, and then abandoned after dad decided that they didn’t need that kind of staff after pappou died. Handmaids from all over rural Greece were coming to Athens ever since the end of the civil war to work for middle-class families and manage to earn a little money for their families back in the village, or to marry some guy that would offer them the chance to stop working. But this room was occupied again by a nurse that was looking after mom and dad in their later years, when it had become enormously hard for them to do the basics for their nutrition and household.

Sometimes he used the guest room to offer hospitality to friends, but it’s been long since somebody slept in there. And now what? He’s crazy

enough to offer a bed and blankets to an alien. A naked one. A shaking and crying one.

There were blood stains and dirt all over Darius's body. But Alexandros thought that it would be wiser to lock him inside the room and then try to get him some clothes. The bed was already made in the guest room, probably a few years ago, but the guy was dirty enough to be afraid of all the dust.

"Can you help me and stand up so I can put you to bed?"

"You've tied my hands and feet..."

He tried to help as much as he could, though never managed to stand up. He was probably feeling much pain, and there was blood on his hips.

"What the hell did they do to you?"

He was just talking to himself; he expected no answer. He finally managed to lay him on bed and put him under the blankets.

"Wait now... I'll go get you something to put on... I'll lock you in here and I'll be right back".

"Please don't call the police".

"I won't... But maybe you need to be examined by a doctor".

"No, please... Sir... Please... I..."

"Come on, don't be afraid".

Alexandros was probably more scared, but now he had already started feeling that very same sense of duty that he felt in his office. He's got to serve the public. But without risking his safety. Even if this "public" is naked and beaten up.

"I'll be alright..."

"What did they do to you?"

"They fucked me."

He started crying again.

Alexandros stood still for a few seconds. This was becoming weirder... What the hell was going on?

“You’re going to be OK. Just wait a sec.”

He left Darius with his hands and feet tied, switched the light on, got out of the room and locked the door. After taking a deep breath, he went inside his bedroom to find a few blankets and some old underwear, plus a T-shirt and pants. That guy in there must feel very humiliated. And, still, he might need a doctor. He found something that he wouldn’t mind not using again. Alexandros had a very emotional relationship with his wardrobe, all clothes reminded him of his life, but these were at least twenty years old and didn’t remind him of anything significant. Plus, twenty years ago he looked closer to the skinny guy’s body than he looks now, and he couldn’t fit in those clothes anyway.

For a second, it crossed his mind that his thoughts were truly selfish. But he took the clothes anyway and got to the kitchen. He grabbed a glass of water. And some disposable gloves (if the guy is raped, he’s probably gay, and, well, he might be HIV positive) so it must be better to take some precautions. Well, he will also need some cleaning, so some wet wipes and cotton pads might help. Well, and a sleeping pill! Yes, a sleeping pill! This would tranquilize the guy for the rest of the night, because, oh my God, Alexandros didn’t finish his shower and it’s already 1 o’ clock in the morning and he really has an exhausting day tomorrow, what the fuck, he shouldn’t have opened the door, now what?

Now, the hardest thing: He’s got to unlock the door... Of course, he shouldn’t have opened the door from the very beginning. He shouldn’t bother. Things happen every day on the streets, but the problem

begins when they're knocking on your door. The problem now is not out there, it is inside.

A good first step is looking through the keyhole. Yes, there he is, he's still laying on the bed, maybe he feels warmer now, he's not shaking. Oh God. What if he's dead? He'll have to deal with a corpse in his house, with Alexandros' fingerprints on it.

Whatever, he's got to get inside. He turns the key, the door opens. He stands in the entrance, trying to find out whether the guy is breathing or not. He cannot tell yet. He gets closer.

"Hey there, dude... Everything OK?"

The guy's eyes are still full of tears.

"Yes..."

"Brought you some clothes to wear. And some wet napkins to clean up. You've got blood and dirt all over... You may also wanna take a shower".

"Thank you."

A mix of pain and fear was all over his face, it was maybe worse than the bruises, the scars, the blood, the dirt. He tried to sit on the bed.

"I think I made a mess. I'm so sorry".

"Need any help?"

"Thank you".

His Greek was good, language can become a crucial factor of familiarity when everything else seems absurd. Alexandros untied his hands and legs and helped him stand up.

"Wanna get a little cleaned first?"

"Thank you".

That was Darius's "Yes, please", one might guess. Trying to walk, Darius fell.

"I'm sorry... I just can't".

"It's OK. It's OK. I'll help you with these napkins,

I'll bring some ice for the bruises, and some band-aid".

It's so awkward to see a six feet tall adult man so helpless and unable to make the slightest move. He was apparently in shock. Anyone could have been after being abused in such a brutal way. Alexandros helped him clean himself, another awkward thing – he cannot recall trying to clean someone up with baby napkins, well, he can. His little son when he was shitting his diapers, and his father, in his very late days, when he was unable to get up from bed. The procedure was silent, Darius had totally left himself in Alexandros' hands. He couldn't even move his hands. He didn't respond even when he was cleaning the bruised or scarred spots.

"Man, I don't feel like grabbing your genitals, you should clean the area yourself."

Another awkward phrase to a person that was raped an hour ago.

"OK... Thank you. Just help me stand up".

He took him by his arms and Darius stood up and cleaned himself. He also asked for help to get dressed, and Alexandros willingly offered it.

It was obvious that Darius wouldn't be able to leave the house – he had to spend the night here. Alexandros was feeling that this growing anxiety was far beyond what he could stand. But he had no other choice. Or maybe he had.

"Wanna call a cab to take you home? ...Of course, I'll pay it... since you..."

Funny. Of course, he had to pay.

"But if you still don't feel the strength, and I guess you don't, you can stay the night... But... You understand I'll have to lock you in this room..."

"I understand. I should go."

He tried to walk again. He fell on the floor again. No, if he was pretending, he must be a future Oscar-winning actor. He's still in shock.

"Really, you can stay. But you understand I need to feel safe too...you may also take that pill that will help you sleep... I take it sometimes too, it's harmless."

"Of course, I understand. Of course, you can lock the door. You're a good person. And you don't know who the hell I am. I'm Darius."

There you go, Alexandros. Offering help to a Muslim immigrant.

"You didn't have to tell me your name".

It would have been much better if he hadn't known. But now he does. So what? He was a person that needed help. There was one part of Alexandros that felt sorry for him and another that felt that poisonous mix of fear and hatred against that person, one of the thousands that came illegally to his country to take over the jobs of the native Greeks and destroy the country's ancient culture.

Alexandros stood up, left the room and locked the door. He just uttered a "Goodnight, see you in the morning".

He didn't even hear Darius's last "Thank you", as the voices in his head were becoming louder and louder.

"Keep Greece Greek".

He went to the shower, rubbing his body like a maniac – like he had gotten in touch with some source of fatal infection.

"He's a human being, you mother fucker" told his mirror idol while brushing his teeth. Even in war, you're supposed to show a little mercy and care for the enemy, when he's injured. And that guy was really hurt.

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Of course, Alexandros could not sleep at all that night.

8 | PLANET HYPNOS

Darius kept weeping silently for a while, but the sleeping pill that his savior gave him soon did its work. The man escaped from the reality of his cozy-but-locked room, for the planet Hypnos. That awesome planet that has no gravity at all. You may fly away from every kind of trouble, hide on top of skyscrapers (though there's only a couple of those in the entire metropolitan area of Athens).

No, tonight he didn't fly. All he needed was quietness and stillness. It was just enough relief not to feel that burden on his entire body. All he needed was to forget all this humiliation, all this violence that he just couldn't explain.

On that new planet, he was again a teenager. A pessimistic dreamer, as all teenagers are, in all times, in all societies and circumstances. But only a few years had passed since then. Or maybe, could it be that this time of dreaming big had never happened to him? He had to be realistic and with a plan if he wanted to survive, from the very first moment he can remember.

Nevertheless, he was always dreaming he could fly. That's what he really wanted right now, that his body felt heavy as it's been made of stone. But what kind of a flight could a man of stone perform?

In that very first dream, he was weightless, like an astronaut in space. He was naked, just like a few hours ago. He was walking naked in the middle of a busy street, with thousands of people walking by him. But nobody could see him. He was invisible, and he kept walking and walking, and the crowd was getting bigger. But nobody could touch him. He was now sitting on a pavement right across Omonia Square. He opens his arms and starts flying over the people, the cars, the old, closed hotels that once used to be the vitrine of a developing post-war Athens.

His sky, alas, had a limit. At the moment he had almost reached the sacred hill of Acropolis when he felt that enormous weight again. It was a matter of seconds for the fall to start – and for him to wake up with a cry for help.

There he was again, locked in a dark room, totally desperate, enormously devastated. He was grateful to that weird man that probably saved his life, but at the same time he was so terrified he wished he could fly for real.

Sometimes, the night is a relieving limbo between two chaotic days. At the time, Darius felt that he didn't want the night to end soon. Now, he felt safe underneath warm blankets. A few hours ago, he was treated mercilessly like an animal. And how about tomorrow morning? What's going to happen when this man will unlock the door of this room? Will he ask questions? Or he'll just let him go? And if he lets him go, where the hell is he going to go? What if those

people are waiting for him around the corner? Allah, make this night last as long as you can. Yesterday he was claiming to be an atheist, but now he could swear that even Joseph Stalin was hiding a pious orthodox Christian in his time of need, those frightening moments between being a powerful leader and a plain corpse.

With his eyes wide open, absolute darkness looks like another blanket that prevents him from becoming exposed. Darius was not a creature of the night, on the contrary, he was enjoying walking in the sunshine more than anything in this world. The night was the time for work. Mornings were illuminated by what he appreciated most in this world. But, in order to achieve his morning pleasure, Darius had to spend his nights working – a challenge rather than promising for a person without papers.

The thing was, Darius had no papers at all. Immigrants can go to school in Greece without legal documents. He couldn't be granted citizenship of his homeland – that, according to the fatherland's law. Neither could he become a Greek citizen – that's the Greek law that wouldn't still let him. So, after becoming 18, Darius was a person with no citizenship, a person that officially didn't exist. A guy with a high school degree, who took exams and passed to his university with his old passport, which expired a few months after his registration.

That was the crazy thing. Darius graduated from the University of Athens and applied for a master's program. Yes, this poor man had a master's degree in Classical Philology – knowledge was his chance to get temporary permits to remain in the country and continue his studies. But even with a MA in his hands,

another permit expired. He applied for citizenship again, but once again his application was rejected with honors. A man who could read (and speak) Ancient Greek more fluently than most Greeks could not become a citizen of this country – this is one of the many paradoxes of Greek bureaucracy.

No, he wouldn't give up. He applied for a PhD in Classical Studies. His proposal was about the Foreigners in Greek Tragedy – Medea was of course his inspiration. But he had to wait for a few months for his proposal to be accepted or not. Until then, he was again a man without any legal documents, so, if he was arrested for something, it was quite possible to be expelled from the country.

But how was it possible for a scholarly guy (or, if you prefer, a nerd) like Darius to get in any kind of trouble and be arrested? Well, the answer had more to do with his night work. Possibilities to get a normal job when you are an illegal immigrant waiting for another permit to stay in the country are desperately small. Of course, you may work in the countryside, in fields, gardens or greenhouses, but that was not an option if he wanted to keep in touch with the University. If in town, you may also find a job as a construction worker, but that's a morning job – so the night was the only solution.

Darius worked in restaurants and bars, mostly in the kitchen, as it was not quite common in fancy places to have waiters from Middle East countries. He was working hard, but he was always afraid that the Tax Service or the Police would find him in some typical control procedure – and they would find out that he was not registered or declared as a legal employee... So, when those kinds of people visited the places he

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was working at, he had to run and hide in the toilet or outside, otherwise he could get in trouble, at least until his proposal was accepted and, a few months after, his permit to stay was renewed.

Sounds like a decent job, or, at least as decent as it can be for a man that has no papers, and it was, indeed. But this fragile balance sometimes makes people vulnerable to the greed of others. Those that are stronger than you, and want you to know it, and not just know it, they want you to accept it.

9 | PLANET INSOMNIA

Alexandros could not sleep either. Unlike Darius, he was counting every single minute until dawn, though he really knew what the hell to do with that man sleeping in the room. The main thing is, he gets up at 6.30, takes a quick shower, has wholewheat cereal with skimmed milk for breakfast, while watching the first news of the day on TV, and then catches the train for a ten-minute ride to his work near Syntagma square. Sounds quite simple, and it is, every day, for the last who-knows-how-many years. He always arrives at work at 7:45, holding a warm cup of green lemon tea from Starbucks.

But this morning there's a big issue to resolve. What is he supposed to do with that man? He can't leave the house with him inside. Well. Of course, he might keep him locked inside the room, but what if he breaks the door, loots the house and disappears? Should he talk to him? Of course, he should. It would be inappropriate to leave for work without exchanging any words, so, he'd rather get up a little earlier, so they

can talk, and he reassures him that it's safe to leave. But is it really safe to leave? Or those people will be waiting around the corner?

And, what about Alexandros? Could he be their next target, for offering shelter to their victim? How dangerous are they? And what if the guy doesn't want to leave? Or what if he attacks him when he unlocks the door? Should he call the police? But it will take a while until he testifies, and he'll certainly be late for work. He is never late for work. This is out of the question.

Well, he may call sick. But he's never done this before, he's never lied to his boss, what the hell, he's a public servant, he is supposed to serve the citizens of this country, not some stranger without papers.

Why the hell did he open his door to this fucking Arab? And who knows what kind of man he is? Well, speaking of "man", maybe he's one of those toy-boys that give blowjobs to other men in the streets around Koumoundourou square, a few hundred meters beyond Omonia Square. That must be the thing. The guy must have denied something they asked him, so they forced him to do that.

Alexandros, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into? This guy represents what you resent the most. He's a Muslim, who knows if he was a jihadist back in his country? He's also gay, a gay Muslim that would be hanged in his own country, and now he's come to Greece illegally and sells his services. What a disgrace! Of course, Alexandros didn't have any problem with gay people, at least that's what he always declared. "If they keep away from me and my family, I've got absolutely no problem", he used to say to his ex-wife when they were arguing about this matter.

Well, Alexandros, here you are, you have the problem inside your house, wearing your clothes (OK, some used ones), and sleeping in your bed (well, not the same as you, but it's still yours). Let's see, how are you going to deal with this mess?

Of course, he must talk to him. But what do they have to say? Ask him what happened to him? He doesn't really want to know, what he already knows is enough. Well, it's better to keep a distance. He'll wake him up, ask him if he needs anything, maybe offer him something for breakfast, he could tell him that he can keep his clothes and kindly lead him to the front door. This is the best-case scenario, of course. What if his injuries are grave? What if he keeps bleeding in there, or, oh God, could he die in there and Alexandros will find him in a pool of blood, on his bed, in his guest room, in his little family house? No, no, Alexandros, trying to think positive once may prevent you from losing your mind.

Maybe he should call his ex-wife and ask her advice. But it's almost 4 o'clock in the morning and she won't be happy to answer. Well, maybe he'd better call her in the morning, before he wakes the guy up.

Their divorce was a rather velvet one, with no unnecessary adversities. All they both wanted was to get rid of each other as soon as possible and establish a safe post-divorce environment for the kids – of course that one would be living with their mother. Though their intimate relationship was a total disaster, her legal advice was always welcome to Alexandros, and Nassa was most of the time very eager to help him. That was a little relieving. Nassa. He'll call her early in the morning. Of course, there's still a good chance that he won't miss his train.

Oh yes, he can be at work at 07:45. This is all he needs. If only that gay Arab could magically disappear...

Well, anyhow, Nassa will surely find a way to help him. But what was annoying him the most was that very strange feeling that he could neither describe nor explain. One part of him was anxious and concerned about what was going to happen the next morning. But there was another part, that one that was relieved by the presence of another person inside this house after many years. Living all alone has lots of luxuries, but there is always this unsupportable everyday solitude that sometimes covers the room with a sand-like cloud that makes him choke. Well, bullshit, nobody is really alone nowadays, there's always going to be at least one green dot on your messenger screen that will be willing to exchange a few words or even emoticons with you, especially when this dot is in a somewhat similar condition as yours.

But this was different. The presence of a person inside the house has a different essence, it's something beyond digits, it's not made of pixels. It's real. That's why it's probably so scary, but it was so surprising that this sense of fear was at some moments giving in to a weird excitement, like a sudden awakening after a thunder and lightning outside one's window.

You should hate this man, Alexandros. So, why the hell don't you feel anything but sympathy? If you had heard about something like that on the news, you would have started laughing and mocking the poor guy, in a manner of underlining that he must have deserved it. You will start with despising the complexity of his Muslim-gay identity, that could cost him a humiliating death "back there", or, who knows, even a sex-change operation. And, of course, you would declare your

disappointment, as the Greek authorities are feeling sorry for such people and don't send them back to their countries.

That might have happened if he had seen it on TV or on the Internet (of course he would have left some ironic comment in that case).

But it's different now. Now he has seen the victim with his own eyes, and he doesn't look ferocious or even dirty. He has heard his cries, and those were human, not of some kind of species inferior to homo sapiens. He had smelled the odor of this man's body – he didn't stink. He had touched that body, and it was not different. Neither were his wounds, or...

Well, his blood is still on his floor tiles.

He's human. He has weight. He exists. That makes the difference.

10 | AWAKENING

It was almost 7:00 in the morning when Nassa rang Alexandros' bell. She usually doesn't read her text messages so early, she was just waiting for any kind of news from Nikos, regarding her dead client's autopsy. Of course, she was realistic enough not to expect that some strong proof connecting the murder to her husband would come up, and still, she could not explain why Menelaos would be such a jerk to organize something like this the day before the trial, knowing what everybody would instantly think about the motivation of this crime.

Well, after Alexandros first phrase after "Good morning, thank you for coming", she was no longer thinking about her own troubles. She just remembered why she divorced him.

"No, I can't tell you if there's still time for you to go to work. No, I couldn't come earlier, I had a hard night too. No, I don't have much time, so, first call sick at your job and then tell me what happened."

She knew that he was in trouble, she could see it from that well-known shadow of anxiety on his face,

and of course the trembling of his fingers. What she still could not tell was if that was something more serious than worrying whether the phone company would cut off his connection because he forgot to pay the bill once more.

“Well, that sounds really weird”.

That was her first reaction. She had the experience of female rape cases, but male rape is something that doesn't happen (or doesn't reach a lawyers' eye) as often. This thing didn't make any sense, though she thought it was quite ironic that a person like Alexandros is in the middle of something like that.

“Can I go to work now? Do you think I can lock him up and ...”

“Do you want to get in more trouble? Holding a victim of rape against his will, locked inside your house, can certainly offer you the privilege of becoming the major suspect, my dear...”

“I'm not holding him against his will. I saved his life, God damn it”.

“Do you think he might need medical care? You said he was bleeding...”

“He didn't want to. He's illegal”.

“I see... Can I see him?”

“Yes... Please...”

The room seemed very peaceful. They found him sound asleep when Alexandros unlocked the door... In the light of the day, they could both see his face.

“People are like angels when they sleep”, Nassa said.

“Indeed...”

Alexandros felt that he was seeing him for the first time. Last night he was just a heap of bruises and scars, a terrified face, with his hair tangled all over his

face...Now he can see his face, without that depiction of enormous fear bruising it.

“For an Arab, he’s a handsome guy – he looks like a kind person” Alexandros murmured.

“Why do you always have to remind me of your racist self? You could have just said he looks nice and kind”.

She understood what a giant leap was for her ex to offer help to an unknown victim of violence. It’s something completely off –schedule, one of those things that she knew Alexandros could not handle.

“So, you don’t know anything about him”.

“Just his name. He’s Darius. He is illegal. And he was raped”.

“Probably by some people of similar ideas to you, dear”.

“Nassa, I just saved this man’s life”.

“But you would feel much better if he was not Arab”.

“Well, maybe I would, but shouldn’t this be somewhat of an argument in my favor?”

“Should we wake him up? There’s a pile of things waiting for me at work”.

“Well, my client for today’s trial was murdered yesterday, Alex. Don’t you think I might be a little busy as well... But this is serious.”

“Okay, okay”.

She could feel his state of panic – like a bunch of shattered glass flying around the room. She knew his panic very well.

“Did he have anything with him, a phone or anything?”

“How should I know? I found him completely naked and bleeding.”

She wasn't listening. She was just staring at the guy.

"Oh God, you have his hand tied all night. Wasn't his torture enough? Wasn't locking him up enough?"

"It's alright... I'm fine".

Darius had woken up. Nassa went close to him to untie his hands.

"I'm Darius".

"Listen, Darius. I'm a lawyer. Those bastards that did this to you won't get away with this. You should testify against them. I can help you and you shouldn't be afraid."

Alexandros went close and offered Darius a handshake.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Alexandros. And this is Athanasia, my ex-wife. She's a lawyer, but I guess she already told you. I'm sorry for tying you up. I didn't know..."

"Oh God, you tied his feet too..."

Nassa couldn't believe it when she saw Darius untying his feet with his free hands.

"It's OK. I understand."

While trying to get up, an expression of pain shook Darius's face.

"You should see a doctor", Alexandros said. "Maybe you've broken something... And... yesterday... you were bleeding..."

"I'm so sorry for all this trouble and mess... I really should clean this up... And those sheets, and the clothes you gave me... I really should wash everything. I'm so grateful."

This was an extremely awkward feeling of devastation for Darius. Everything that had happened to him was so unreal. But pain and humiliation were terribly real, and he couldn't stand this.

“Can I use your bathroom please?”

“Yes, go ahead, it’s that door on your left. Feel free to take a shower... and please tell us if you need anything”.

For a second, Nassa had forgotten that this wasn’t her house anymore, but she’s sure Alexandros would say the same.

They were both watching him walking slowly towards the bathroom door. It was obvious that he was in pain. But it became more obvious when they heard him crying... it was way louder than he thought, certainly louder than falling water in the shower.

11 | AN AWKWARD SCHOLAR

It was beyond any doubt that Darius needed professional support. At the same time, it was even more obvious that, for many reasons, he could not afford that luxury. He didn't stay in the bathroom for long. He could have stayed there crying for ages, but he thought it was inappropriate to spill so much water just to prevent the others from hearing him.

But those minutes under the shower were equivalent to a heavy hailstorm of thoughts banging on his body – making the pain even harder. He didn't know what to do. He was afraid to step outside this man's door, but he knew he couldn't stay for long. He was feeling repeatedly all this violence and brutality all over his body. He couldn't explain a damn thing. Was he paying for something his boss did? Was this the end, or just a warning? He couldn't tell if those people wanted him dead or simply scared to death. How could someone use such means to send a message?

“I shall return you the clothes as soon as they're washed, sir...”

“You shouldn’t mind that, man”.

Alexandros still didn’t know how to handle this. Thank God Nassa was here.

“I insist we visit some therapist. I have a friend of mine that can see you and tell us if there’s more to be done, or if you need any kind of medication... I don’t know much about what you’ve been through, Darius, but it must have been very traumatic. You can’t go through this by yourself.”

She was determined to do what she could, but our willingness to offer means nothing if the other is reluctant to accept it. Darius was not just reluctant. He didn’t want to accept anything like that. But he was still scared of everything.

“I know... But if I get arrested, I’m in trouble... I don’t have any papers”.

“Do you have anybody here in Greece? Do you have anywhere to go?”

Of course, he had a place. He was living in a small basement near Omonia square, a twenty square meters little apartment with the basics. One bed, one chair, one table to eat, a small hotel room fridge and an electric oven. All the bare necessities one could use for a happy luxurious living. The neighborhood was a total mess but that was the best he could afford. His most valuable belongings were his books, and this was something that nobody would feel the temptation to steal. They are heavy, they are rather cheap, nobody is buying.

“Yes, I have a place”.

Alexandros had made breakfast, and Nassa told Darius that he should take that advantage since it was the first time that she was seeing her ex-husband preparing something hopefully edible.

Deep down she knew that this was meant to impress her, not Darius. Alex was praying inside that this strange Arab guy shall leave his house as soon as possible. Actually, there was a slight possibility that he could go to work after all.

“Any relatives here?”

Nassa knew that most of the illegal immigrants were initially invited by some relatives, but Darius responded that he was alone in town. He had come to Greece with his mom and siblings, but they left for Germany a few years ago. He remained here to continue his studies.

“So, you are a student Darius”.

Alexandros was rather impressed. He thought that people like Darius were just unqualified unemployed people that were trying to survive by working in the fields or in construction works for less money than our own Greek youngsters, and of course they were stealing our Greek jobs. The other possibility was that Darius was just a jobless little thief. In both cases, he didn't belong to this country, especially now that most Greeks are unemployed and living under the threshold of poverty. So Darius was studying. Well, he could be lying.

“I'm studying classics. Ancient Greek... I have finished my master's degree and hopefully I'll begin a PhD”.

Nassa was really enjoying the moment. All the stupid stereotypes that were growing like palm trees inside Alexandros head were collapsing. But she couldn't help thinking that this man, her own man, was always ready to utter something completely and annoyingly foolish.

“Well, I appreciate that, Darius... but... I'm just

wondering... how useful could this be for someone from Iran? I mean, no offense, but... how do you expect to make a living out of it... of course it's a brilliant choice...I wish I had done this too when I was your age... but I really can't find a reason...you know..."

"That's what my mom and siblings were telling me, actually... but you know, I love that culture so much... Sometimes I dream that I could be like Herodotus, the historian, who traveled so much and described all those ancient civilizations."

"Well," Nassa said, of course Herodotus' death should be excluded from your daydream.

Nassa and Darius started laughing and Alexandros could not tell why, and of course that pissed him off a little bit.

"Well, it looks like my end could be worse than his," said Darius and his face darkened somehow. Herodotus died...explained Nassa to Alex.

"Of course, I knew that". How could it be possible that this Arab knew more than he did about Greek culture?

"Speaking of which, Darius, if you feel like talking... I mean not the details of what happened outside this door. I can understand that you don't or can't talk about it right now.

... But you should trust us...These people must be punished for what they did, and we must be certain that they won't do this again to anyone.

"I don't want them... I don't know why ..."

Alexandros wanted to contribute to the conversation, as usual, in a rather catastrophic way. "Were they not some clients of yours or anything..."

"Clients?"

Nassa knew that Alex could destroy everything, and make that poor guy feel more humiliated. She nodded to Alex to stop asking such questions, but, alas, he didn't seem to understand.

"I've heard that men of your kind sometimes ...you know... are forced to have intercourse by their clients". Alexandros knew very well that around Omonia square a huge flesh market was in bloom, while most legal enterprises were in total decline. He knew that many respected Athenians were cruising the area to find young illegal immigrants that could offer them a blowjob for less than five euros, even for a hamburger with French fries.

Nassa tried once more to save this, but Darius had understood. "Mr. Alex, even if I was one of these kids... I wouldn't deserve this. Nobody deserves such a thing... "

"Please, Darius, listen to me. I'm sorry for what Alex just said, and I'm sure he never meant to offend you."

Alex's face had turned reddish...

"I'm so sorry...I just assumed that... you know... I've seen so many things happening around here in these last few years. You know it wasn't always like this... there was a time when this was a really trendy spot in Athens. Big stores, modern blocks of flats, theaters and cafés... now everything has changed..."

Nassa suspected that Alex was totally capable of making things even worse, and it was not the best thing to do to win this young man's trust.

"I know Mr. Alex... a few years ago I did some research on Athens...you know, comparing the city of the classical Athenians with the modern one."

Nassa thought it was rather awkward to discuss

such things the morning after somebody was brutally raped, but this is a typical posttraumatic reaction... he was trying to remember something good that could keep him standing still.

But they had to find out what happened. “Darius...was someone threatening you... were there any kind of signs that warned you of an attack... or... were you in any kind of trouble? Please, don't consider this an interrogation. I believe you can understand that all I want is to find some way to help and support you.” Nassa could feel the agony in his eyes and his trembling limbs.

“I have no enemies... I don't know who they were or why they did this. I'm not a prostitute, I'm just a delivery boy... I didn't recognize any of those... and I didn't understand a thing of what they said...”.

“So, could it be a racist assault?”

“I don't know...my Greek is rather good”.

Alexandros' intervention was another step to break any kind of bond Nassa was trying to build...

“Well, your Greek is good, but one could tell you're not Greek... you look like somebody from the Middle East... you know, your hair is darker, your skin...”

“Could you just shut the...”

Nassa looked furious, but Darius didn't seem to care.

“It's OK... Well, I really don't think this was their motive. It was dark enough for them to see that I was a little darker...”

And he smiled. Can you believe it? What kind of person are you Darius... Despite Nassa's hopes, Alexandros wanted to take the investigation in his own hands.

“So... could it possibly be a homophobic assault...I

mean...No offense... I don't know if you're..."

"Homosexual?"

Nassa thought that should stop right away.

"Darius...please, you don't have to answer this..."

"Last night.... I was a virgin...It's common for a Muslim to be a virgin before wedding... Now... I'm not anymore. Am I considered homosexual?"

Nassa tried to fix everything, though that seemed impossible. She explained. There were two things that had to be done. One, trying to help Darius get back on his feet again. And two, assist the authorities to find and punish these bastards. Rape is a serious crime, and they should get what they deserve...

For Alexandros' it was shocking to hear that this man was a virgin, at least until he was raped. He didn't say anything after this revelation... Was it that his own plot of this entire thing, the one that he had formed and edited for the entire night, was turned upside down? Who could tell? Was he shocked by the fact that a young man like him had no sexual activity... of course he could be lying? But if he wasn't, this is a totally tragic situation... and a quite interesting alteration of Alexandros' feelings towards an illegal foreigner, one of those thousands that had invaded his country, stolen Greek people's jobs, multiplied like rabbits and threatened to conquer the western world and gradually transform it to a pan-Islamic universe, according to his own theory of international relations, which was actually a very popular view in the country, especially in Athens and the big cities, where those migrants arrived looking for their own place in this European world, or just trying to find a way to flee to the wealthiest countries, like Germany, or even better, the Nordic countries. What the hell were they doing

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

here, what could they want from this country that was in the turmoil of a crisis so deep that she couldn't feed her own children?

But in Darius's case this scenario could not fit at all. Who are you, mother fucker? And why cannot I hate you as I should?

12 | THE POWER OF FEAR AND HATRED

How did an easygoing, kind, lawful and dutiful citizen like Alexandros' end up voting for a far-right party that was accused of organizing small scale pogroms against immigrants in the center of Athens, but even for having substantial bonds with neo-Nazi parties and groups all around Europe? To answer the question, one could check the latest election results. Almost half a million Greeks had voted for them, and of course there couldn't be so many Adolf's admirers in a country that had much more than half a million victims during nazi occupation. Many people like Alexandros voted for them, not only once, not just to demonstrate against the other political parties that had led the country to bankruptcy, through a corrupted administration that had lasted three decades. This wasn't just a vote of anger and frustration. Not even a way to demonstrate their lack of trust to mainstream parties.

For most of these people it was a vote of hatred.

Hatred that was an immediate impact of fear. Fear for what was coming after the elimination of a status quo that was collapsing a few years after they mistakenly thought it was on his. Zenith point.

Alexandros was not one of those who had lost their jobs or closed their enterprises because of the crisis. He was working for the state, and in Greece it's impossible to lose your job if you're a public servant. Even if you practically have no duties, the State must find something for you to do, it simply cannot fire you. Of course, his salary was now lower enough to make it harder for him to cover children's expenses, but he could manage to survive. He was living alone, he had no loan installments to pay, he wasn't the type of guy that liked fancy cars or clothes, he hated to travel, his television set was twenty years old, and he couldn't understand why on earth it is necessary to buy a flat screen one if that old battle ax was still working fine. He didn't have a car, you don't need to sleep with a few thousand euros parked outside your house, waiting for someone to steal it. He didn't even have a computer at home, just a cheap tablet to check the news and the weather on the Internet. His most expensive luxuries were cinema and CDs, but who needs CDs right now that everything is on YouTube?

Considering that Alexandros didn't seem so brutally affected by the crisis, could it be something else that led him to the far right.?

Could this be a legacy that was coming straightforward from his ancestors?

A sleeping sparkle of fascism that was waiting for the right moment to scratch Alexandros' civil surface and cover his ego with rage and his heart with the poison of hatred? Nah... of course the past cannot be

erased, no matter if you have experienced it or not, it always finds a way to define you with some of its leftovers. But not for Alexandros. He knew that his place in this Ministry was a result of this past, a past that wasn't even his own. But at the same time, he was devoted to his duties with passion, trying to prove every day to himself that he was worthy of the opportunity that some others had offered to him. So, it was more a kind of reverse motivation than a hatred machine.

Well, sometimes the bonds with the wider sense of the past could create the conditions for hatred to appear and grow. A part of his devotion was due to his strong belief that as a civil servant he offers himself to his country. Greece. The country that his ancestors offered their blood for. The country that, despite its current decadence carries the burden of a sublime culture, a culture that had enlightened humanity with its incredible achievements. This sublime was filling his spirit with a very comforting sense of supremacy.

Supremacy. That red button that can trigger hatred before you know this happened.

What was there for Alexandros' to be proud of? His own achievements? Though he was serving Greece, he was smart enough to know that typing documents and pressing stamps is a social role that of course is necessary for the state to function, but it is not exactly a position that can make the difference. He was not really proud of his career or his academic background. He hasn't been successful with his role as a father and husband. Well, if he had, his wife and children would still have lived in his house. But they're not. Regarding his personal life after Nassa, it was rather a city without houses, roads, just an empty central square with a small

store with himself on the cashier, waiting in vain for a client to get in, in fact without even giving a shit if nobody enters.

There was only one aspect of his personality that he could actually be proud of... "Say it loud, I'm Greek and I'm proud."

That was the only thing that he could lean upon without feeling mediocre or, even worse, a total loser. That was his only quality that was undoubtedly magnificent. He spoke an ancient language, he lived among the remains of a supreme period of culture, art, philosophy, though he knew only a few things about all these. Of course, it's awkward to feel proud of something you know very little about, especially when these very little come mostly from controversial internet pages of really low accuracy. But this feeling of pride can sweep over those details. You feel pride because you should feel, and your culture is above every other culture, because this is the only thing in your world that can be attractive and admirable.

If one's name can declare his place in this world, Alexandros' had the ideal name. The name of a conqueror who had half the then known world under his control in his middle twenties. Of course, our Alexandros was fifty and he hadn't conquered anything at all, but a name always meant something...he strongly believed that this name was a message from beyond beyond that he's meant for something great, though the message was not truly clear about what kind of greatness he was destined for.

So, there you go... finding something worthwhile in yourself is obviously a motive for your self-esteem to reach a higher level. An achievement that is not yours is more likely to be underestimated. But in his

case, just like a fallen aristocrat would be proud of his family crest, Alexandros Greekness was his own precious ring that should be well preserved and protected from potential thieves. And now the thieves were here.

All those immigrants that were probably the majority in this area of Athens were the resemblance of this enemy in his eyes. They were different from those who had arrived since the early nineties from Balkan or ex-Communist states. These people had a different everyday lifestyle, their language was weird, their skin was weird, they weren't even Christians. They were renting cheap basements in old blocks of flats that proved to be truly little to accommodate their big families. Many of them were even homeless or jobless, they were hanging around without doing nothing, their hygiene was sometimes unacceptable for European standards, or at least he thought so. He hates the smell of urine outside his door, and although he certainly had no means to define its ethnicity, he attributed it to all those bastards that came from nowhere to this country that suffers from such a crisis, so what the hell are they doing here other than being part of a wider plan to conquer and destroy Greece without guns. Maybe it was Turkey behind them, well of course. They shouldn't send Turkish people to inhabit Greece in the first place. Their front line would be other Muslims, to prepare the field for the real conquerors. Mehmed the Conqueror had done that in 1453, when he ordered the bashi-bazouks to attack Constantinople first, before sending his own soldiers; he has read that somewhere on the Internet. Thank God that the Internet exists. This is the only way to find information that he wouldn't be able to have

access to on mainstream media.

This is where he was reading about all the criminal activity of these people. He suspected their nature was wild and uncivilized by their everyday manners, but to be honest he hadn't seen anyone of them committing a crime. But he was reading terrible things about gangs of burglars, drug dealers, about prostitution, sexual assaults to women, but what was the most serious of all was that they were becoming more and more, in a few years they would be outnumber us, Athens will be a city of Muslims, not orthodox Greeks. This was a terrifying threat for him, as he felt he would be the only Greek living in a small house in the center of Athens with thousands of Muslims living in overcrowded blocks of flats all around him. When his wife and children left him, this solitude was choking him even more, though he was admitting that becoming so paranoid about his theories of Muslim threatens and war of cultures had accelerated Nassa's decision to divorce him.

Now he was feeling like a deserted soldier in a small guard, with the enemy all around him. What was he fighting for now that his wife and children had left him? Well, maybe those people were the reason that they left him, not his paranoiac fears. Of course... These people were responsible for losing his family. This is probably a part of their bigger plan. Dissolve the traditional Greek family ties, make the Greek family disappear and at the same time give birth to countless Arab children, your future warriors. They won't even need a war to conquer your little house. Your warrior, your own son, has left it. And now all they were waiting for is you to get old and die, so there will be no one to guard your ultimate belonging. Your

own house.

After the 9/11 attack he was feeling that his theories might have a realistic basis, but then the Greek internet was not either popular or developed enough to offer space to conspiracy theories. But in the 2010s when the Greek crisis had begun, most Greeks preferred the Internet for their news updates, in most cases without being able to distinguish between reliable websites and fake news resources. In a couple of years, he discovered Facebook, where he found it really easier to connect with and participate in groups that shared the same enthusiasm and concern about the threatening new world order that was ahead, of course totally ruled by the Muslims. This was the time when he started using Facebook groups and posts as his only source of information, as he considered this the only way to learn the truth that all media were hiding.

The Internet now was becoming full of conspiracy theories and just clicking on the share button was an extraordinarily effortless way to spread any kind of rumor across the country, or even the entire planet. These rumors, constructed upon a mixture of evidence and imagination, have eternally one thing in common. They spread fear across societies. But in human communities fear doesn't work the way it does in other species, sheep for example. Sheep run away and hide from the unknown threat. Humans invented hatred to defend themselves from fear. This hatred is not necessarily against what has caused this fear. In fact, if you're scared of something a lot, you don't have the guts to confront it. You find other ways to express your fear and anger, focusing on creatures you can easily and (hopefully) successfully deal with.

For Alexandros' this hatred was not expressed with

actions. He never liked violence, but he discovered himself approving some of its forms, especially when this violence was in his own mind justified... he silently accepted all that hate speech and the violence against illegal immigrants that was becoming increasingly popular, mostly in Athens and big towns. The far right was already the third party in the last elections. This could mean that, in the middle of this devastating crisis, it was quite possible that its power could rise more.

Alexandros' never took part in the pogroms. But he considered them actions of defense against a widening threat. He was never a member of the far-right party, but he was one of the half million Greeks that had voted for them, not just once, so it couldn't be a vote of anger, it was an obvious choice. He couldn't tell that he didn't know who those people were, he had seen them marching on the streets at nights holding torches, he knew of their neo-Nazi past and present. He knew that the headline of their campaign was that all illegal immigrants should be expelled, and all jobs should return to the hands of native Greeks. That easy going, kind and peaceful man, who was a shining example of a public servant was voting for the far right and approving their violent methods.

This was so confusing. Last night he offered shelter to one of these people that could well have been a victim of a racist attack. One of those he was secretly applauding.

Is this man a whore? Could that be some kind of revenge by his pump? Well, in this case, he had taken a substantial risk, and he was paying for it. But he said he's not a whore.

And that awkward feeling when Alexandros was trying to carry the naked Darius around the house. It's

been a long time since he had touched a naked body. And the last one was probably Nassa. After their divorce his sex life literally didn't exist, apart from some rather boring efforts to masturbate while watching soft porn movies on the Internet. He was rather romantic, plus, hardcore porn was rather making him more miserable. How could he compete with these studs with those enormous penises? Plus, he liked to watch a plot in such films, not just fuck and go.

This time it was so weird that he should definitely blame himself for feeling a little aroused by the warmth of the body he was carrying. You don't always control your body reactions, and this was annoying him. Well, it can't be. He's a man. Well, not a real man, if he's homosexual he doesn't count as a man. That made him feel a little better. Maybe he was aroused by all this suspense around the issue. Yes, that's it. He's always thrilled by danger, and this was indeed a dangerous situation. That explains everything.

Maybe, he thought, this was something even more, another thing that he should blame himself for. Maybe he thought that he would like to be a part of this gang that kicked this guy's ass. Though he could never become a rapist, he might enjoy punching that guy, because, obviously, he would have done something offensive in the first place.

But was that defense? He couldn't accept that a male rape is an act of defense. They could have taught him a lesson without going to extremes.

And now that they've talked a little... it seems that all those thoughts and scenarios cannot fit. Who are you Darius? Well, it's better if he'd leave the house as soon as possible without learning anything more.

13 | A MAJOR ISSUE

The news about his wife's murder was spread all over Menelaos enterprises. To be more accurate, he did not exactly own some kind of company, but his network was offering protection to many night clubs on the Athenian Riviera. Half the people were claiming that he was responsible for the murder, the rest were claiming that it must have been a kind of revenge, or even a warning issued by his competitors for something even worse yet to come.

His reaction was, as expected, ambiguous. He remained silent for about two minutes and then asked everyone to leave the office, but before that they should check that all payments of the day were properly received. This was his own view of corporate social responsibility. He was the boss of about a hundred people in the Athenian nightlife, so no matter what was happening with his personal life, the normality of business should not be affected by anything.

He didn't shed a tear, at least not in front of anyone

or anything alive, but after the funeral he insisted on staying at the graveyard alone to talk to his wife, those were his exact words. Even his personal guards, a luxury he couldn't risk avoiding, were asked to stay outside the graveyard. But deep inside, even in these last moments with her he knew he didn't have the privilege to speak out loud, or cry. That annoying feeling that someone is always watching, no matter if it's the police, your competitors or even your wife or her lover, was always there. Always. All through their wedding, in every situation, he was never alone, and he never would be. So, his choice was to stay there for a while, next to his wife's permanent address, totally silent. He would allow nothing to come out of his chest. Because he had to look strong 24/7. Or maybe because he didn't give a damn about what happened to her? Or because he was probably the reason?

Menelaos wasn't really a handsome man, just a mediocre elegantly dressed gentleman with dark hair, unaffected by age, and a mustache that looked like Clark Gables. This mustache was the only clue in his appearance that might give a touch of evil on the face of a common businessperson in his early 60s. He was rather short to be impressive, but he was in quite decent shape. He used to be a bodybuilder in the 80s but had second thoughts about all those hormones he had to consume, so he gave up his career before risking dying from all these steroids in his mid-thirties. He never gave up training though... what his late wife had confessed to Nassa was that she was enchanted by his strong body. Being almost twenty centimeters taller than him, he was like the miniature of Hercules that she thought she could find safety and warmth with. Well, that was not exactly the case, and she found out

about that really soon. Her hopefully cozy family shelter was in fact a luxurious cage of abuse and lies, written all over Menelaos muscular body.

Nassa believed her side of the story. It was a typical case of a *femme perdue* that got married to the mob, just to survive. At least, according to her testimony, when she decided to file charges against Menelaos for domestic abuse. It was that eternally repeating pattern of non-consenting intercourse, with some physical abuse that should certainly be worse than the bruises on her shoulders that Nassa had the chance to see. In his own aesthetic code Menelaos had some red lines. Never smack, never hit her on the face. He adored her face, he demanded that she should always wear a bright smile. He had also given her money to whiten her teeth. Her face was in a way sacred, while the rest of her body symbolized the sinner that was meant to be punished just for existing in this world. This was beyond any kind of evidence.

But now she is dead. The trial would continue, and things could get worse for him. Who wouldn't suspect that he was behind her murder? Of course, he had something strong to contradict this common belief. "Even the fact that I'm the main suspect is some kind of proof that I am not guilty. Because if I was guilty, it would be very obvious that I organized this. A person like me would not make a mistake like this. So, it's perfectly clear that I didn't do it". This rather awkward argument made absolute sense to him, but there was one thing that he was afraid of. One person that would do everything to send him to prison. And that person was that bitch Nassa, that diabolical lawyer that his late wife had found. This was definitely a major issue.

14 | PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Darius was now wearing some of Alex's old clothes... "I used to be in better shape a while ago, now I really cannot fit in them. No, you shouldn't bother bringing them back... I should have donated them to the church a long time ago".

"So, you can still donate them. I'll wash them and bring them back to you...I feel so grateful for all those things you do for me...Besides..."

"Besides what?"

"You know, if you give them to the church, somebody might need them more than I do, and probably you should..."

"No, it's fine. Absolutely fine... You know what, Darius? I am sorry for what I had assumed for you".

"It's OK... I could have been one of these guys... money could come easier, you know. But it wouldn't be me. I just can't. I cannot blame anyone for doing this, but I just can't".

"You know... I... I just don't like strangers a lot, Darius, so I might have been, or still be, a little

prejudiced against you. Maybe, if you put yourself in my place, you might feel the same. People from another country, of another totally different culture come here and our life is changing... And, you know, we cannot offer you what you're looking for, because we're in a deep crisis”.

“I got what I wanted... I wanted to study this country... and you offered me what I needed. I could have been dead, and you opened your door to me... how could I forget that?”

“Listen, Darius... I must confess that I was scared too... and that...when you told me your name...”

“Well, I guess you wished you'd never opened the door. That's fine ... I can understand that”.

“Listen, Darius, maybe you're a saint, I don't know you, I really don't. Maybe I am totally wrong about you.

“You are wrong. I'm not a Saint. I'm as saint as you are, and of course as sinner as you are. I could be a little more of a sinner. You have every right to be afraid of somebody you have never met. What I think makes the difference is that it's Ok to feel awkward about the unknown, the problem starts when one feels awkward with certain unknowns. I cannot blame you; I just can't feel the same. You know, I was scared too when I first got here, I was told not to trust anyone and, maybe it was not bad advice, but at some point, I decided that you cannot live a life feeling that someone will take advantage of the trust you are showing. You know what...I'm really thankful that I trusted someone who wouldn't trust me, and that someone treated me with much more kindness and hospitality without even trusting me. Can I hug you sir?”

Nassa was impatiently waiting for this conversation to end. A few minutes ago, she had persuaded Darius

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

to talk to a lawyer. Well, he didn't totally refuse to visit a physician to get tested for HIV, or any other possible infection.

The two men, the quiet racist and the scholarly illegal immigrant hugged. A sincere thank you was the only phrase that was heard before Darius followed Nassa to the psychologist. .

15 | A GEM WITH DEMONS

Tony had disappeared since the day of Judy's funeral. No, he hadn't shown up, at least not officially, that would be like tying himself on an electric chair. He couldn't face Menelaos' rage, or at least the rage he was expecting by a man against his late wife's lover.

Tony and Judy were lovers. For Tony it was a secret honor that he kept only for himself. The poor boy from Albania that was making out with the boss's wife. Deep down, it was more serious than a trophy for his lifetime achievement. Judy was a very honest lady, who looked for and found shelter in his tattooed arms, a warm pillow on his shaved chest. And of course, a secret that filled her heart with guilt, to such an extent that sometimes she even justified her husband's violence as a fair punishment for her adultery. But that excuse is so irrational that a few hours later she was blaming herself again for forgiving her husband's cruelty.

At the same time, Tony was faithful and respectful to his boss, with the sole exclusion of having an affair

with his wife. He was handsome, he liked fancy clothes, and beautiful women and Judy was indeed a beauty drowned in grief. Grief for an indefinite misfortune, for a life that she couldn't have the slightest control over. He spent a couple of hours every other day at the gym, always counting on the fact that a well-shaped body can sometimes be more attractive than the routine of living with a rich but intolerant and abusive husband. He found that his affair with Judy was his own little personal revolution, showing the victory of the vigorous spring against the middle aged but rich enough to enjoy whatever he wanted.

Tony admired his boss... it's nice to be working for somebody that resembles what you want to be in thirty years, in terms of power and wealth. Menelaos had everything that Tony was fantasizing he'd achieve one day, but he was also very respected by various kinds of people. First, by his own kind of people, the "professors of the night", as Menelaos had named all those who were behind a wide range of activities regarding the Athenian nightlife that were most of the time jumping inside and outside the margins of legality. Nobody dared confront Menelaos and nobody wanted to be considered his enemy. This is why Tony was terrified to think of his boss's possible reaction to finding out that one of his best night boys was fucking his wife. He had heard stories that nobody would confirm about the several kinds of Menelaos revenge on his unfaithful colleagues. But the tattooed night boy was so passionate about that charmingly sad lady that he was determined to take this chance. He was more of a lover than a mobster, and this was the time that he was feeling his end was coming, right after his beloved Judy's death. This was so weird. He always thought that

he couldn't live for one day if he ever lost her, but look at him now, it's been a few days and he's still alive, and, even worse, he spends a lot more of his time thinking about his possibility to survive than mourning for the woman he was sleeping with a few days ago. Everything was over and meaningless. He had promised her that he'd stand by her side during the trial against her husband, though he knew that could turn him into a moving target for many of his co-night boys, but that lawyer, Nassa, had promised him witness protection for both of them. But now nothing matters anymore. Judy's dead, everything he's ever loved is dead.

Well, practically not everything. Tony was hiding in a friend's attic. He was in his underwear, swiping pictures of Judy, with his eyes red and a gun under his pillow. On the floor, a bottle of vodka, unopened. He wasn't going to drink, though that might help a little to forget that he didn't even have the chance to say goodbye to Judy, he couldn't even go to her funeral. But he should remain sober because his life was at risk anytime. And he had tried really hard to get to this point, to resign from any kind of defense. Maybe he should find a way to contact Nassa again, there were so many things that didn't make sense to him. For example, what the hell had happened with that guy they kidnapped in front of his eyes...he was convinced they were looking for him, maybe it was a warning for him. An act of hazing that would humiliate him and make him return to the boss on his knees and beg for mercy.

Darius may have never consented to visit the hospital, but after a long talk he accepted Nassa's proposal to speak to a psychologist. Though she had omitted to tell him one small detail. That the guy was

someone he knew very well. She was hoping that maybe he would be persuaded to testify against those people, but, even if he finally did not, his information would be precious for finding out who they were, if they were another racist group that attacked immigrants or some kind of revenge between gangs. There was certainly a close connection between racists and drug dealers, so any piece of the puzzle that could come to surface could be helpful. Plus, despite her compassion for what Darius had gone through, there was always some kind of doubt in the back of her head. What if that kind and loveable person was a part of something less innocent than his face?

“Nassa, he’s totally devastated. Though it seems that he has been a victim of violence a few more times. Since he was a little child, he was abused. And ever since he came to Greece, he was repeatedly abused. Physically and verbally. And sexually. This was the first time he was raped, but he told me that there were many times that he was harassed or even humiliated....”

“You mean by fascists?”

“Mostly. But also, by immigrants like him. He’s not the typical role model of a young Muslim man, though he seems religious. But he also adores western culture and he’s open minded, and this is something that no kind of fanatic could ever accept, even when it comes to people of your own nation. Besides, don’t forget that what nation isn’t as strong as devotion to faith in the Arab world. He’s a Shia, and some fanatics hate Shiites more than Christians. Hatred sometimes happens inside the borders of the same nation....”

“Do you think he’s in some kind of trouble?”

“I think that he’s really scared of somebody or some people, but I couldn’t unlock this drawer... He was

somehow avoiding giving me more details. He's scared. This for sure. Somebody is holding him and therefore he's been forced to do things he really feels guilty about.

"Such as..."

"I suspect they have made him deliver drugs to parties. He works as a delivery guy for a burger house that also offers catering to events. "

"Did he confess that?"

"Of course not. He told me who he's working for, and I did some research. Of course, we don't have any kind of proof, but it looks like some of the details seem to match. He told me that sometimes he delivers packages of gifts to the events. Of course, he is not allowed to work as a waiter here, his skin is rather dark for high society galas, but he is asked to carry packages and then clean. And those gifts that he considers enterprise gifts are delivered by him to the party planner. They come to the burger house packed, and that is delivered packed.

"You know what," Nassa said. "I cannot believe that a man of his intelligence is not aware of what he's doing. Or at least suspect."

"I agree. This is why he's so scared. He believes that this last thing was some kind of warning against him, or even his boss. He thinks he's helpless... Because it looks like this is one step of a series of events. They have threatened him many times, in several ways. He said they had stripped him naked another time when one of those "gifts" was accidentally lost. He swore to Allah he had nothing to do with it, but they couldn't believe him, or at least they said so. So, they forced him to take off all his clothes to search him. And that was in front of all his co-workers after that event. They

found nothing of course but that didn't prevent them from taking naked pics of him.”

“But who were they?”

“Probably his boss' people. Let's call them his supervisors. The ones that must check that the job is done and correct any mistakes”.

So, it looks like our innocent scholar has something to hide, and he's in deep shit. What Nassa has fantasized, saving the life of an innocent victim and providing her legal services in order to punish the racist bastards that did that to him, was not exactly the point. Darius is nice and didn't deserve to be raped, no one does, no matter how deep is the trouble he's into.

“There's another thing Nassa... He needs to take an HIV test. He said they raped him without any kind of protection. And we don't really know what he's been through before.”

“He said he was a virgin... That it was his first time”.

“He probably meant his first penetration... But it looks like he has some experience in fellatio. Though he doesn't consider this as sex”.

“Do you believe he did that for a living? Because he denied that when Alex implied that he was in that kind of business”.

“No... He did that to please his property owner when he couldn't pay his rent... At least that is what he told me... And sometimes he did that with co students as part of an experiment based on Plato's Symposium.”

Everything sounded so weird. Of course, he could be lying. But it was quite possible that he was telling the truth. But now the image of a helpless rape victim that has been in the wrong place at the wrong time was

shattered in pieces. Nassa had believed that morning, when he saw him sleeping like an angel in Alex's bedroom, that Darius was the ideal client that she has always been looking for. Well, surprise, he's not an angel, so what? He didn't deserve what happened to him. If he has committed crimes he can pay together with his bosses. In any case, he could still help.

"Are you going to see him again?. I know I'm asking too much from you, I know you should never have told me what he has said to you, but I think you understand it's particularly important for me. You know that... I suspect this entire thing might be connected to Menelaos."

"Wait, are you telling me you didn't know in the first place?"

"Didn't know what?"

"The burger house he told me he was working for, and the catering company, are two of Menelaos' legal enterprises... they're officially owned by an offshore company, but they belong to him."

This was getting more interesting. That's why she adores this man. It wasn't just a matter of physical attraction. He was a friend, a lover and a work companion that would never let her down. Confident, honest, smart and truthful. Of course, he was a cop. And she never liked cops in general. She could recall herself yelling against cops in huge demonstrations or being chased by them when things turned out to be more controversial. But he was a man she could lean on the same way he knew he could lean on her. He had indeed studied psychology, but he was working as a negotiator for the Hellenic police. So, she just had told half the truth to Darius when she literally begged him to consult an expert in psychology.

“Do you think he needs more professional help?”

“Definitely. He’s not suicidal, but he cannot get over it on his own. He’s really intelligent. I’m impressed by his knowledge. He has a very stoic way to overcome what life brings in front of him, but this is too much. This was violent and brutal. Those people are monsters, and we’ll find them.:

Nassa knew he would do his best to investigate this. A victim of rape is not necessary to file charges himself, the State is entitled to open the case. This is why she had to use this little lie. Now the state knows, no matter if Darius believes that he hasn’t spoken to the authorities.

“Shall you see him again? I know this is too much to ask...”

“If I see him again, we must tell him the whole truth. That he’s speaking to a cop psychologist... It is quite unprofessional to hide things from him, this could damage the spirit of trust that has been created between all of us”.

“Do you think he’s as nice as he looks?”

“He’s a gem. But he has his demons too.”

16 | CONFESSIONS

Darius was walking towards his home. That little room that he rented for almost all his regular salary. He really dreamed of having a place of his own, so he wouldn't have to do what most immigrants had no choice but do. Live in the same dirty small apartment with many other people like him, and without most of the necessary facilities that a place like this should have for a human being to live there as a human being. He hated having to share the bathroom with ten other people, he hated losing his clothes, his food, his money, because some people thought that in this time of need people that share the same problem should share their belongings too. He also hated when the most masculine of his flat mates were forcing him to clean the house, cook for them or even offer them the pleasure of a hand job or a blowjob. Thankfully, they had not gone further, so he could still consider himself a virgin. Despite their extreme masculinity some didn't really care that Darius was a boy when it came to satisfy their sexual urges. They had no money to pay

prostitutes, and some considered this inappropriate. Their girlfriends or wives were back home, and of course sodomy was an inexcusable sin. So, the only way to satisfy themselves was taking advantage of the youngest and the weakest. This had happened quite a few times at Darius's various homes, but he was always hoping for the kindness of some roommate. The presence of someone that would intervene and protect him at the trying time.

You can always find good people. And he had found so many of them. If they weren't there for him, in some really difficult moments, he wouldn't have made it so far. Without them he felt totally helpless. He was rather unable to defend himself, maybe he was born a victim. All he did in a state of threat was surrender. He felt paralyzed, hopeless and powerless. And then, he left himself to the disposal of his predators. No instinct to survive. Like he didn't care.

Or maybe he did. He wanted to go through the pain as soon as possible, considering this pain, this surrendering to the others' urges, something inevitable. What he only wanted was to follow his academic dream, though he was realist enough to understand that it was rather impossible for an illegal immigrant to pursue an academic career in a European country. But he was determined to do his best to achieve it.

And one first step was to find a place of his own. A place where he could find some time to study. Where he could have his books and his laptop, especially this last one, without sleeping with it under his pillow in order not to lose it. And he did it. He managed to find a tiny place where he could be on his own. One tiny room with a tiny bathroom. What was absolutely necessary, but also the best he could afford.

He was also happy to have talked to that psychologist. It was the first time that he had opened his heart to a person that seemed to care and understand. The first time that he confessed everything that made him feel ashamed of himself, everything that he was forced to do just to survive and make it through the day.

“My mom or dad would never understand, and that strange person did. I wish I had the chance to meet this person before... but maybe it was better that I met him under these circumstances, after that thing”.

He had spoken openly about “that thing”, mostly because this was a burden, he could not take any longer. He impressed the psychologist with his philosophical aspect of the issue, but the best words are these you are uttering with eyes full of tears.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over this, sir. It’s stuck in my head, every single minute of it. Their hands on my body, the ripping of my clothes, that sense of being naked and hopeless on the asphalt, their words, their laughter, my face on the dirty ground, that one hand that kept my mouth shut and didn’t let me breathe, the turns they took to fuck me... The way they left me like a piece of shit... bleeding from behind... Crying like a baby that was just born into a horrible world. But you know what, doctor? All these minutes that they were dealing with me I was praying to Allah they’d kill me in the end. But when they left me, when I heard the sound of their motorcycles fading away... I felt so relieved that I was alive. That I could still feel the world around me... That I could still have a chance, even on this peak of humiliation and despair. No matter how much as I wanted to die when each of them was fucking my ass, when this was over, I wanted to live more than

anything. I started thinking about what I have been through so far... No, this shouldn't end this way... And I felt that I should get up and walk my fucked ass somewhere, anywhere, that I could seek help. The first door I rang never answered. I cannot blame them. If they had a door camera, should they open to a naked bleeding man? I couldn't feel my feet, my stomach was in turmoil, but I should keep walking, this was my only chance, my only road. I wasn't ashamed, I wasn't afraid of anything, I didn't even mind if some police cars saw me and arrested me. Everything was better than the shit I was at that time, so I had to walk on. And I'm so grateful that Mr. Alexandros finally opened the door and let me in.. I think it was my tenth effort. Not bad, considering my condition. And do you know what makes me feel better? The fact that he offered me hospitality despite his xenophobic views. He also took a step forward. And that's really important. He could have called the cops or just kicked me out. I could tell from the look on his face that his dilemma was much bigger than ... should I open my house to a stranger in the middle of the night... Even when he had made his mind up and he had already given me his helping hand, his prejudice was torturing him, but he preferred to betray his own values than being inhuman to someone in need. Maybe because it was already too late to kick me out, but you know what, doctor, that could be because he was just convinced, he was doing the right thing..."

Darius could not remember when it was the last time that he had confessed so many things about himself, maybe there has never been such a last time. He was always stopping at the end of part one, his philosophical approaches of the matter, or, to be

honest, his own well prepared way to avoid focusing on himself and the current problem by sabotaging the conversation with theoretical, and to a great extent rhetorical arguments that were just drawing the attention away from what really was the reason for the discussion. But now, the psychologist wouldn't let him perform his well-known practice.

"This is all very impressive, Darius. But here and now, we are not talking about Plato or Aristotle. We're talking about Darius. So, leave behind your vault of knowledge and unlock your vault of feelings. This is what matters now, friend. Feelings."

"Sir, I wish I had no feelings at all right now".

"But you do have... So let them out of your bosom, man".

"Pain".

This was Darius's first word, and he was so proud now that so many words followed in order to explain to the psychologist this titanic feeling that had conquered his life long before he was raped that night.

"I'm a bag of bones and pain, doctor, but I want to live. This has been shining on my head from the moment I decided that I should get up and ask for somebody's help. While I was taking a shower in Mr. Alex's bathroom, I was feeling the water like a river of life healing my wounds and sweeping away all the dirtiness of my body and my soul. That now that I have fallen at the bottom of humiliation my body could become pure again, in something like a ... baptism or even a rebirth, a renaissance."

"And then that man offered me his clothes so I could come and visit you and as I was wearing them, they felt so soft and clean on my body, with a discrete scent of lemon, probably from the detergent. And as I

was leaving to get to your office, doctor, I felt this urge to give this man a big hug to express my gratitude. And even though he doesn't like migrants like me, he accepted my gesture with willingness, and I was so relieved to feel someone hugging me as I was hugging him”.

Darius was recalling every detail of his own words, as he was approaching the busy but dark street that his little apartment was in.

“I should return his clothes to Mr. Alex... Well, tomorrow... Maybe I could get him something too... Well, something from my own country was not a really promising idea, but we have something in common. I'll buy him a book about ancient Greece.”

All those thoughts vanished as soon as he got on the front door of his block of flats. A vehicle of the fire service, a police car, and, behind them, a cloud of black smoke coming from the basement.

To be more accurate, it was all coming from Darius's apartment.

17 | DARIUS, PLEASE, DON'T COME BACK

Alexandros was quite relieved to see his life going back to normal. That night, plus the next morning until Darius was gone were a turmoil that hit his quiet everyday schedule... Every twist on his routine was as unpleasant as getting the flu in the middle of summer. When he hugged Darius goodbye, he was wishing that he would never fulfill his promise to come back soon to return to Alex the clothes that he kindly offered him. But there was another thing during this hug that made Alexandros' feel uncomfortable. It has been really really long since the last time someone hugged him, and it felt somehow weird. It felt cozy and warm. He had touched that man's body the other night while he was dragging him inside his house, and now, his clothes on him had that familiar scent of his favorite detergent, the one his mom used to buy, the one that he was insisting on buying and using even though Nassa hated it.

That kind of feeling aroused by a physical contact

with a man he was supposed to hate felt increasingly unpleasant the more he was thinking about it over and over. So, what's the conclusion? Please, Darius, for the love of God, or for the love of your Allah, please, don't ever come back again. Don't mind bringing me these clothes back... And as the days were passing and the possibility of Darius paying him a visit was extinct, a breeze of relief cleared away all these confusing thoughts.

Until that phone call from Nassa.

"Did you have any news from him?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"I thought he said he would come back someday to give you your clothes back".

"Come on Nassa, why should I believe him? I didn't want those old clothes anyway; I don't think I can still fit into them... And it's not really a big deal".

"It is. We have lost him. He's disappeared".

"Come on, he has no papers and he's scared. What makes you think he'd be willing to help you with your case? It's perfectly normal if he just wants to stay out of trouble."

"Alex, his apartment was set on fire. Nobody has seen him ever since. He didn't even show up to see if any of his stuff was saved".

Alex remained silent. So, could he be dead? Did he save him that night for no reason? Was all this mess totally worthless?

"Do you think they killed him, Nassa?"

"No body was found in the apartment. And everything he owned was destroyed. His books, his clothes, his laptop. We are just trying to see if there's anything in the disk that can be recovered. But there's no sign of him. We went to the store he was working

for, they said they hadn't seen him since that night."

"So, if they knew where he went to seek help, they may know my house, they may even watch me".

This was getting rather unpleasant. Should he be worried about his own safety? But he was sure that no-one else was in the street outside his house when he let that man in. Not even a car that somebody could be watching from... Nothing. But what if they were at someplace, he didn't notice? Why did he put himself in such a risky condition? He'd better never open his door to that poor man. Now he's probably dead anyway, and thanks to your kindness, Alexandros, you're going to die for that immigrant.

"There's no reason to panic, Alex. You know what I think has happened? I can bet on it. Maybe they were waiting for him to go back to his house. If he did, yes, he's screwed. If he thought that going home was risky and avoided it, he's still got some chances. This is why I'm asking you if you had any news from him. We had no other contact details. His phone was stolen the night he was raped and, if we manage to recover anything from his disk like his email or any kind of social media account, well, then maybe we could find some details to contact him, if he still uses it."

"And if he's still alive, Nassa... But you know what? I don't give a shit about him. I want you to be honest with me. Am I in any kind of danger? You know I don't like this idea, even when it turns out to be one of my obsessions."

"I'm not sure whether he's alive. But I can tell you for sure you are not in trouble."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It's quite simple. If these guys are racists, they will never go after another racist."

“I am not racist. We’ve discussed this a thousand times. I’m a nationalist, I just love my country and want to protect it from all these invaders.”

“Naked and hungry invaders like that poor guy... ok whatever... These people know that you vote for them, so why should they come after you?”

Come in, don’t be so insulting Nassa. I have nothing to do with people that attack other people. I just love my country, is this a crime? God, I saved this man’s life, what else do I have to do to prove to you I’m no fascist or racist?”

“I just hope that you didn’t give him in to them... I know you cannot do such things”.

“Are you listening to what you’re saying? Well, this is more than I can handle. I think you should apologize for implying that...”

“All right, I’m sorry.”

“You know what, I’ve got to hang up. I think I’ve had enough. If He comes by, I’ll let you know. Bye”.

Ok. He was insulted. Fine. Nassa had to know that he didn’t tell anything to some of his friends with similar “patriotic” ideas. She knew that Alex would never take the initiative to send the poor guy to the spider's web, but there could be a chance that he discussed that over chatting on the internet in one of his favorite nationalist groups... He was cool enough to do so. In such groups there are always some more radical members that would willingly take action whenever they get useful information. But, on the other hand, Alex would never mention a story like this one. He was feeling good about saving a life, but offering shelter to an Arab was not something he would like to talk about with his internet friends. He preferred to upload links to history articles about the

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glory of Ancient Greece, the battles against the Persians, the hero warriors of Sparta and Athens, and the magnificent Alexander the Great. Those stories were achieving many likes on Facebook, but sometimes he wasn't quite sure whether his friends were really reading them. It was enough for them to believe in an indefinite glory, a misty saga of the past, without paying any attention to facts or historical details. Saving a stranger's life wouldn't be so popular in such audiences. So, no Alex, I never thought you might have given him in. They still haven't turned you to a monster like them. But the more you get acquainted with them, the more monster material is piling up inside your soul.

So, where the hell is Darius? Hopefully, not in hell.

18 | THEORY AND PRACTICE

Menelaos was not a man that included forgiveness in either his professional routine or his personal relationships. His dignity and reputation were based upon a principle that might sound controversial but, nonetheless it was his own personal definition of justice. A relentless punishment for the rule breakers, while, at the same time, a deep respect and gratitude towards anyone who contributed to his relentless punishment. That was his own way of maintaining what he considered a balance of things.

His wife's death was more than an act of war, according to his interpretation. To be more accurate, the war was fiercer and wider than one single death implied.

“I know you’re never going to believe me, but don’t you see how obvious it is that someone has set me up?” Those were his exact words when he finally decided to talk to Nassa on the phone”.

“You should know that I had prepared a proposal to settle things and end the trial. It was actually a good

bargain for her. And we had discussed this. She was incredibly positive. The money was good, the only thing that she couldn't believe was that I would never interfere in her life again."

"Can you blame her for not believing you?" Nassa had a good point. When your husband has become the worst nightmare of your life for as long as you've been together, you can't even accept the possibility that he'll keep his legally documented promise and get the hell out of your life, leaving you with a 300.000 euros cheque just in order not to continue your lawsuit against him. Especially when you recall some other promises of his, after having beaten you up, that this will never happen again. Judy knew that she would live the rest of her life in fear, but if there was only one chance in a million that she could make him pay for what he had done to her all over the years, she would at least leave the battlefield with the victorious result of ruining his reputation. Yes he cared about his reputation. And that had nothing to do with any kind of lawfulness. It was more an indication of dishonor if a top mobster was not treating his biological family well. That was a sign that he would also treat his business "family". And this was costing way more than a six-digit number that could persuade Judy to remain silent forever.

"Well, Menelaos," said Nassa, "it looks like you've managed to shut her mouth forever without having to sign this cheque."

"You are fucking kidding me. Nobody would ever find out that this trial had ever started. Now everybody knows. This is a disaster for me".

Well, if a mobster is on trial for murdering a bunch of people, it's actually not that bad for his brand name.

But this Goddamn thing was a total disaster.

“You must believe me Nassa... I had no idea.”

“You know how impossible it’s for me to believe even one single phrase that you’ve ever said”.

“Don’t you see they killed her to finish with me?”

“Where is Tony? Did you kill him too?”.

“Come on, that dick isn’t worth a bullet in his head. Though he betrayed me... he was more than a son to me...”

“So, you sent your dudes to teach him a lesson”.

“I’m not a teacher. I’m a betrayed husband... And father, if you consider that he was a son to me...”.

“So, you just wanted to humiliate him”.

“I would better call this a prank”.

“Is raping a man a prank?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You sent your guys to rape him, but...”

“Wait! What the fuck are you talking about? What are you accusing me of? I wanted nothing more than to scare the hell out of him... and...of course you might say humiliate him.”

“You still haven’t answered. Where is Tony?”

“You seem to care a lot about him... well... in fact... I don’t know... after everything that happened to him... maybe he’s sad about Judy...”

“Or trying to get over what happened to him”.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Nassa was beginning to realize that it was quite possible that he was not aware of what she was implying. But that was another missing piece of the puzzle that had to be found. And it was neither on the table, nor apparently somewhere underneath it. Maybe the two incidents were totally irrelevant.

“Menelaos, that night a man was attacked and raped

near America square. I know this is one of the neighborhoods under your supervision. You cannot possibly plead ignorance.”

“I heard about that. I'm sorry about the poor guy. But it wasn't my thing. I don't mess with black T-shirts you know. You know what I mean. I don't mess with the Nazis.”

“Well, tell me you're Communist Menelaos... that's the most hilarious joke I have heard for a year or something.”

“Well, to be accurate, I kind of was thirty years ago, when I was still in Odessa.”

“Odessa?”

“Well, I left Greece to study medicine in Odessa in the 80s...my father insisted... but it took me a long long time to graduate. So long that the iron curtain fell before I passed my finals.”

“It seems to me you had the chance to examine the perspectives of a new career...”

“Well, you mean the girls, don't you? No, that was just a cover for the real thing.”

“I see... chemistry.”

“I had the best grades in Chemistry... knowledge should be applicable to production.”

“You know what Menelaos? I don't care about your theories. Your wife is dead. Her lover is missing. And another man is missing. And I would give the world to find whatever happened to him, no matter what it takes.”

19 | #IAMINNOCENT

Any kind of legal procedure takes time, and a great deal of patience, plus, sometimes, it requires a percentage of indifference, just to ensure that the attorney will not go absolutely nuts. There are periods of time when nothing really happens, files and documents are silently waiting inside some lockers for the next stage of the trial. Lawyers are dealing with their current cases – somebody else’s problems take the lead in their attention and their preparations. But the people behind the files and the paperwork are still somewhere out there, feeling that nothing is yet settled, no matter if they are the bad guys or the good guys. This limbo situation sometimes feels like a burden in their everyday lives, just because nothing has yet been solved. Like a hidden program that “runs” behind your life, eats your energy and your memory and slows everything down.

Menelaos wanted this entire thing to end as soon as possible. And, no, it couldn’t end with his wife’s death. Not even a child would believe such a thing, so this is

why it looked impossible that he could be the man behind her murder. He's a really old battle ax to make such a mistake. Plus, most people thought his wife's case against him had little chances to end against him. He had a bunch of experienced lawyers that always provided a perfect laundry for all his undercover business, and they would have definitely found it extremely easy to deal with a case of domestic abuse. The only negative option in this entire thing was the bad publicity that all this hype would splash on his profile. But he didn't really care a lot about that either. Nassa wasn't the lawyer that would use the media for a campaign that would activate feminist groups to protest outside the court – as her tactics were based more on legal arguments, the procedure itself, than the possible pressure that the public opinion would probably cause. And Menelaos was satisfied about that. But he knew that this wasn't enough, that Nassa would not surrender so soon, that she was supporting and encouraging his wife to file charges against him.

“I may have abused her, I've never denied that, but I did not kill her. I have nothing to do with her murder. I had the strongest list of arguments for the trial, and I would definitely win the case. Whoever killed her was obviously aiming at harming me as well.” Those were his words in a short video that he released on Twitter, with the hashtag #Iaminnocent.

Of course, there were many things that he had to clear out besides a possible prosecution that would cost him a few more months in limbo and a lot of money for his lawyers.

Oh yes, he had a lot of money to pay the best lawyers...

20 | PHILOSOPHIKI

Sometimes it's so totally clear where you can find what you are looking for that it becomes transparent, therefore it's impossible for your glance to cast on it. Darius is a simple person, despite being so confused. Of course, he must have his secrets, but there's one thing that he couldn't live without. And this one thing was something that very few people could imagine. At least, that's what Nassa was thinking while she was driving to the University of Athens campus at Zografou... It's not really hard for someone to look for shelter in a place like that, considering the fact that this campus is not a typical one. It's really big, really dark, really a bunch of ugly cement-colored buildings planted inside a pine forest on mountain Hymettus slope. Besides some certain safe parts, it's not a clever idea for someone to wander inside it after a certain time at night. So, practically it's an ideal place to hide. Plus, the building of the Philosophical School of Athens was inside this campus, a major asset for a hideaway for a classical studies lover like Darius.

There was only one thing that was troubling Nassa. Would Darius be courageous enough to jeopardize his hideaway by attending his classes or just visiting the library? That seemed to be the big question, if he was still alive.

Alexandria was reassuring her, but she was afraid to share all her considerations with him. She couldn't be sure what her ex was capable of, or even how much fanaticism was injected in his brain by his fascist friends. Most of them looked like nice people, lawful citizens with modern manners. But it was a matter of seconds for one to feel the venom of hatred running from their mouths like a waterfall when the chit chat was turning to a discussion about immigrants, foreigners, Muslims. Deep down she couldn't be sure that Alex hadn't spoken to his friends about Darius, not necessarily with animosity, but more possibly because of his naïve character.

A fascist cannot be naïve, one could say. Well, yes, they can. Some of them have to be stupidly naïve to believe and clap their hands when their mentors, the demagogues orating fear and hate, and animosity are doing their work. Naïve doesn't mean not guilty of course. They contribute to the crime in their own way.

Darius was the perfect contradiction to their theories. A Persian, a Muslim that knew more about Ancient Greece than they did, that could read a text in Ancient Greek while it was hard for them to read a modern Greek one. This was such brilliant proof of how idiotic and unrealistic their conspiracy theories were, how ridiculous was their feeling of cultural superiority. Darius was a gem. But those people would kill to bury the gem that doesn't fit their scenario.

She entered the crowded, noisy building that looked

more like a decadent messy former mall than a house of arts and letters. Greek Universities may have an important level of appreciation for their scholarly achievements, but you cannot really be proud of the conditions of their facilities. Low budget for maintenance and surveillance, and a rather messy aspect of academic freedom that allows practically everyone to use those facilities in their own way to express their freedom of speech, has turned most of the buildings into a colorful but chaotic bazaar of ideas so contradictory to each other that all you hear is a beehive noise that makes no sense. So, where the hell could her guy be?

She asked for the Secretariat of the Masters in Classics, hoping that she would find an announcement table somewhere near it. She was right. It was already one in the afternoon and the class about Euripides and his Plays was just about to end, but, alas, the lecture room was five floors above. Thank God there was one thing shining bright and working well in this building, and it was right next to her. The elevator.

Seconds after the sliding doors opened at floor nine, she started wandering to find where the hell was Euripides's lecture rooms. The floor was really quiet. It was the top floor of the building, where you can only find some small libraries, professors' offices and a few small lecture rooms that couldn't have more than thirty seats... Well, luckily a bunch of students were coming towards the elevator. Should she ask them if they have seen him? Of course, she should. Postgraduate students are more likely to know each other, their classes are not that crowded and probably they've spent some years together while studying for their first degree.

Dar? Well, yes, he was here before, but... you know, he might be still in the room talking to Professor Andrianos. Yes... he looks fine. He just had so many questions that were too boring to listen to... I guess Dr Andrianos is bored too but he's too gentle to tell him to go... Artemis, a tall brown-haired person in tight jeans and an impressively short t-shirt was very eager to provide Nassa with all the information she needed.

You know, he's so enthusiastic... plus he's the only guy in the class, and he's kind of cute, isn't he Jenny? Yesterday you said he's got a cute ass.

Oh come on Artemis... Jenny complained...just leave him alone.

In a way, Dar seemed to be a rare object in this Philosophical world of women, that is to say, for once again in his life, he was a minority. A Persian learning Greek in a school full of women, and he was definitely not interested. Nassa thanked the girls and headed to the small lecture room, but she couldn't help not hearing what the girls were talking about right after she turned their back. It was Artemis again.

No... there's no way they fuck each other.

What are you talking about? He's A Muslim, they've got strict rules about those things.

Nassa was really furious, but right before turning back to shout at them thought that it was better to hurry up if she really wanted to ring Darius. A few steps further she could still hear the girls talking, and then realized that there was absolutely no reason for her to shout at those girls.

"Jenny, please, don't you see that Andrianos has a crush on him? Just like Cavafy did for the young horny Arabs of Alexandria."

The girls were just speculating. Darius and Adrianos were talking. The professor, a gray-haired gentleman in his mid-sixties, with a classy gray suit that could use a little ironing was explaining to Darius one of the last scenes of *Bacchae*, the tragedy of Euripides.

Mystagogue...thought Nassa...she really wished she could return to the university. Yes, law school was definitely a tough task to deal with. Extremely talented and horribly ambitious colleagues, but what a fascinating discipline! She would never interrupt this conversation... now she has found him, she could just wait outside for them to finish their Socratic dialogue... Darius was looking well... Now that she can observe more details one could say that he's handsome and yes, his ass is nice, the girls were absolutely right. The light through the dusty windows was falling on both, Darius seemed to absorb every single word, plus every single unspoken detail that his professor was revealing with his body language.

"You have to excuse me", said professor Adrianos. "I have to attend a stupid meeting, but if you are patient enough, I can meet you at the Library in a couple of hours. I've seen you spending a lot of time there, young man, and, if I were allowed to give you any kind of experience-based advice, that would be... that the library will give you more answers than I could possibly do. There's just one minor problem. If you're a good scholar your questions will always be more than your answers. This can make you very unhappy, if you're looking for answers, so try to find happiness in looking for questions. But... also, never forget to live your life. Please your body as well..."

Darius was silently watching his professor leaving the room... Nassa was getting that Dar was in platonic

love with his professor's intelligence, by the way he was looking at him. She couldn't help noticing the fire in the young man's eyes, a fire showing a spiritual lust for discovery, for knowledge. This fire was replaced by a somewhat funny surprise when he saw Nassa standing by the door.

"So, here you are Darius."

"So here I am."

He wasn't scared, he wasn't upset, Nassa was prepared for a more energetic reaction by someone who had totally disappeared.

"I'm so sorry I didn't contact you, but it was impossible."

"You disappeared from the face of the Earth, man. Alexandros and I thought that something bad had happened. You never went back to your therapist, you never called..."

"I think I should explain..."

"Dar, you don't have to explain anything at all. You have every right to choose to get away or hide or do whatever you consider better for you. If you had just told us that you no longer wanted any kind of assistance with your case, we would have backed off and that's it. But trust me, I was scared. Now I know you're here, you look ok, and I'm leaving right now. I want to respect your own decisions."

"I have to explain... please give me that chance ..."

She did. And Dar made himself quite clear. No, he didn't want to proceed with the lawsuit against his rapists. He didn't know who they were, it was impossible that they could be identified, the court would ask him for proof, and he didn't have any witness or proof. Plus, he wanted to forget. He was humiliated enough that night, now he had to move on

without even slightly thinking about that night. But no, this wasn't the reason he disappeared. His apartment was set on fire, he lost everything, hopefully some of his papers and study work were saved in the cloud, but he lost everything else. He had to run away, and so he did run away.

"I am trying to forget, Mrs. Nassa. It is impossible. It's always coming back and makes me feel so sick ... this place is the only one that makes me feel safe, the only place in this city that I can do things I really love, plus the only place I feel loved."

"But how do you survive?"

"I live here. It's quite a big building for somebody to hide. I live in the entire building. I feel like a king living in a nine-floor palace that is very noisy during the day but becomes so peaceful at night. I have a certain locker that I put my stuff in, I've got a sleeping bag that I get in every night, you know, I always sleep early, I have to be up by six every morning, and then I lock my stuff, there's a hose that serves well for my bath, a lot of restrooms all around, I have my lunch at the campus restaurant for free... I'm doing fine."

Nassa was quite astonished to find out about Darius's shelter. But the most surprising fact was that he looked so clean and happy and self-content in this big ugly building that had become his nest.

"Well... so...you never get out of here?"

"Sometimes I like walking around the campus, but you know, it's not really safe. There's always that thing... that feeling that somebody might take me down again and... you know... Sometimes I think that this fear will never go..."

Of course, it would take a long time for him to overcome this. Well, the most possible motion is that

he would never get over it.

“Dar... isn’t it how they call you?”

“Yes... it’s so lame, but it’s OK with me...”

“Dar... you should have continued the sessions with your therapist.”

“I know. I just had to disappear, that’s all. I’m afraid to get out of this building. There’s nothing out there that makes me feel comfortable or safe. Have you seen me here? I’m not hiding, I didn’t try to hide from anyone. I just want to be here, like I’m a bird with broken wings and this is my nest. Here I go to my classes, I spend hours in the library, I even volunteer here, I work.”

“Work? What kind of work?”

“I draft papers for my colleagues for money. You might call me an academic whore. I help them pass their courses and I get some money to buy clothes, books and food, thank God I don’t have to pay for rent, I certainly cannot afford it under the circumstances.”

“Do university students pay for their papers?”

“You must be kidding me Mrs. Nassa...? Didn’t you already know? Well, yes, they do. I’m not charging much, but I’m doing professional work.”

“Well, I would call it a professional fraud.”

“No, my work isn’t some cheap copy paste. I am doing research; it’s just submitted under someone else’s name...”

“So, you live here, you work here, aren’t you ever going to return to the real world?”

“Do you find this absolutely necessary?”

“Don’t you think this situation you’re going through is rather a denial of facing the truth, I mean, getting on your feet again and functioning out there in

the open.”

Dar didn't answer for a while. He smiled and said,
“I just can't.”

“I just can't. I live for today. I enjoy attending my classes, studying in the library, even writing other people's assignments. Here I feel safe, useful, and creative. Each time I walk out of this building I'm a shattered toy again... that naked humiliated person that was fucked in the ass by a bunch of people that I cannot even remember who they were.”

“You can't remember...”

“I can't. That's why I cannot hate these people. You cannot hate somebody you don't know.”

“Trust me Dar, you can. I didn't really mean to bring this all back again...”

“It's fine. You didn't bring it back. It's always there. It's just a schism in my time. I've been through a lot before that, but this is something different. This doesn't have a cause. It's not war, poverty, it's not a disease, a consequence of something I did wrong, this has absolutely no reason at all. I was just walking, and they attacked me. I know it's something hard to believe.”

“No, it's not, Dar. A violent incident is often unexpected. You can't predict it, so you can't do anything to avoid it.”

“I have been walking these streets for so many years – and now I can't do it anymore.”

“But you can't stay here forever.”

“I can be the ghost of Philosophy School for a while. I don't have the courage to go anywhere else.”

He was speaking the truth. And Nassa knew it. He was scared, like a bird hit by electricity the very moment it was trying to rest on a wire. The bird falls

senseless on the ground. Dar chose to find a place to hide. A cage.

“I’m not a caged bird, Nassa. My heart is dead. I feel I have no feelings; I feel that I cannot trust anyone, I cannot love anyone. I’m done as a heart. I’m done as a human body. All I’m trying to do is save my spirit. I’m living in the world of my readings, you know, it’s like the ideal world of Plato. Not a reality, just an archetype beyond it.”

“I’ve also read about Plato’s cage, Darius. A place where people are in chains, watching a movie that they think it’s the real world.”

“I know I’m in chains. And I’ll never be free. I’m only free when I think.”

“Do you believe in yourself? Do you really want to get out of this trap?”

“It’s easy to judge someone if you haven’t walked in his shoes.”

“Well, maybe I have, this is why I care, Dar.”

They remained silent for a while.

“Well, that was not as brutal or sudden as yours. It was not out in the dark, Dar, it was not done by unknown people. But you know what? It hurt a lot. Because it hurts a lot when the man that abuses you is your husband’s best friend.”

Dar took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t... And... Mr. Alex... did he know?”

“He found out.”

“And what did he do?”

“Nothing. He just started crying. That’s Alexandros. He suffers but does nothing. He begged me not to file charges, because his best friend was also his best colleague. So, I took my children away, filed a

lawsuit against his friend, and filed for a divorce with Alex.”

“Are... are they still friends?”

“No. His friend is in jail. Not only for my case. He had harassed half the staff in his office. I persuaded them to testify. Dar, it’s not fair for you to feel guilty. I never felt guilty. Many women do. I did not. From the first moment, I felt anger. Anger and an invincible need to look for justice. Not revenge. Justice. My wounds are still open. I’m sure you can understand the difference.”

“I just don’t feel the need for anything. Neither revenge, nor justice.”

“You’re a man, you’re coming from an environment that masculinity is connected to patriarchy, it’s absolutely understandable to feel humiliated.”

“This is not a matter of cultural diversity, Nassa. It wouldn’t make a difference if I were Greek or European.”

“I don’t really know much about your culture Dar, but trust me, I’m trying to understand.”

“It was just another trauma. I have experienced it, I have accepted it, I’m trying to leave behind, I just can’t.”

“And you’re hiding from life”

“This is my life. I wish I could stay here forever. I’m good Nassa... I’m good.”

They were walking carelessly among the bulky and ugly buildings of the campus. Nassa didn’t want to pressure him anymore but there was still one thing that she had to ask him.

“Dar, how about paying a small visit to Alexandros? Or how about asking him to come and visit you here?”

He said yes. He would like to see him. He feels so

grateful to him for letting him in.

“He’s not a fascist you know. He can’t be a real fascist. He treated me with kindness. A fascist wouldn’t...”

“I don’t know what he is. He’s a good man deep down. But these past few years he flirts with all these nationalist and xenophobic ideas...he sees enemies everywhere.”

“But he didn't treat me as an enemy.”

“Well, maybe some of his friends might have attacked you...”

“OK... Well, they might have. I want to see him anyway.”

It looked like he really did. Though it was not a clever idea to visit the place he was attacked. But Nassa could drive him here, and those guys could never suspect that he could ever visit one of their silent, inactive but nevertheless existing supporters.

21 | ALEX AND FRIENDS

Alexandros was never really enjoying the party's gatherings, but it was a matter of discipline to attend them normally. Sometimes there were some so-called lectures about the ancient Greek civilization and its superiority over every other culture in this world. Of course, these lectures, given by people that had extraordinarily little to do with any kind of scholarly approach to the subject, were just a means of selling hatred in a luxurious and glorious package. Alexandros was very fascinated by all those historical details about the language and the heroic saga of ancient times, and at the same time so frustrated that this formidable past has given his place to a pitiful present of poverty, unemployment, crime and decadence. Of course, there was always a solution that could make Greece what it deserved to be. And this solution according to Alex's party colleagues was that Greece should've returned to the sole hands of the Greeks. And this has started from the center of Athens, where a vast number of illegal immigrants and refugees have found cheap places to

rent, mostly basements of old blocks of flats. Alex was feeling that his house was just a lonely Island in an ocean of big towers occupied by intruders. They were strangers, they were poor, so they were potentially dangerous. His steppingstone was this party, the only one that was not corrupted by the new international world order, the only one that was showing faith to the ancient values of the nation.

In the small lecture hall, a dramatically diverse audience was applauding the latest lecture. The room was decorated with cheap replicas of ancient Greek pottery and sculpture. Alex felt that this was a place where he could find a refuge against all that threatening darkness that was choking him.

A low volume chit chat by a couple of tall, clean-shaven dudes dressed in the official party black t-shirts stole Alex's attention.

“11 o clock, America square.”

“Is it going to be a big thing?”

“It’s a mini market, run by a Paki.”

“I don’t feel good with all this shit my man.”

“Well, you can always get the fuck out of here and join the NGOs that feed those assholes. Come on man don’t fuck with me. It’s an order from higher.”

“But it’s just a store for the Pakis man.”

“Don’t you remember that there was a Greek store there before. They’re opening business and steal our jobs, how fucking blind can you be Ares?”

“Of course, I remember...but that had closed a long time ago.”

“Because the Pakis came and conquered the square. But we’ll fuck them all.”

After initially feeling somewhat shocked by the conversation, Alex tried to rationalize that revelation.

They 're just youngsters, no, nothing is going to happen, it's just their over enthusiasm about the party. Of course, he had heard about attacks and abuses against immigrants in the center. He had saved poor Darius's life. But no, this must have been some kind of mafia, some enemies of the party were taking advantage of all this violence and aggression brought by the economic crisis, just to create scandals about the party that seemed to get bigger and bigger.

Ares left the room, obviously preoccupied, and the other macho dude came and took a seat right next to where Alex was sitting.

Alex couldn't help but notice a black ring on the guy's finger. He stared at it carefully, as he was continuously trying to convince himself that no, this was not the swastika on that ring. But he kept recognizing the Nazi symbol, no matter how hard he was trying to identify something else.

He always wanted to convince himself that he was on the rightful part of history. But sometimes when your vice is absolutely wrong, your feeling of everything gets so totally distorted that you find yourself trying to find excuses and justifications for every single element of this choice. Why was Alex there? Did he have anything in common with people that were xenophobic and racist? Was he one of them?

The guy sitting next to him was a typical example of that new generation that was growing stronger in those last few years. Clean shaven hair, black clothes and boots, muscles that were probably a successful combination of hard training and steroids, some tattoos on his arms hidden under his T-shirt. What does he have in common with this guy?

"Mr. Alexandros, how are you?" Well... they actually

might have something in common.

“Do we know each other?”

“Of course, I remember you from the church. I am Panos, Mrs. Chrissy’s son, you know, the lady that cleaned St. Nikolaos... I was there every Sunday, you were there too, sometimes you were in the choir.”

Panos? Alex was astonished. He can remember that kid helping the priest in the church, helping his mother cleaning the room... A religious family, a kid that never caused any trouble in the neighborhood...

“Of course, I remember you, Panos... It’s just that I haven’t seen you in a long time...”

“Well, I had to find a job too... And I guess I’m too big to help the priest now...” Panos’ voice had gone deeper – that skinny adolescent was transformed into a strong, handsome, but somehow scary man.

“I’m in the party too... I’m happy I see you here Mr. Alexandros. I always respected you and I was sure we were sharing the same views on the world. “Nation, Religion, Family” There’s nothing else we have.”

“You’re right, Panos... These are the fundamental stones of our existence. Actually, I’m not a really active member... I’m a little old to be an activist...”

“Nobody is too old to serve our nation. In our Guarding Squad, we have people older than you”.

“Guarding squad?”

“It’s something like a voluntary security force. You know, we hang around at night and cooperate with the police... They can’t do everything by themselves. As good citizens we must stand against crime and violence.”

“I see... But isn’t that somehow dangerous? I mean... There are so many criminals and gangs out there”.

“We’ve got them... don't worry, you may sleep safe... You know, sometimes I’m in your neighborhood... I’m looking after you. “

Alex apparently knew everything about those night squads, and, yes, he had to confess that their presence sometimes made him feel safe. But, ever since Darius’s incident, he felt that something might be going wrong. But more than that he was afraid that someone might have seen him carrying Darius inside his house... To be honest, this was the thing that was bothering him. He saved the life of an Arab, and he doesn’t know who had done this to him and why... Could he be a suspect in the eyes of people like Panos?

“I mean, sometimes those people could be armed and dangerous.”

“We are armed too when we’re passing through dangerous zones”.

“I see, Panos... So...”

“Don’t you worry. We’ve got them. And we’ve got those people who support them too... Athens will be clean in a few years, when we’ll be in charge. But we cannot wait until then. We have to act now – those corrupted politicians are cuddling them.”.

Well, that was the skinny guy that was praying in the church a few years ago. And know, he’s turned into a wannabe vigilante carrying arms – maybe this was his own way to express his messianism. But at the same time, he was having second thoughts about his decision to help Darius. What if he was one of the criminals that had fallen like a plague in the center of Athens. Is there a possibility that what he’s been through was a punishment for his crimes? But, on the other hand, does a person deserve to be raped for whatever he’s done? And what had he done actually? Why did he

suddenly disappear?”

“Panos... I was wondering... is this your job? I mean... this is what you consider your career?”

Panos laughed. “Of course not. This is my duty to the Nation. I work as a delivery guy, and trust me, this helps a lot, my eyes have seen a lot of things. These bastards that have invaded our country are definitely a part of a bigger plan. But if I’m not strong enough to cancel these big plans, I feel the obligation to resist them. And there’s only one rule for this. “Eye for an eye”. Whatever the bastard does, the same thing he gets. Well, sometimes this is not possible. Sometimes they cannot return the money or the various things that they’ve stolen.”

“So, what do you do with those people.”

“Then the bastard must realize that he’ll never do anything like this again. Then he has to feel pain. And he feels pain. I understand many people feel uncomfortable with this... But there is no other way. Those criminals don’t deserve any kind of tolerance. They just need punishment. And, in order to avoid similar behaviors, punishment must be harsh”.

He had been hearing this argument many times. And, to a certain extent, he agreed. The state should protect the people, but there’s no such a thing. These young men didn’t just wake up one day and start kicking asses. Society reacts to indifference and corruption. It was only common sense to him.

Alex hadn’t heard anything that he didn’t already know or suspect. But in some way, he was feeling better. Panos was not a criminal, his mother was a kind woman, he’s a church going kid, he has good manners and motives. So, he must be fighting for a fair purpose. And maybe Darius paid for something really bad that

he had done. The price was high, but when the state services don't work, "eye for an eye" seems like the only solution.

"A while ago there was that bastard that was stalking Mr. Agamemnon's daughter. I'm sure you know Mr. Agamemnon, the tavern owner right across your house. The girl is just sixteen. He was following her every day. He was harassing her, sending her inappropriate pictures on social media... Until one day, he assaulted her in the restroom of Mr Yannis' tavern. Could you believe this? In her own father's store! The girl started screaming and the bastard ran away. And you know what... He insisted... He kept harassing her... But we found him. And he paid the price. Now he won't ever consider stalking again" said Panos.

"Really? "This last phrase was a shock to Alex. Was this Darius's case? Was this the reason Darius was attacked? Was this some kind of revenge for whatever he had done? But Darius was claiming that he never had sex before his rape. But this could be true. Or he could be lying, just to avoid discussing the matter in more detail.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if mr. Yannis had gone to the police? Absolutely nothing. The mother fucker would get away with it – I don't know how they find lawyers. Where do they find the money to pay the lawyers? How do they know all their rights? The system doesn't work, Mr. Alexandros. This is when we offer our services to tie things up. If the state worked, we wouldn't be necessary. But we care for this country, we want it to be safe for the Greek people. And all these strangers are uncivilized. They disrespect our women, our religion, but they claim our own respect. Why should I respect that scum that

dishonors that little girl? But don't worry sir, he found out what it means to be humiliated..."

"The poor girl... Did you see the stalker again?"

"He's still running away – I'm sure he won't stalk any girl again... Well, maybe he liked what happened to him. Maybe he'll turn gay..."

"Of course. He wouldn't dare to come back... Panos... you should be careful with such situations... I know you have a decent purpose, but sometimes you're likely to get in any kind of trouble with those people."

"Don't worry... I'm happy to serve the honor of my country. And there are all these people in our party that cover me and protect me. We never do anything without a plan. We are soldiers, we work under strict orders and discipline... You shouldn't worry... I'll give you my number, Mr. Alex... If you ever need anything, or if you'll ever notice anything suspicious in the neighborhood, give me a call and I'll be there. I will be immensely proud to guard you and save you from any kind of danger".

Alex was totally confused. He didn't know which the actual danger was. Was it Darius? What kind of trouble was he into to be punished like that? Should he ask Panos if he knew anything? He decided not to... he wouldn't be able to avoid questions like "Why do you want to know". He left the meeting thinking that it would be best if he'd never meet Darius again in his life or even talk about that night. He didn't know what happened that night.

The phone rang. This couldn't go worse.

"It's Nassa, Alex. Guess what. I found Darius. And I'm sure you'll be excited to know... he wants to meet you"..

22 | TONY, DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD

Tony was shivering in that cold dark basement of Menelaos' ghost company building. There was nothing on himself that could remind of that confident Balkan lover that had seduced poor Judy. Dressed only in his boxer shorts, no shoes, no socks, no T-shirt, no chair to sit on. He was locked in there probably for a few hours – these guys had rushed into his small apartment – he was sound asleep on the sofa, with the television still on and a half-eaten pizza on the coffee table. They didn't offer him the option to get dressed. "The boss wants to see you". He realized that he wouldn't need to care about clothes, his apartment, his TV, or his life in general. It was extremely possible that he would never return home to care for such useless details.

The boss was not coming, and Tony's agony was growing more unsupportable, but obviously there was nothing he could do about it. "He'll come, he wins, I die", this is the thing. He wished he had answered Nassa's calls. If only he could text her a message or

something but his iPhone was by the half-eaten pizza in his tiny living room. So, maybe he would see things from a different perspective. He's lost everything, he has no chances of surviving, so it is unnecessary to worry about anything at all. "If only I could stop thinking about all those things and just pretend this isn't happening..."

The door to the basement opened - he knew those footsteps very well.

"Well, Antonio, I deeply regret all this inconvenience, I really wish I didn't interrupt you from anything important. But I had no choice. You didn't answer my calls. You didn't even respond to your lawyer. You made her think that I may have harmed you. You didn't even come to Judy's funeral."

"You didn't have to kill her..." mumbled Tony. "It was just an affair. She would never leave you. You could have killed me..."

Menelaos's manners transformed simultaneously. He smacked Tony on the face. He neither resisted, nor reacted.

"How dare you utter that I killed my wife? We've been together for half our lives".

"You were abusing her".

"Shut the fuck up. I could never kill her. I loved her".

"What kind of love is this?"

"What trouble have you gotten her into? I cannot believe you could do her any harm. You're not a killer, you cannot even park cars... But there must be something you".

"I swear I did nothing to get her in any kind of trouble... We were just meeting..."

"Fucking..."

“Making love... Two consenting adults. We loved each other”.

“Bullshit, Antonio. You are omitting a small detail; she was married to your boss. This is troublesome. You didn’t need to do anything else.”

“I swear to God... I loved her, boss... Like you’ve never loved her”.

“You don’t know a fucking shit about my feelings...”

“We have both lost her now...”

Menelaos was seeing a totally shattered man that was mourning – he knew the bastard very well. It was so odd. He wanted to kill him and hug him at the same moment. He would never forgive him for fucking his wife, but he could put himself in his place. They had both lost her, just like Tony had said a few moments ago.

“You must help me find who did this to my wife. Or I’ll make you disappear right away. You know I can do this. That’s why you were hiding from me. You know it’s impossible to forgive you for what you’ve done to me, for how shamelessly you paid me back for everything I have done for you. You were nothing without me and I can make you return to lower than that, trust me. But I need you, Antonio. I need you to help me find them. You were close to her, you were sharing my bed, for God’s sake, and I know that this wasn’t just for the sex.”

“I loved her. I couldn’t do her any harm”.

“I know you loved her”.

“And she loved me too, boss.”

“Don’t ever fucking say that again...”

“You were treating her like an animal, how could she love you?”

Menelaos kicked Tony hard between the legs – His late wife’s lover tumbled on the floor moaning with pain.

“Don’t ever say that again, Antonio. You owe me your life. If I hadn’t intervened, they would have kicked you away from this country. Remember... you came to Greece on foot, through the mountains, without any fucking papers. And now you’re a Greek citizen, with a Greek ID and passport – which I learnt you renewed a couple of days ago. Where were you heading? Were you trying to escape from me? This can’t be. You knew I was going to find you even if you were going to hide inside those fucking cold-war bunkers in your country. Why the hell were you trying to flee the country if you have nothing to be afraid of?”

“I was afraid of... you”, was Tony’s almost breathless answer.

“Don’t fuck with me Tony. What kind of shit are you into? And how’s Judy involved?”

“Please, leave Judy out of this... She’s got nothing to do with this... How can I know you didn’t kill her? How did you find out?”

“I knew everything from the very beginning.”

“What the fuck?”

“I’ve got all your passionate nights on tape, bastard... Do you think there was even the slightest possibility that I wouldn’t know every single step of my wife?”

“Why didn’t you say anything? You wanted to trap us?”

“I wanted her to be happy. And she was happy with you. Though, I must confess, I have serious observations to make on your skills as a lover. A good body, a good speaker, but an amateur in the field of

intercourse itself. You've watched a lot of porn, but this experience is not so effective in real conditions. But she was happy with you. And she deserved some moments of happiness. Plus, all those tapes would be useful for me in court, either in the domestic violence case, or a possible divorce case in the future. I've studied the tapes. I know every single tattoo in your body, I even know that birthmark of yours – well, those could also sell well on amateur porn sites...

“Don't you at least respect her memory?”

“Shut up, you mother fucker. Stop talking to me about respect. I own you

I used you and I'm holding you. There's nothing else you can do but be on my side and tell me everything you know. Otherwise, you're destroyed”.

“Well, of course, you own me, but you need me too... If I won't help you, the chance of being convicted for your wife's murder is getting higher”.

“You always overestimate yourself, Antonio. This might cost you a lot.”

“I have nothing to lose. I've lost her, and I can take you with me.”

“No, you can't, Antonio. Because you are so consumable. I could smash you right away. But I could never do that.”

“Oh, come on, and who were those people after me that night before Judy was killed? You sent them after me, to humiliate me, but, surprise, your geniuses attacked a poor Arab that had the same T-shirt... You got even more furious and... you killed your wife”.

“You're so vain, Antonio... I don't know what you're talking about. I think that it is obvious to you that I can find you anywhere, anytime. And I can rip your dick and balls with my own hands – this is still an

option. What other shit you're involved in? "

Tony remained silent. He didn't know what to believe. If it wasn't Tony, then who might be after him?

Before finishing his thought, Menelaos grabbed him by the neck and started shouting.

"You tell me, or I break your fucking neck".

Tony was choking – but he didn't resist, he didn't try to stop him.

"Please... It's something different... It has nothing to do with Judy".

"Don't fuck with my patience...Spit it out or..."

"OK, Ok.... "Tony's body was covered with sweat – his boxers were wet too,"

"Did you fucking piss on your panties, sissy? Gross..."

"That's... another... thing... There was that girl... in a tavern... Down there... Kipseli... Kato Patissia... I can't remember the place... I was there with some friends... I was drunk... tsipouro, you know... I... didn't know what I was doing... I followed her in the restroom... I couldn't stop... I think I had a crush on her... I had sent her messages; I had asked her out... but... I couldn't stop... I was so fucking drunk... She started screaming, and I ran away...."

Tony's words were drowning in his tears...

"So you cheated my wife too, you bastard..." Menelaos started punching and kicking Tony, and he was screaming even louder... Until he stopped...

Tony was still breathing... but looked like he had fallen into a small pond of blood, sweat, piss and tears.

23 | REVENGE PORN

Nikos looked very confident. “You’ve got to accept the fact that we have no evidence that Menelaos has to do with this entire thing. There’s nothing that connects him with either the murder or the rape case. Plus, there’s no motive. Why should he do this at this particular moment? He knew that his wife and Tony were lovers. Do you know that someone has uploaded a bunch of sex tapes on porn sites?”

“That’s absolutely monstrous!”

“No, this could happen to everyone. Revenge porn is quite common in our days”.

“It doesn’t change the fact that it’s horrible, especially when your wife is dead... I have to sue the web site as well as the bastard who uploaded the videos.”

“Well, I think that your witness Tony might know a little more about this. This account has a few more of his videos. There’s one that might explain what happened to Darius.”

“Do you mean that Tony managed the account that

uploaded his videos with Judy?”

“Well, if I was in his place, I wouldn’t dare do something like that.... I’m sorry that I have to ask you to watch, Nassa”.

“Do you think I’m so puritan? After these few months together, you shouldn’t have that idea about me”.

Three videos of Judy and Tony, plus a few others, with Tony having sex with various girls.

“He doesn’t seem to be aware that he’s videotaped...”

“I know...” said Nassa. He’s too narcissistic – his social media are full of photoshopped pictures. He focuses on details, the lighting, the angle... Oh God... I can’t believe he would allow this frame to be shown publicly online. It’s obvious he doesn’t know he’s being taped; he would put his ass somewhere else in the frame, oh, please, stop showing me this...”

“He doesn’t know... This is clear. Do you think that Judy might know?”

“What do you mean? That Judy was taping them?”

“She seems more careful to expose her body to the camera... in most of the video you cannot see her face”.

“Oh, please Niko, we’re talking about a murdered woman. The most probable thing is that Menelaos did that to get even.”

“That wouldn’t be so flattering for him... A sex tape of his wife with his Albanian boy”.

“It was absolutely clear that he was watching every step she was making. Don’t you find it quite reasonable that he could have wired the room?”

“I’m sure he did. But I’m not sure that he would post the videos to the Internet”.

“So, who did this Niko?”

“Could this be her?”

This sounded like a button that switched on Nassa’s fury. “You didn’t say this!” It sounded like a typical sexist approach.

“Why would Judy do such a thing, Niko?”

“I said before, revenge.”

“Revenge against whom?...”

“Her unfaithful lover. You should watch the third video”.

It was Tony, and a girl. Tony was once again too clumsy to consider that he was aware of being taped. It’s from a café in Patissia. He rushes in the restroom; he pulls his pants down and attacks the girl. She starts screaming and he runs away... his pants are still on the floor. People get in and search his pockets, while the girl is crying in the arms of an older man.

Nassa could not see the connection. Until they watched another video. It was taped a couple of weeks later. It was taped in a nearby hotel room. One of those cheap and nasty ones that offer their hospitality to desperate one-night stands. This is way more artistic, a somewhat professional production – it is a common practice for such hotels to tape their clients. Tony is there. The girl is there. So, he was definitely cheating on Judy. Niko’s point was, someone has shown the videos to her, and she decided to get her revenge. Tony was her last refuge, the only person that she could trust and believe. So, she posted the videos.

“No, Judy couldn’t have done this”, Nassa said. It doesn’t make any sense.

“Well, maybe it does, Nassa”. It was certain that, after the attack on the girl, Tony had the chance to meet her again. The trial was close, and he had promised to testify against his boss, though there were

many doubts that he would finally appear in court. Judy was convinced that he would, of course. She truly believed that she and Tony could have a future together, as a matter of fact, that was the only future she could imagine. Menelaos wants her – one could say “loves her”, but you cannot call love something that could be better compared to a sense of property. So, maybe the correct expression is “Menelaos owns her”. The only way that he can secure his dominion is to make her only hope disappear. And, obviously, this was not a hard thing to do, as far as Tony is concerned. Tony was more important even than the trial. Because that was her only chance of escaping. And this bridge should be burnt down.

“You ‘re implying that Menelaos framed Tony, then he had shown Judy the videos, so that she lost every kind of hope, Niko”.

“And she did... So, she posted the videos... at least a few of them. It’s not really hard, I mean technically...”

“That doesn’t explain why she ended up dead and why Tony has disappeared”. Do you think Tony could...”

“He couldn’t... He’s just an asshole... but I don’t think he could murder the woman he loved.”

“And also betrayed... And please don’t repeat the stereotype, that a narcissistic man cannot deal with monogamy, Niko.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m a narcissus too, but I insist on monogamy my dear.”

“I bet you do,” said Nassa. “Who’s managing the account that uploaded the videos?”

“I cannot say much about that... All I know is that all were uploaded from the same IP – and that’s Menelaos’ house”.

“So, it could be Menelaos”.

“I guess not. That would be way too obvious. I’m sure he’s got a lot of ways to cover his tracks from other IPs... He controls so many call centers in the region, why should he post them from home? That leaves us with only one option... Judy.”

“I still can’t believe this, Niko”.

“Well, it makes sense. The videos were posted a couple of days before she was murdered”.

Nassa was trying to mend the pieces. “So, Tony is a suspect”.

“He could be. He tried to renew his passport a week before Judy was shot— but he underestimated the possible delay of the Greek bureaucracy. But I’m not sure he’s the one that killed her. I don’t think he’s capable of committing murder”.

“Well, you’d better issue a warrant for his arrest as soon as possible”.

“I already have. But he’s disappeared. We searched his apartment. All his stuff seemed to be there. If he tried to escape, he took absolutely nothing with him. Doesn’t this sound unlikely to you? How could a narcissus not take his favorite perfume with him? We searched for him; we didn’t find him”.

“He might have passed to Albania already.”

“His passport isn’t yet renewed... Why would he risk leaving the country without an EU passport? He would be trapped in Albania forever. Menelaos has provided all his boys with Greek citizenship”.

“So, Niko, where the hell is he?”

“I’m not sure if he’s safe. I just hope he’s still alive”.

“Niko, I’m not allowed to ask for more details, but my client is dead and my witness is missing... Does anything make any sense here?”

“Well... It looks like a domino that nobody could expect. Menelaos had wired Tony. To make his wife lose any kind of home, he showed her the video with the other girl. Judy uploaded the video, in her own despair and disappointment over the man who was her only hope. Then I’m not sure, but let’s speculate. It has something to do with the girl.”

“She has a name, I suppose”.

“Of course. She is Marina Papadakos. 16. She attempted suicide after the videos were posted. She survived, but her father found out. Guess what. Her father is the local leader of the neo-Nazi party.

“Agamemnon Papadakos, I know that bastard”.

“Well, his daughter was now a victim of possible rape, and even worse, she was humiliated on the internet. The girl was in the ER for almost a fortnight. She’s still in the hospital...”

“And her father started seeking justice – in his own fascist way. Do you think he found Tony?”

“I think it’s bigger than this... Papadakos believes that he’s the guardian angel of the neighborhood. The archangel of order and security. When he found out that the videos were uploaded by Judy, he obviously thought that Menelaos was behind that entire plot. So, he didn’t just want to find Tony and punish him. He also wanted to make Menelaos pay for posting the videos. He knew he wasn’t well equipped to reach him in person. So, he decided to kill his wife. It could be a rather suitable option. Everyone knew that Menelaos had abused his wife, so she went to court. In the public eye, the most reasonable explanation for Judy’s death would of course include Menelaos, not Papadakos. The plan had two parts. The first, failed. They didn’t find Tony, they found Darius, they raped him, believing

that he was Tony. And, probably, they still believe that Darius was Marina's rapist. This might explain the fact that his apartment was burnt down. The second part did not fail. Judy paid for uploading the videos, but.... this is somehow ironic... Papadakos didn't know she was actually responsible."

"I think I may have seen Papadakos at Judy's funeral, Niko... But Darius is not on the video. Why are they after him?"

"Maybe they're not... You know... there isn't much of Tony's face on the video – I wouldn't of course say the same about the rest of his body... They're both dark-haired... And the main thing is... they wore the same T-shirt that night... Your ex found Darius without his clothes, right?"

"He was completely naked".

"Well, don't you think that Papadakos' guys searched Darius's clothes? Maybe he had a bus card or a student ID showing where he lives. This is why his house was burnt down."

"Then I guess they know he's still alive, Niko".

"Probably yes..."

"So, Darius is still in danger.:

"Well, it depends on what they wanted to do with him in the first place. If it was all about humiliation, then they made their point. They raped him, they burnt his house down, they may even believe he's already dead. But I don't think that's enough for Papadakos. His daughter was raped by an immigrant. An Albanian or an Arab, it doesn't make much of a difference. The thing is, when you kill a woman because her husband posted your daughter's video, it looks like the rapist won't get away with anything less. And, you know what Nassa, I don't really think it's over. The only hope for

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

Darius is that Marina gets better and won't recognize him. And then they'll go after Tony."

"What if they have already found Tony?"

24 | XENIOS ZEUS

“I really have to apologize, Mr Alex, for disappearing... But everything seemed really chaotic and scary for me... I was afraid to come to your neighborhood again. And I really appreciate you coming all the way here... I feel a little guilty. I have your clothes here. They’re clean and ironed... I don’t have a home, but I’ve got a few friends.”

Alexandros was feeling rather uncomfortable in the university cafeteria, a crowded beehive that he wasn’t really acquainted with. “What Am I doing here, a 55-year-old man”?

“Oh, no worries, Mr. Alex! There are students at your age, even older. Well, the freshmen think that everybody else is old. They even see me as an old man, and I’m just five or six years older than them. “

“The truth is, I had some work to do here, so I thought it might be a good chance to see you after all this time... You know, I was asked to talk with the Dean – the University must build some more teaching rooms, and there’s a lot of paperwork and cooperation

between them and our Ministry”.

“Well, it doesn’t matter... I hope I’m not stealing time from your work”.

“Absolutely not. The Dean called in sick today, and his secretary didn’t let me know on time... So, I’ve got an hour before I have to return to my office. So... how are you doing?”

“I’m good, Mr. Alex.. I think that Mrs. Nassa must have told you I’m kind of the ghost of Philosophiki. I think it will be better to stay here for a while. This is why I never came back to say thank you, and of course return your clothes”.

“But you cannot do this forever, can you?”

“Well, I guess not”. Darius was smiling – they were both feeling awkward, actually this looked like they were meeting for the very first time in their lives. That night had a lot more to remember than the look on each other’s face.

“You know what, if I saw you walking in the street, I might not recognize you. That night... it was dark, you were crying and bleeding...”

“I imagine how disgusting I must have been that night.”

“Oh no, not really... You are a handsome man, Darius... and a kind man, now that I can look at your face in a peaceful condition...”

“A handsome man?” This was awkward... Darius started laughing... And Alex knew it was a really stupid thing to say... But this is how he was feeling that weird warmth, the very same one that he was feeling that night, when he was trying to grab Darius’s body inside.

“I wanted to tell you... that I am really sorry for what you’ve been through... I know I’m not very good with words, but I wish it had never happened to you... You

are a man that gets Greek education, you study classics, you belong here, you didn't deserve such a horrible thing... We must encourage people that want to become a part of Greek culture..."

"Well... I didn't have much time to show those people that I know ancient Greek. And... I'm not sure they'd even understand if I started speaking in ancient Greek...But... Mr. Alex, what if I wasn't? What if I was just an illegal immigrant that knows nothing about Greek culture, what if I was just stuck here..."

"This is a long conversation, Darius... I admire you for what you are. I love my country. I love anyone who loves my country. You love Greece, I love you Darius..."

Well, that was kind of shocking for both of them.

"I mean... I admire you.... I appreciate you."

Darius was silent, trying to process everything. Why did Alex come to find him? What if he gives him into some racist gang? Oh no, he won't. And, for the record... This might be the first time in his life that a man tells him "I love you"> That man has already turned red.

"I've been thinking about a lot of things, Darius... I'm sure it may be hard for you to understand... Because what you've been through is certainly a nightmare... but... for me too... that night was apocalyptic... You know... I live a quiet life, I'm a mediocre person, without any particular interests, this whole thing..."

"I understand, Mr. Alex... Don't worry... I wish this had never happened... But I'm so grateful that you opened your door to me, that you dragged me in, you saved my life... though..."

"Though what...?"

"I think that you might have to act against your

beliefs. I can understand that many people may feel uncomfortable seeing their old neighborhoods changing, people from other cultures living in those blocks of flats that your old friends lived in...”

“I’m not a racist, Darius... Maybe you have misunderstood me...”

“I’m not accusing you of everything, Mr. Alex. I’m just trying to understand. I cannot always understand... I’m trying... And I appreciate that despite your fears and doubts you offered me philoxenia... I was an iketis and you offered me shelter, like Xenios Zeus would have done...”

“I would never deny that to anyone... “

“You’re a good man, Mr. Alex...”

“Some people are telling me I’m too tolerant – that I’m actually a coward”.

“Take that as a compliment. The truth is, they’re more scared than you are... Thus, they may become more hostile”.

Alexandros was so confused. When Nassa told him that Darius would like to see him, but it was impossible to visit him at home, he felt fear and relief at the very same moment. Fear, because all that mess inside his mind had to be a little tied up in order to meet him. No, he didn’t like the fact that he saved a Muslim man, a dark-skinned man, an Arab man, an illegal immigrant. But he had compromised with this - he protected a person, a human life, and this is another proof of Greek cultural superiority. But this is just a few drops of ideology on a storm of something that lies beyond cultural boundaries. And that thing was attraction.

This was the utmost mess that he felt unable to deal with.

What he could not get over was that warmth of a

human body in that condition of awkward intimacy. Without even seeing him, the feeling of a beating heart close to his, the scent of fear and despair, the bleeding wounds.

That night, Alexandros felt like a savior, but at the same time, he was feeling like a hunter. Was that just a bodily, instinctive reaction of a man that hadn't touched a naked body for an adequately long time? Or it was that electricity of attraction and affection that cannot really be explained...

And, what the fuck, Darius was a man.

"You don't have to worry about me, Mr Alex... I'll be alright..."

"Darius..."

Alex was dying to know whether that man that was sitting next to him could ever possibly feel anything like that strange warmth that, no, it cannot be love, he cannot fall in love with a man, maybe it's more kind of a bromance, of a friendship that was meant to be established, whatever the hell that connection was".

"Darius... Could we walk a little outside? You know, I'm not used to all that noise".

"Sure... You're not allergic to pine trees, I hope... There's a whole lot of them outside... but I like walking through them during the day. At night, it's dark and dangerous, so... that's a pretty good chance".

The "University-City" was built near the mountain, pine trees are easy to plant, easy to expand and prevail – they rarely allow any other kind of plant to get in their way. Around the ugly buildings, unfortunately without enjoying the luxury of a gardener, pine trees were a quiet oasis, especially if you have the dare to walk through them. Most students preferred the cafeteria, the libraries or class... very far from what is considered

a University Campus in other countries.

It seemed rather easy to find a spot with a thick shadow, and without any garbage all over, empty bottles and cans, pizza boxes, and sometimes syringes left over by the nocturnal angels of a big campus with almost zero security beyond the buildings.

“Well, this isn’t the National Garden that I used to hang around... but it’s a good substitute...” Darius was smiling...

Alex wanted to know. He might never see this man again. He wanted to know if this intimacy was just an illusion.

“Darius... That night... When... I helped you get into my house... I know it’s not appropriate to remind you of your trauma... But... I cannot stop thinking about that, and you’re the only one that can solve this puzzle... What were you feeling?... I mean, beyond your pain, beyond your devastation...”

“Can I be honest?”

“Of course”.

“Warmth. When I felt your hands on me... trying to carry me inside... I felt that I was safe in the arms of a savior... But at the same time, I had no strength... I had left myself helpless, without resisting...”

Alex couldn’t hold his tears...

“I’m sorry Mr Alex, if I said something that hurt your feelings.... I was just meaning that I was feeling good... despite my pain... good, safe, warm...”

“I could hear your heart beating... I could feel your tears on my face... Darius... It was so shocking, but I thought I was feeling your pain. That this beating heart was mine.... And I had to know how you felt... I have to check whether I’m an old man that gotten out of his mind.”

“Please don’t cry... Alex... please... I could feel a heart, but... I don’t know whether it was mine or yours... It’s like... you took me away from hell”.

Darius opened his arms and hugged Alex. Alex was still crying...

“Please don’t cry Alex” ...

“This is so ridiculous, I’m sorry”.

“Please listen to me. I’m as scared as you. Maybe I’m even more. I can’t forget about that night. And... as the days go by, I think that this night was not the night of my fall. It was the night of my redemption. Or, maybe, even my rebirth. They brought me to zero, and then you came, and I was born again. I came back to this world naked and scared as hell... What I felt inside your house was not just security. It was affection. Deep affection. A shelter of what I’ve never met so far in this country. Love. I’m not really sure I can explain that. I was confused, this is all far away from what my feelings had shown me till then.”

“This is exactly the same feeling as mine”, said Alex. “This is so distant from whatever I have felt for a person. I’m a straight man. I had a wife. I have children. I like women... And now you’re holding me in your arms”.

“And right now, I’m kissing you”.

They fell on the ground. Only a kilometer away from his library, Darius was living his own platonic Symposium, under the shadows of thick pine trees, an awkward but effective type of privacy in a campus of a few thousands of students.

Fallen pine leaves were kind of itchy, but this didn’t prevent Alex from getting rid of his clothes. He didn’t care he was naked; he didn’t mind what his middle-aged body looked in the eyes of that young man. But

he couldn't dare touch any of Darius's clothes. He didn't want to remind him of that night.

Now the world was like a flipping card. He was naked and vulnerable inside Darius's "city", exposed but hidden as well... but he felt safe.

"I was scared all these days, Alex. I was scared that I was falling in love with my savior. My culture says this is inappropriate. But my mind, my soul, whatever my studies have made me, were forcing me, in a very logical way, to follow my urge. Follow what I knew I wanted. This is not a matter of gratitude; I don't think I owe you anything... Alex... Why are you closing your eyes?"

Alex fell on his knees...

"Because I don't know what's happening to me..."

"I think I do..." Darius said, while taking his own clothes off... Now they were both naked, on their knees, hugging and kissing each other.

"Please open your eyes Alex".

He did. His lover's face was so close to him.

"I don't know what's happening next, Darius..."

"Neither can I... Let's find out... Let's explore" ...

"OK".

Two naked men, under thick pine trees. Two bodies uniting in one, like it was meant to be like that, like they were destined to unite despite every aspect of themselves. A young but thin and weak body of a Persian in a clumsy but celestial harmony with that wimpy one of a fifty-something Caucasian. Their lips, their fingers, their tongues, their ears trying to explore each other. First it looked like fighting, a Greek Pale. But this didn't last long. Nobody wanted to fight. Nobody wanted to conquer. It was that weird feeling of dancing while tumbling on pine trees and dirt.

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

Nobody said a word. They could only hear each other's little cries and their breath getting faster and louder, sometimes leaving a sense of cold under their sweaty neck and shoulders...

The two bodies weren't separated after they came. They were still one, and they knew very well from the very beginning that if they released each other's body everything would be over.

But it was Darius's word while cuddling his savior's face that might have changed that certainty.

"I love you too Alex".

25 | WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO GO

Alexandros' ringtone woke them up. It was a rather atmospheric version of the Greek national anthem, performed by a choir of ladies, recorded in the Panathinaiko stadium, the stadium where the first modern Olympics were hosted back in 1896. They were still stark naked, lying under the thick foliage of the pine tree, a huge blanket that was hiding their bodies from the sun – as well as any kind of indiscrete eye.

It was Nassa.

“Where are you, Alex?”

“Just... was very busy at the office”.

“Don't bullshit me. I went there to find you and they said you went out to participate in a committee. There's something really weird about Darius's case. He might be in danger, and maybe you are too... Did you finally meet?”

“No... I didn't have time.”

“I'm calling him, and he won't answer”

Darius was staring at Alex's eyes – he looked so calm and grateful for what had happened.

“Maybe he'll see his missed calls and call you back”.

“This is serious, Alex. Maybe it would be better if you postpone your meeting”.

“OK, anyway, you insisted that I meet him.”

“I cannot tell you over the phone. Could I come over to your house sometime this evening?”

“Well... let's see what time it is... It looks like I fell asleep for a while...”

“Alex, are you OK? You're not the kind of person that falls asleep on benches or parks”.

“I was tired”.

“OK. Will you be there around 9 o'clock in the evening?”

“OK... I will”.

They hung up. Darius kept on staring at him...

“Everything alright?”

“It was Nassa. She said we both might be in danger”.

Darius tried to kiss him. “I don't want to put you in any kind of danger”.

Alex avoided the kiss.

“I don't know what's happening to me...”

“Neither do I, Alex... All I know is that now I feel safe...”

“I've never been with a man”.

“I wish I could say that. I've never been with such a kind and gentle man”.

“I was scared that I might hurt you. Did you feel pain?”

“It was comfortable and tender...”

“Darius... I think it's much more complicated for both of us. I feel cold. I should get dressed...” Their

clothes were thrown all over on the ground... Darius got up, collected Alex's clothes, shook the dirt off them, and handed them to him. It looked like he was trying to offer him the maximum level of hospitality, since they were in his own "place".

"There you are... "

Alex put his clothes on in a sense of bewilderment. Now that feeling of craving and affection was replaced by a sense of remoteness, he was feeling that clothing was necessary for his defense. This young naked man was no more an object of desire, but a charming demon that had invaded his sobriety. An eerie feeling of regret, a wave of guilt for what he had done. Something that was way beyond his values. No, he had never felt sexual attraction for a man, as far as he can remember, and that was for sure, he should never have. Plus, this man is younger – he could be his son. Oh, no, he could never be his son. He could never have an Arab son, a circumcised man, an invader of his country. This was so contradictory to every single one of his values.

"You seem preoccupied. I can understand this... "

"Please, can you put your clothes on, too...? I feel a little uncomfortable."

"Fine" said Darius... "if it makes you feel better..." He picked up his clothes and put them on too.

"Don't you ever disagree with anyone? "

"There's nothing to disagree about... "

"Do you think that we should forget about what happened?"

"I will never forget, Alex. But I will understand if it won't happen again."

"How can you be so cool about this? We had sex a few hours ago, we slept together naked, and we weren't even drunk".

“I don’t drink- remember? I’m a Muslim. And definitely, I’m not cool.”

Darius was now fully dressed, standing above Alex.

“I’m a fifty-five-year-old man. What I’ve done is unacceptable”.

“No, Alex. Maybe it’s against your values. But it was an act of love and consent. You didn’t force me, I didn’t force you. We both wanted it. Maybe it’s wrong for you, but for me it was something totally charming – and new, well, new to both of us, indeed. I know that it may never happen, it’s quite possible that you might hate me as hell when you go back home, because... you have a life, and this life has certain rules and regulations. But what I cherish here is all those moments – Well, I might say that you cherished them too.”

“I didn’t tell Nassa we were together. She said we both may be in danger”.

“It’s normal to feel embarrassed. I cannot share the same feeling. I come from a different world, though it’s obvious that the rules in my world are way stricter than in yours. In my country, they could put me to prison or even execute me for having intercourse with a man. Even in my own community here, this is not acceptable. But you know what? I don’t care. I’m on my own anyway. I care only for what I have felt, and it felt beautiful. And beauty is what I seek in this life. I may be dead tomorrow, as anyone. At least I’m grateful for feeling this kind of affection, this kind of Eros that I have read about in Plato’s Symposium”.

“You’re young and romantic, Darius. And it’s OK for a young man to look for experiences. But it’s different for me. I’m in the second half of the journey, I’m supposed to have figured out such things. And I’m

sure I had them settled... But now, I'm here, with you, wondering what I'm doing... Oh God, I think I'm sick..."

Alex got up and ran a few meters away. Darius could hear him throw up. He obeyed Alex's "Stay here" imperative.

As soon as he returned, he looked paler than ever.

"I need to go".

"Fine."

"I will meet Nassa. I think I shouldn't tell her that we met. I'll let you know... or... maybe I'll tell her to let you know whatever's going on."

They were standing face to face, but a few meters away.

"Fine, Alex. Don't torture yourself any longer. If you feel like going, then just go".

"Please, don't misunderstand me".

"I don't. I totally understand."

"Please, let's forget what happened".

"Well, I'm sorry, I can't forget, Alex. But you can, if you want to."

"You know I don't want to, but I have to" - Alex's eyes were full of tears fighting not to run.

"Let's not become melodramatic, Alex. I'll go first to make this a little easier. Well, thank you, sir... Once again, thank you!!!", he shouted as he started running through the trees.

Alex stayed still. He wished he had the strength to follow him, but this young lad was so fast. Plus, it would be totally ridiculous to chase after someone in the middle of nowhere.

He walked slowly out of the tree cluster and tried to find his way to the parking lot. He wasn't sure where he had parked nor where he was going. His stomach

still hurt as a rain of snapshots was falling on his head. Darius's skin, his scars, his thick lips, his white teeth. The more snapshots of this strange day, the more he felt familiar to Constantine Cavafy, the Greek poet of Alexandria who was a quiet and disciplined public servant while he was working for Alexandria Water Company... But as the night fell, he was wandering around the darkest alleys of the city to search for young men to satisfy his thirst for life, love and lust.

His friends in the Party certainly didn't like this particular Cavafy's side. Neither did he. He was trying to find an explanation. Why did he fall into this? Was this a side effect of his long abstinence from sex? Was he seduced by that young man? Are you so desperate, Alex? No, this can't be it. You can't be gay. You can't have had sex with this boy in the woods... You were always feeling despise and contempt for these middle-aged men that were searching for young immigrants, for cheap sex in the parks. No, you're not that kind of man, Alex. Could Darius be one of those boys? No, he couldn't... He looked so timid, so vulnerable, he was literally left in Alex's hands.

"Nobody must know".

He looked behind. Darius was not there.

"I must not see you again, Darius. I wish I had never met you".

Alex got in the car. The phone was ringing again.

"Mr. Alexandros... It's ..., from the Party. Could you come over to the office, there's something you need to know, they told me. It's important".

What the fuck? What the hell do they want from him? Do they know anything about that night, or today?

"I'm a little far away at the time. Is it alright if I

come by tomorrow afternoon, around three, after work?”

“Well, they said it’s important. But I guess it’s fine”.

“OK, see you, pal”. Alex started the engine.

Meanwhile, Darius kept running – he was heading to the mountain, and it was getting dark. He almost couldn't breathe. That very same day, he had felt the deepest affection – his body and mind coordinated to something he had never experienced before. Now he was desperate, sweaty and exhausted. He had to go back to his hideout.

All the buildings on campus were dark and locked. He might have to sleep outside tonight. It didn't matter. He was burning. He ran into a tap and a hose – left there for watering the flowers outside the library building....

There was nobody around – it might be almost midnight. He took all his clothes off and got under the water. He preferred that option to start screaming out loud. A few minutes later, he washed his clothes under the water and walked to his secret place. Nobody could see him anyway. He was like an invisible man. Invisible or non-existing?

Now you're clean, Darius. Katharsis. A naked ghost, looking for a place to hide and spend the night.

26 | HAVE YOU SEEN THAT MAN?

Alex didn't have social media. There weren't too many people at his age that particularly enjoyed posting on Facebook at that time in Greece. He liked surfing the internet, but preferred visiting particular news websites, and of course the web site of the Party. But the Party knew how to protect its reputation – there were many Facebook groups and unofficial (but extremely supportive) websites that did all the dirty work. Closed Facebook groups were used to organize any kind of actions that shouldn't be attributed to the Party, so the Justice won't have any possibility to connect between the “dirty work” and the Party's officials.

But sometimes such dirty work demands publicity. Maybe people are skeptical towards pogroms against illegal immigrants, but who would object to an “expedition” to track and “help the police arrest” a rapist that molested one of the neighborhood-grown girls that everybody loved, Marina.

In their own view of “humanitarian intervention”,

fascists consider that the punishment of a stranger that raped “one of our girls” is a necessary reaction to what they call “a cultural threat”. Of course, nobody was going to post a call to lynch a person, but many people would be eager to offer information that could lead to the arrest of the rapist. And that was the point of that Facebook post, in a group closed “Patisia is and will always remain Greek”.

HAVE YOU SEEN THAT MAN?

A picture of Darius was under the header. A picture that must have been taken that very same night by those who assaulted Darius. It was a close up to an obviously astonished face. Darius was still dressed in his T-shirt; he didn't look beaten up. Looks like the first thing they did before attacking him was taking a picture of him. “This Paki is a dangerous rapist. One of his victims lives in our neighborhood. Could your daughter be next? This man is still free, hiding from the police and our patrols. We must find him and hand him to justice. He will pay in jail for what he did. If you have seen him, send us an inbox message, or call us. Let's clean our neighborhood up from this scam”.

“How did you find this, Nassa?” Alex looked so troubled reading this printed piece of paper. “I haven't seen it anywhere outside”.

“It's not outside. It's on the internet. They use social media to organize their works”.

“But the information is wrong. Darius is not from Pakistan.”

“Do you think they care? Pakistanis are more likely to be targeted. They look different, they are Muslims, most of them live in the center”.

Of course, the post did not mention the fact that Darius had paid an “eye for an eye price” for his alleged

rape. This was an unnecessary detail that should not be mentioned, if the Party wanted to hold high their reputation as “Guardians of the order”, especially if it implies that they committed an act of homosexuality. Their archetype should be clear. They’re Greek, Caucasian, straight, well-shaped, they love their country and its culture and are willing to do anything to protect their compatriots.

“Wasn’t he punished enough? What more do they want from him?” Alex could not understand, but he was getting more and more nervous. Could they have seen him helping Darius? Could they have followed him? Could they know that a few hours ago? But why should they suspect him? He’s a good patriot, he always attends their lectures, his patriotic spirit is beyond any doubt. If only he didn't visit Darius...

“First, I should remind you that Darius didn’t commit any crime to deserve punishment”.

“At least that’s what he’s saying...,” said Alex.

“I know that Tony did it. But I don’t know where the hell he is. The thing is, the Party hasn’t found Tony. Do they still believe it’s Darius? They hit the wrong man that night, just because they both wore the same T-shirt”.

“If they did what they did to him, why are they still looking for him?”

“Maybe the girl’s father wants the rapist to be punished and they cannot really tell him that they raped him. Or maybe they’ve realized that they made a mistake.”

“So, what do they want to do with him?”

“Well, maybe they want to make sure he won’t go to the police, which is a thing that an innocent man is expected to do. This flaw in their action cannot be

forgiven by the upper layers of the Party. So they might try to make Darius disappear... before the girl wakes up – she won't recognize him”.

“Are you implying that the Party will try to kill Darius? Well, Nassa, now I think your prejudice takes over your critical thinking. The Party has values. It has principles. Maybe you don't share their views, but you must admit that they are talking about real problems. Well, you've lived a few years in this place, you remember how it was a few years ago and how it became. They want to clean the country, but in a lawful way. Whoever doesn't have papers should be expelled. You're a lawyer, doesn't this sound fair to you? If I go to Germany without any papers, won't they expel me? Why must Greece accept all these people? You might disagree with those views....”

“I completely disagree, Alex... I have forgotten how this poison has affected you...”

“This is why I'm saying you're prejudiced. You have in mind that I share some of their views, so everything is their fault, like everything was my fault... You might hate them, but they're not killers”.

Nassa was regretting so much opening that conversation. But she had to stay calm. Of course, in a different situation, she would have banged the door and left her asshole ex alone to get away with everything. But things looked too serious to follow her impulsive side.

“Listen Alex, you may offend me anyway you can. I came here to warn you. Yes, I believe they can kill. And I believe you might get in trouble, if they have seen any sign of Darius's presence in your house that night. Now you're on their side, so you may not feel threatened. But just think what might happen if they

find out that you helped their enemy? You'll automatically become their enemy too. And I want to protect you from this. You, as well as Darius."

"They told me to pass by the Party's office tomorrow".

"There is no reason to panic... Actually, there is... But you should behave with cunning..."

"Why did I open my door that night? I should have left him out there".

"Because you're human".

"I'm an asshole... "

"I cannot disagree with this. In general, you are. But what you did then was one of the two things I will always admire you for".

"What's the other one?"

"You were so gentle and tender in bed".

That was rather a button that could open a box of revelations. Alex remained silent for a second and then he started crying.

"Now what? Oh please, Alex, don't remind me of the one thing that annoyed me more than your political views".

"I'm not gentle, nor tender...I'm..."

"Well. You should get hold of yourself and listen to what I'll tell you. If they haven't seen anything, just play the fool. If they have, tell them that you didn't know who he was, you just gave him clothes and he ran away."

"You make this sound like an interrogation procedure".

"You and your neighbors gave them the power to pretend to be "the guardians of order. They think they rule here, and they've overcome even the gangs – or probably they've come to a deal with them... Alex..."

You're not listening".

"I'm fucked... I met Darius today".

"You told me you didn't".

"I lied."

"You don't have to make any mention of that".

"You don't understand, Nassa..."

"Understand what?"

Alex remained silent for a while.

"Nothing, fine, I won't say anything".

"The thing is Alex, we have to warn Darius too.. But I guess I'll do that. We shouldn't risk any other contact for a few days, for the good of both of you".

"You're right". No, they shouldn't. How could he look him in the eyes again?

"You said you met".

"I went to his school. For an office business... We chatted a little in the cafeteria, he said thank you, I said you're welcome."

"Is he alright?"

"Looked OK. He was very enthusiastic about his studying there. Do you think it's a good idea to make him worry?"

"Well, these people are everywhere..."

"In the philosophy department, there are mostly female students, Nassa".

"Well, I'm sure the party must have some female members too".

"Yes, indeed, but you know what, they are nice girls. You know there are a few of them teaching in Ancient Greek classes organized by the Party."

"Well, if they're as nice as the Party boys... I must find him."

"Then I guess it's likely that one of these girls has seen the picture on social media."

“If so,” said Nassa “I should let him know as soon as possible”.

“What if the police find him first... Isn’t your boyfriend a police officer” ...

“I will not comment on “your boyfriend”, but you’re right. I’ll call him”.

“Send him my greetings”.

“Now who’s prejudiced, my dear ex-husband? Have I ever said anything about your girlfriends?”

“You know there aren’t any. I’ve always been faithful”.

“I meant after our divorce, Alex. But let’s not argue about this... We’ve got serious things to do”.

She dialed Nikos’ number on the phone, and explained to him the situation, while at the same time was staring at her ex, who looked really uncomfortable.

Nikos promised to go find Darius first thing next morning. He’ll go undercover and explain to the guy that he’s in danger. He could offer him shelter for a couple of days in his apartment (which means no time together, honey). It was quite unlikely that Darius would leave his precious hideaway, but they had no other option.

Nikos went there the next day. Darius was not in class. He tried the library, the cafeteria, he walked around the entire nine-floor building, but Dar was nowhere.

“What the fuck Darius...” he mumbled... “Where are you hiding? Are we playing Jungle Book?”

27 | AM I ONE OF THEM?

“Of course, there is nothing to worry about Alexandros. Please don’t consider that we believe you are a traitor. Your family history, as well as your reputation in our neighborhood is the best witness for your loyalty to our party, to our ideas, we know that you share the same agony for the future of our country, for this irrational invasion of foreign people and cultures. We know what an exemplary patriot you are, Alexandros. But, as you can well understand, since this incident is said to have happened very close to your house, you’re a very valuable and trustworthy source of information.

This was quite a flattering introduction to something that was rather an interrogation in Alex’s eyes. What did they really know? The guy at the other side of the table, bold, clean shaven, rather overweight, possibly thanks to steroids, looked very curious... Adding the leader's portrait above his head and the complex of two flags, the Greek national flag and the party’s emblem in golden letters shining above a dark

blue background, Alex was not feeling very comfortable. He was Ok with them, he participated in their meetings, but he wasn't exactly a big fan of their militaristic lifestyle and attitudes. He voted for them, but he didn't wish for close acquaintance with these bald guys that behaved like local leaders. He suspected that some of these were behind illegal actions that were not good for the party though they seemed to be extremely popular among his most fanatic voters. To cut a long story short, this was a shitty situation and he just wanted to get away with it as soon as possible.

"I would appreciate it if you became more specific. There have been many incidents, alas, in our neighborhood in the last few weeks, I'm not really sure which one you're talking about."

"I was told that a misfit was hanging around outside your house. One of these paki men whores that we're trying to trace and prevent them from hanging around in our streets. That said he was probably under the influence of drugs, and he was named, or wearing very few clothes. Maybe one of his clients drugged him ... And you know, there might probably be one of his compatriots or even his pimp. You know they are coming to Greece in big companies of men and, of course they have some urges... So, the cutest of them sometimes has to play the part of a woman, no matter if he has a mustache or a hairy chest... The mother fuckers are such perverts" ...The bald guy spoke with a sense of contempt. Alex was feeling trapped. He didn't know what they knew, he wasn't sure what to say, though he was thinking about it all day, he felt that all he had prepared to say were somehow erased, that he had to think it all over again.

"Oh, you're talking about that night... Well, I did

what every person would have done. I found a bleeding man outside my doorstep, I took him inside, asked him if he wanted me to call the ambulance or the police, he begged me not to, and that's it. I gave him some clothes to wear (yes, he was totally naked, but I didn't ask him what had happened, this isn't any of my business). I didn't know if he was Greek or a stranger, he spoke Greek very fluently. And after a while, he left. I know nothing more about this situation."

"Did he stay long? Did you discuss anything?"

"He didn't want to talk about that, and to be honest, I didn't ask. I just wanted to offer him first aid and no more trouble. He was injured and helpless and shocked".

"Well, the bastard is a great actor."

"He seemed to be suffering a lot".

"Have you seen him ever since, Alexandros?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"I would be very useful if you had, actually... This is a very dangerous mother fucker".

"You know, I'm the kind of person that wants no trouble. I did what I felt I had to as a human being to a human being. And that's all. It was quite a shock for me to find a bleeding man outside my house".

"This man is a rapist. We are looking for him. We are helping the police arrest him. But he's probably involved with other illegal activities. So, somebody found him before us... but we must find him. He has to pay for what he did to a Greek girl. He must stand before a court and then be taken to prison. And their justice will be implemented in the way prisoners know..."

"I wish I knew more. I would have shared it with you, but he was rather laconic about who attacked

him”.

“But you said he speaks Greek very well... How could you tell this if he didn’t speak much?”

“Well, he was quite fluent. He didn’t have an accent. Are you sure he’s not Greek?”

“Did he look Greek to you?”

“Well, it was very dark to tell, and many Greeks are not fair-skinned”.

“Does this guy look Greek to you, Alexandros?” The bald guy took his phone and opened a picture. It was Darius. So, they knew who he was. Maybe they knew more. And maybe they were suspecting Alex for not telling them everything he knew.

“Well, it looks like him, but he was injured, he was crying, I cannot tell... And... as far as I can tell right now, he doesn’t look very Greek to me”. Alex tried to laugh, but the man across the table was obviously not in such a mood.”

“It is a matter of honor to find him and lead him to justice, Alexandros. If you remember anything else, if he told you anything about where he went, just let me know...”

Alex was feeling sweaty and nervous, and he wished that the bald guy wouldn’t notice.

“Well, Alexandros... You should ask me to switch the air condition on. I didn’t realize it was so hot here... I’m more used to extreme conditions, from the time I was a marine.”

Alex was feeling awkward. He looked at his shirt. It was dripping. The bald guy stood up and opened a closet. He handed a black T-shirt to Alex. The sign of the party in small golden letters was on the left side of the chest.

“Come on, put this on... You can’t go outside

dripping... Don't be ashamed... It's a gift from the party – I know you are a public servant, and you don't want to openly support us, but it will only take you a few minutes to go to the house.”

Alex took his dripping shirt off and tried to wear the T-shirt.

“Let me help you Alex... Why are you shaking?” He grabbed Alex's arms, and he helped him with the tight t-shirt... “It looks like you need a little exercise”.

“Well... this is true...” Alex wanted to escape, but the bald guy was still holding him tight... “You know, after 50... we're losing our shape...”

“Let me know if you remember anything – and maybe you can come to one of our summer camps – we do a lot of training, after a couple of weeks you won't recognize yourself...”

“Of course... I'll see what I can do...” He said goodbye and left, with the fascists T-shirt sticking on his body like a snake dress.

“Am I one of them? Am I one of them?” This was the only thing on his mind during his walk back home.

“Fuck you, fascist asshole...!” The angry voice of a man shouting against him was the only thing he heard. He didn't even turn his head to see who he was. Did it matter anyway? Of course, that guy wouldn't dare say that to the bald guy. “Do I look so weak to everyone?”.

He got in the house, locked the door behind him. He took the t-shirt off, he was feeling it was choking him, he almost ripped it... He threw it on the floor, together with his still dripping T-shirt. He ran to the toilet and started throwing up.

“I just want a quiet life... Why doesn't everyone leave me the fuck alone?... I'm in deep shit... Deep shit... Darius, I wish I had never met you...”

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

With his arms wrapped around the toilet seat, he started crying. Now that nobody could see or hear...

28 | HOME AGAIN

Tony was not used to traveling by bus. Growing up next to Menelaos and becoming one of his golden boys had enabled him to enjoy luxuries that otherwise he couldn't possibly afford. But now he wasn't under Menelaos' shelter. Now he is back to zero – at least he was alive. He didn't want to remember what he had earned and what he had lost all this time close to Menelaos. All he has now is two fifty-euro banknotes in the pocket of a pair of cheap jeans. Those were Menelaos "time to say goodbye" gifts.

"Take a shower, then put these on. In the pockets of your jeans, you'll find the money to buy a ticket back to Albania, and your passport. Then get the hell out of here and never come back to Greece".

Three weeks. Tony was in that hole for three weeks, wearing only his pissed boxers, and enjoying the pleasure of a bottle of water and two sandwiches every day.

"You're setting me free, boss... You must have found out that I didn't do it. I didn't kill her."

“You did not, for that, I’m sure. But I’m also sure that you’ve gotten her into trouble. And I blame you for that, I’ll never forgive you. Just get away from here and go back to your country. If I see you in Athens again, I’ll rip your dick and balls off... If you didn’t have those, you’d be a better person”.

“I have nowhere to go in Albania boss”.

“This is not my fucking problem. Go find your parents. Or any kind of relatives you may have. Just don’t you dare come back...” Menelaos was extremely merciful to Tony – any other traitor would have disappeared without any sign.

“I spare your life because I believe that you loved her. You’re a dick, but a loving one... Get the fuck out now, I’m not sure that I won’t regret this by the end of the day.”

And there he was now, in the dirty bus station, dressed like a homeless person. The noise sounded terrible to his ears – he was in a dark silence for so many days, that was blinded by the Athenian light of day.

“This was it... Tony... This is the last time you’re visiting Athens.”

Should he call Nassa? He didn’t have a phone anymore, maybe when he gets back to Albania, he will let her know.

The bus driver started the engine. “Well, goodbye Athens... I don’t think I’ll ever see you again.

Oh God how much he wanted to burst into tears, but he was trying not to... “Stop man, focus on something else”. For example, the old lady on the net seat, that she had already started knitting something that looked like a sweater.

“Are you okay, boy?”

Nobody had called him boy for years. She opened her bag and offered him a biscuit. He was hungry like a wolf, but he didn't want to show it.

"Thank you".

"You can take them all. My son bought them for me, but I think they're too sweet, plus I don't like chocolate. Do you like chocolate boy?"

"Well, I guess I do... Thank you". He wanted to eat them all at once, but, no, Tony, you have to show some dignity.

"I've been here for a couple of weeks to see my grandchildren, but this town is absolute madness. So, I'm going back home... There's no place like home boy... My son has built a nice house in a nice suburb. He's a plumber, but now he has his own company, he has four Greeks working for him... He's still working hard; he has a good family... But I feel that I don't belong here. So, I only come for the doctors, and sometimes they come to Albania in the summer or at Christmas. I'm going to Korçe. How about you, boy? Are you staying here?"

"Well... I was... but now I'm going back to Albania. I was born in Tirana, but I can't remember much, I came here very young."

"Good for you. I wish my son would return one day, but I don't think so..."

"Well, I cannot blame him", said Tony. "He has a life here, he makes money".

"but he's far away from me... When you'll have a child of your own, you will understand the mother's pain".

It was the time for Tony to start crying.

"Oh, come on, boy, don't be so sensitive. Be a man... You know.... back home, life is tough, like here..."

‘Things have changed a lot...’

For sure, things had changed a lot. Tony was living a fancy life - but no element of that life was actually his own. He had his boss’s car, some fancy clothes (“for the job”), he exercised in the boss's gym, he had his chest waxed in the boss’s spa... whatever he was was somehow connected to Menelaos and his enterprises. Without his boss, he was nothing. And without Judy he wasn’t even a man.

The old lady kept talking, trying to make him feel better. He didn’t mind. It was like granny reading a fairytale to little Tony. He closed his eyes – the voice was becoming more and more distant, until it ended up being a fairy tale told in an unknown but tolerable tongue.

29 | STRAIGHT ANSWERS

The case may be closed within a few weeks, Nassa... Or just remain pending until we find new evidence. We have the videos that prove Tony's affairs with both the ladies. But there are still some missing links that we cannot explain. Plus... there's no way to find out who shot Judy in the head".

Nikos was apparently pessimistic about the outcome of the case. He wouldn't give up, but there was so much pressure above his head, so many cases just flashing every day – some even more demanding and prioritized by the Chief Officer as urgent, that he didn't have the luxury of devoting 100% of his time to this case.

He had also noticed that this was negatively affecting his relationship with Nassa. Sometimes he was feeling that she expected more from him (just because she was involved in the case too), and that was kind of annoying. What the hell, when we're together he wants to be her boyfriend, her lover, not her inside information resource. It was rather uncomfortable to

meet with her once a week or less (she was extremely busy too), and, after some speedy and anxious sex and a few minutes of laying naked next to each other and self-analyzing what goes wrong, the first thing you hear from her is “Any news?”. And the most annoying thing was, that such news couldn’t be just of any kind – she expected to hear something about “the” case, “their” case, “the” case.

“So, today you asked me before going to bed... This means I can’t have the night next to you, Nassa?”

“Nikos, I’m not Mata Hari. For God’s sake, I don’t have sex with men to get classified info. I have sex with you because you’re an awesome man... with an awesome attitude, and, of course, an awesome body...”

Nassa wasn’t lying. He was an honest man with exemplary behavior, because people with his occupation aren’t really acclaimed for their gentle attitude. He was too progressive and open minded to be a cop. This is why she felt so comfortable with a man in uniform.

Nikos’ ringtone interrupted her thoughts. A rather unusual ringtone for a cop, as it was a small part of NWA’s *Fuck the Police*... Nikos has a sense of humor that she didn’t always understand, but that was absolutely fine. Now she wasn’t looking for a lifetime kindred spirit, she just wanted somebody willing to care and understand her for as long as they both could stand each other.

Oh shit... Nikos said after hanging up.

The girl died in the hospital, Nassa. Her heart didn’t make it... She had some heart problems ever since she was a little girl, and it looks like her heart couldn’t deal with the entire coma situation. Poor girl...

This was making things even worse. The girl's death was a perfect chance for a new fire to start. The Party boys' rage would be triggered by this development... Now they have found a new excuse for another pogrom against the immigrants... And since the late girl would never have the chance to identify her rapist, Darius was now the man they would all accuse.

Nassa was trying to figure out what she could do first. Even if she managed to find Tony, it would be impossible to persuade him to confess... Especially now that the girl is dead.

“Look at this Facebook page, Nassa”.

“Do you know this man? He's a rapist and a murderer” was the first post.

The comments were hideous. “Find and kill the bastard”. “Eye for an eye, the Paki has to die”. Darius's photo was everywhere. Hatred on Facebook expands like a wildfire. You cannot stop it, there is no chance that anyone can.

“The thing has already started, Nassa...” Nikos couldn't stop scrolling down his smartphone screen. “The Party boys are chasing after homeless immigrants in Victoria square. They rushed into an abandoned building and forced everyone they found there to leave... They didn't even let them get their stuff with them – they threw them away...”

“And what about the Police Niko? Why can't you do anything?”

“I'm not “The Police” ... The commander of the nearby Police Station is a good friend of the Party... Sometimes he attends their meetings. Some of the officers are seen wearing party T-shirts in their free time, if you understand what I mean...”

“What the fuck, Niko? Is the State theirs?”

“They Have power Nassa. And the sources of their power are too many and too deep”.

“You can't just allow them to rule those poor neighborhoods... Can't you see they're getting bigger?”

“It's not just a clan, Nassa. Their network goes deep. They have friends in the police, in the administration, in church, in the Mafia, in big companies, everywhere... And they have many people that support them... Because they do the dirty work. You know, there are so many people out there that don't feel comfortable with the immigrants. Some are just afraid of their different looks, their different habits, their different religion. Some fear that they will be robbed by them, some that they have diseases that had vanished in the country and now are spreading again. So, it's not just a bunch of fascists – they're just doing what many people would never accept that they approve. But you know what? Deep inside they approve of it, and they don't feel the slightest of guilt. They just want to maintain their politically correct image. The bourgeoisie that wants to look open minded in their modern lifestyle – well, this is just a thin cover of their true perspective, which is as dark as that of the witch hunters.

“I appreciate your analysis, Niko – but the thing is... is there anything we can do to help Darius?”

“Well... he doesn't answer your calls... Maybe he's hiding somewhere... But where?”

“He doesn't even have a place to stay...”

“Well, someone might offer him hospitality. Do you think that Alex would do such a thing?”

“I don't think so... They're suspecting him. Niko... And now he must be scared to death”.

You know what, Nassa... Maybe Alex hasn't told us

the entire truth... You said they met. He could have already given him in, because he's one of those polite gentlemen that would never stand seeing blood in their hands but would silently approve this pogrom.

"I think he's not such a big asshole... He saved his life; he can't give him up now..."

I don't know, Nassa, but we must find him before they do.

What if it was somehow revealed that he wasn't the one who did it?

"We don't have to prove those bastards anything... They don't really want justice. They just show off. They want people to trust them, so they pretend they're the guardians of justice. But they don't give a shit about real justice. They want to find a guilty person and lynch him. So they'll be the good guys that play the part of a state that doesn't exist. Can't you see this is just a chance to justify their actions and their power over the people of the poor neighborhoods. Darius matches all the criteria. He's better than Tony. Albanians are integrated better in Greek society. Darius is from Asia, and he's Muslim. He has all the qualities that turn the entire society against him. Even the Albanians that share some of the Party racist opinions..."

"So, making Tony come back, even if it is 1% possible, it wouldn't make any difference.:

Absolutely not. Well, it looks like they've found more about Darius. It's on the news.

The thing was getting bigger. A family TV show had an interview with the girl's father. The tragic ending of a careless date was the title of the episode. The father is crying as the camera focuses on his face. He's not pretending. His pain is real. His little daughter is dead. No, she wasn't one of these bimbos of our days, she

was grown with traditional values. That guy was stalking her, at least that's what she said. No, his dad had never met him. He was an immigrant, of course the family couldn't accept that relationship. This is the only thing he ever asked her. Of course, she could date and marry whoever she wanted, the only condition was that the guy should be Greek. We have so many good guys in the neighborhood that she knew very well ever since they went to school... This girl was a kind and innocent girl, they were going to church every Sunday, she never had an affair, she didn't go to bars and clubs, she was only assisting her father in his work and her mom at home. The only thing she liked doing was shopping and hanging around in cafeterias with a couple of girls that were her best friends for many years.

But this damned man was pressing her... and he managed to rape her. No, the father didn't know any details, all he knows is that his little girl was found unconscious by the room service in a hotel room. She had swallowed a box of sleeping pills.... The doctors said she had sexual intercourse, probably without consent, as they could not define whether she was dragged before or after penetration. The man couldn't stop crying. His little girl's blood was on the hotel sheets. She was a virgin when that bastard took her pride. No words came from her mouth since that day. She was not robbed... her phone and money were found next to her. The room was booked on her name and her ID was left in the reception. It was the first-time they were there and the only thing that the receptionist remembered was that the guy was of average height, rather thin, wearing jeans and a Metallica t-shirt. He had left the hotel about an hour

before the girl was found in a coma that was never supposed to end. The TV hostess wiped her tears as the camera was zooming on her face and an angelic music carpet filled the screen of the telly, together with a picture album of the girl. She didn't make it. If only she could have said anything about that man... Some of the father's friends, a bunch of honest and decent guys that live around the corner, tried to find him... and they did... he tried to avoid them, but they took a picture of him and said they went to the police.

"He's a fucking liar," said Nikos. They never called the police. They think that they are the police. They wanted to find him and get rid of him!

Nassa was trying to find out which of the father's claims were wrong on purpose, and whether there was anything that he didn't know.

Darius's face was now on the screen. His name as well. Darius Badjani. According to the father, a friend from the Police had found his name.

Nikos was really annoyed. They were everywhere, but they had connections in the Police. Some officers as well as officials are known friends of the Party. Their profession wouldn't allow them to be official members, but it was a common secret that the Party's power among policemen was huge, even higher than the national percentage that the Party had achieved in the last elections.

The father kept on weeping and the hostess was trying to get even more information. She wasn't objecting to anything the man said... even when he was saying that immigrants had caused a lot of harm in the center of Athens, a place that was shining and hospitable for everyone just a few years ago. The hostess was trying to move on, saying that we must

understand this man's pain and not misunderstand his sayings. Please keep in mind that this man has just lost his beloved daughter.

"What would you say to this man, Darius Badjani?" There's Darius's picture on screen again.

"Nothing. I hope he pays for what he did to my girl. I cannot bring her back. I'm done. I'm dead. She was my only child, the reason I worked hard for so many decades. If he did this in his country, he would be executed. But he left his country and came to ours. Did we invite him? No, we didn't. Did we treat him badly? No we didn't. We should never allow such criminals to come into our country. I cannot have my life back. I hope that man gets what he deserves.

"It doesn't really matter how much he knows and how much he's faking", said Nassa. "The thing is that Darius is in danger for something he has not done. Do you think I should try to let the father know that they're after the wrong man?"

"Nassa... I'm a police officer. I think that it is the job of the police. Let me do the dirty work. I could pay the man a visit ... though this case is not mine. But I'll do my best. I'm not even sure if Tony raped the girl, or it was an act of consenting adults. There were no bruises on the girl's body, nor any other signs of violence or resistance."

"Tony thought he was a stallion", said Nassa... but he should have never betrayed Judy. But we must protect him too. He's my witness... remember?

"Nassa... do you have feelings about Tony? Nikos couldn't hide what he was thinking in his everyday life. It was already too much to do while investigating."

"No, I don't, Niko. He tried to make a move on me once, but I'm not having sex with clients or even

witnesses.”

“Does this mean that you like him?”

“I also don’t fuck more than one man at the same period. As far as we both know this period is reserved...”

Straight answers for straight questions. So... am I just your sex partner?

“Niko... we share the same passion for justice. And we’re having a great time in bed. Don’t overanalyze things...”

Nikos was listening to the last minutes of the interview. He said that now he will file charges against Darius. He was waiting to find out his name and whereabouts.

“We have some messages from viewers that might help the police do their work,” said the TV hostess. “And I think that it is urgent that this man gets arrested, you will understand why after I share this exclusive information with you. This man can be very dangerous. People have seen him hanging around in the Philosophy school of Athens! Considering that the majority of this school are girls I think that the police should act immediately.”

“Thank you so much”, said the father. “I am sure that my neighbors and friends will also do their best to help the authorities. If this monster wasn’t around, my daughter would still be in my arms. She had dreams you know. And this man destroyed everything. I hope he pays. I hope justice will prevail and my daughter’s heart will rest in peace. I have lost everything. I have really nothing to expect.”

“Should we talk to the father? He looks like an understanding man”, said Nassa.

Nikos wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about this option.

He thought that maybe the father was pretending. You cannot trust people that are mingling with fascists. These people are hiding behind a relatively polite behavior. They pretend to be kind, according to the *savoir-vivre* - actually they don't pretend. They are kind and nice in their own circle. Their hostility and brutality are expressed only undercover, only against strangers. This role is behind the scenes, and these polite people will never show off what they're doing in the dark

"This is totally paranoid, Nassa. Darius didn't commit any kind of crime in this case. And, probably, neither did Tony... This is madness. People are under attack for no reason".

"This is exactly the essence of racism, Nikos. That there's absolutely no reason for this hatred. It's some kind of fear and insecurity that becomes aggression. People stop thinking, they're just impulsively reacting. I'm not trying to justify it. I'm just trying to explain it. Just think about my ex. He's not capable of killing an ant. But he silently accepts the opinion that illegal immigrants should be kicked out of this country. His fear is stronger than reason, so he is silently consenting. Other people go even further. They're not like Alex. But what makes me so angry with him is that I cannot say if he would take part in those attacks if he had the courage. I'm not sure if it's the voice of gear or the voice of reason that stops him."

"He's a nice, quiet man. He could never..."

"He will give him in, Nikos. If they threaten him, he will give him in."

30 | AGORA

A big mall is a nice place to hang out and waste your time when you are convinced that you don't have a life, so window shopping might be the most significant thing one can do after work, especially when buses and the Metro are on strike for a few hours. Alexandros was missing the times that he was walking through Patisision street, once the fanciest commercial streets of Athens, on his way home. His dreamy shopping day was when mom and dad were taking him to the fancy MINION, the multi-stored megastore of the seventies, several times a year. MINION was the shrine of Middle-class Athenians that felt that belonged to the bourgeoisie and wanted to show it to everyone around. Before Christmas, it was the time for Alexandros' gifts - and some photos with the Santa-Claus, before MINION's huge Christmas tree. A remote-controlled car, an electric typewriter, a model airplane of the Olympic Airways, and always some books. Alex was never disappointed, the books were of course his least favorite option, while a bicycle was a Christmas wish

that Santa never managed to make true for Alex. In the carnival time, they would buy Alex's costume (preferably one of a brave soldier, of ancient-Greek origin. He had become Alexander the Great, Achilles, Pericles). He had an entire collection of them in perfect condition, but Nassa gave them away to an orphanage around the corner. He didn't really mind. He never liked them anyway, he always wished they would let him buy the Robin Hood dress, but that was out of the question "Not that thief, he reminds me of the symmorites" (the communist rebels) his dad had said, and Mom always agreed - to be honest she just never disagreed. Dad had to control everything - including Alex's swimming equipment for the summer. The third visit of the family to MINION - this was with mom only - and she was rather more elastic about Alex's choices. In September, the fourth visit was to get everything in need for school. Blue notebooks, geometry tools, atlases, pens and pencils - there was always a limit to this. Alex could have one pen of each color: Blue, black and green, one pencil and one eraser. Dad was keeping the rest of them, and Alex should show him that his pencil was small or the pen no longer writing to get a new one. "I'm doing this for your own protection, son. First, if you have many pens and pencils, they will probably steal them from you. Second, you don't have to show off to your colleagues. Third, it is necessary to have a sense of economy from a very young age. So, Alex had many pens and pencils somewhere locked at home, and at school he was scared that he might lose one and have to apologize for that to his dad.

As time was passing by, Alex felt more secure when he had only one pen. If you have only one pen you can

lose up to one pen, certainly not more. That was somehow relieving. If you don't have a lot of things, you don't bother about losing them.

Now that dad wasn't here Alex could buy whatever he wanted. But he actually didn't. There was always something holding him back from anything he desired.

"Do I really need this?" This was the second thought, moments after he decided to buy something new for himself. In most cases, the answer was "No". Especially after the crisis prevailed, that "No" was becoming even louder. No, Alex. You can still live without that thing. You don't know if the days to come are even worse. You cannot trust the politicians, and - he was quite realistic about this- the Party wouldn't be able to win the election. But even if they won, he wasn't really sure they had a certain plan for the country.

A walk through the mall was, despite all this, something that he enjoyed - and there weren't many things around that he really enjoyed doing. He allowed himself some small luxuries - an organic chocolate with nuts, and a macchiato coffee, sometimes even a slice of pizza, especially when he had no meal waiting for him back home - and of course, some bare necessities in order to be decently dressed for work.

"I should buy some sports shoes, I really should start walking, I've gained some weight lately, or maybe this is because of all this junk food... Well... maybe next time... Or should I take a look now, I don't really have to decide."

Well, at least today he has bought a little something. A book. A poetry book. Translated short poems by Jalaladdhin Rumi. This was the first poetry book that he was buying. Plus, the first one by an Arab writer. It took him a few weeks until he finally decided to buy it.

He had a pretty good argument. Darius knew Greek culture much better than Alex did. Well, it wouldn't matter if Alex read a little of eastern poetry to find out more about this culture. He felt the need to discover more about the Orient...just like his ancestor, Alexander the Great, who had conquered the Middle East and Persia, and had gotten in contact with so many ancient cultures yet unknown to most of the Greeks. Besides the war and the killings, he knew that when you want to keep something that you have tried hard to achieve you have to understand the details of its essence. So, he didn't exactly Hellenize those areas. He respected their local values and culture in order to keep them under his dominion. Just like him, Alex was feeling the need to discover something new, something that he had physically explored on Darius's body, and his own body as well. He knew that what he'd done was inexcusable and beyond any kind of logic. But for this timid and indecisive man this was something literally awesome. He was scared to death, he had sworn he'd never do such a thing, but now that it was done, he wanted to examine it, to dig into its deepest roots. Now it was safe to focus on something that is a fact. It's been done and this cannot change. And of course, he's made up his mind. He would never meet Darius again.

What he had of him was just that picture of his rather frightened face that the Party had posted on social media seeking for information. That's the only thing he had to remember. But this wasn't his real face. He could still recall the image of Darius sleeping like a baby in his house, and then his naked body next to him, his dark hair and eyes and skin. No. They would never meet again. They will never touch each other, he will

never feel his breath on his chest, he will never have his body in his hands again, that young blooming body of a man so full of life and dreams, but at the same time so brutally devastated.

Alex was sitting on a bench in the middle of one of those long mall corridors that look so annoyingly identical that you feel that you'll never find the way out of the labyrinth. He opened his book and tried to read but this was such a noisy place to enjoy the serenity of Rumi's verses. He gave up as soon as he felt that someone was sitting next to him. Instinctively he moved to the other end of the bench to offer some space to the person sitting next to him.

He discreetly looked at the person's shoes. Well, it's a lady with flat sneakers and a long floral dress, quite long for this season of the year. As his eyes moved upwards, he realized that the lady was wearing a hijab. Her head was covered by a beautiful azure piece of clothing... of course Alex was feeling uncomfortable. That awkward sense of cultural diversity that he couldn't understand or accept. He was born into a simpler world, without immigrants. He's too old to get used to this entirely new reality. Of course, two decades had already passed since the first Albanian immigrants fled to Greece, but that was another thing. Maybe he should go, maybe her husband will appear in a while, and he has heard that they don't like seeing their wives hanging around with other men. To a certain extent he agrees with some kind of discipline in the family, maybe this is their own way to preserve their values and of course faithfulness and confidence are universal values, not particularly Muslim.

He put his book in the paper bag he was holding and stood up. He was still wondering whether it might

seem impolite to that lady that he left this bench the very moment she had arrived and sat next to him. So, he looked at his wrist, where his watch used to be, just to give the impression that he had something urgent to do.

“You're not wearing your watch Mr. Alex.”

A very familiar voice.

Alex, totally astonished, one might say shocked, turned around. The lady was reading a book. She took a watch off a small plastic bag that she was holding.

The voice was hers. But she wasn't even looking at him. And definitely the voice was not one of a woman.

“It must have fallen when we met ... that day inside the campus. I had to return it to you.”

The voice was Darius's.

“I know it's a surprise to you Mr. Alex but, I'm begging you, please try not to stare at me.”

Alex felt some kind of dizziness. The noises from all over the place sounded unsupportable now. Darius.. dressed up as a Muslim woman.

Darius put Alex's watch on the bench right next to him. His eyes, neatly shadowed and with a sensible quantity of mascara on them, were staring at the floor's tiles. Big marble tiles, that, alas, couldn't make a great building like the ancient ones he was studying about.

“Please take your watch. And... if you want to sit next to me, I can explain everything. I would be grateful if you could only listen to me for a few minutes.”

Alex sat next to Darius. He started coughing...

“I'm sorry... I feel like I need to throw up...”

“I'm sorry for coming out of the blue... but I had to return your watch.”

Alex was also staring at the marble tiles.

"Why the hell are you dressed like that?"

"I'm sure you're aware that they're after me. My face is everywhere. And...in Iran... when they're after a homosexual, he has two choices. Leave the country or have a gender change operation and become a woman. This is absolutely legal in Iran."

"I don't care about Iran. So... you're hiding from them?"

"I had no other choice. Otherwise, they'd find me. At least they show some respect to women. One of my colleagues who comes from Pakistan and wears humans lent me her clothes and showed me how-to put-on makeup. I'm staying with her boyfriend for a couple of days."

"This could be a funny situation my friend... but it's rather tragic."

"You tell me, Mr. Alex.. I cannot stand all those clothes, the makeup, everything is so annoying... I can't even go to classes. But this is the only way to hide."

"You shouldn't put yourself into danger just to bring me the watch. I know they're after you."

"I didn't want you to believe I'm a thief."

"What happened to that poor girl? What have you done to her?"

What an odd situation. Two people sitting next to each other, murmuring without even looking at each other.

"I don't even know that girl. That's a big misunderstanding."

"I don't know what to believe anymore, Darius... Everything is so absurd... Why do they hate you so much?"

"Well, maybe because I am what I am. And what

am I, really? A man trying to hide himself... A coward. But I don't have a choice."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just hide. This is the only thing I can think about right now. There's absolutely no plan, Mr. Alex... Just survive the day. They came to my school. They asked questions. Before the police, can you believe this? The police are after me too. I don't know who'll find me first. And I don't know whether that makes any difference. I've been told that the Party has many contacts inside the Police."

Alex remained silent. He also has many friends in the Party. And he's also been asked many questions. Maybe they're watching him too, no one can tell. He had to call Nassa. He hated it when he had no other choice than this. He had two options. Call his friends at the Party or Nassa. Cuts both ways.

"Can you wait here for a couple of minutes? I need to make a phone call."

"Please don't give me in, Mr. Alex".

"I'm not a monster, Darius. I saved your life, remember. I'll try to help. Again. I cannot promise anything. But I will try to help you."

Darius didn't leave his seat on the bench. He stayed there, in his long dress and his hijab. He was freezing. Was it the air conditioning of the mall that had drained his sweat... was it the fact that he had finally found the man he loved?"

This is for sure. Darius was in love.

Of course, this was by all means inappropriate. He was in love with a man. He had had sex with him. An absolutely indecent violation of each and every one of the values he was raised with.

"I am cursed and damned... this is for sure." Well,

this might justify why his life was in danger. Maybe his homosexuality existed before he had realized it, so his kismet was determined. Maybe he was totally helpless. Maybe it was worthless to try avoiding what looked inevitable. Maybe his present condition, dressed in female clothes, was closer to his real nature. But he always thought he was a man. A scholar, a man dedicated to research and study, with no particular interest in flirting. Ok, he never had a girlfriend. But he was sure the time would come for him to marry a girl... maybe one of his colleagues, they seemed to like him a lot, he was the only male in the post grad program.

He could never remember himself taking this advantage. Any other man of his age would feel like the “Bachelor” in that reality show, just a more “intelligent” version of it. But he didn’t. Sometimes he was rather rude with some of the girls that were making the first move on him. No, he never thought about sex, well, “never” is not really never, but this didn’t look like a priority. Sex was connected to marriage, according to his family traditions, so the time would eventually come for it. He was aware that the time would come to return home. Even if he finished the master’s and moved on to a PhD and finished it as well, eventually he would return to Iran. Things might get better there - and the very first day of his return, he will find out that a matchmaker came a few days ago to his relatives and have already agreed that he gets married with a beautiful girl. He will be a University Professor of Classics in Baghdad. That was the plan, well, not exactly his plan, not what he was craving for, but what he would end up doing. His dream was to stay in Greece forever, or even go to a big European University with a famous Classics department. But this

was way beyond what he really believed he could achieve. There are some roots that unite us with our past, even the past that chased us away from home, leaving the roots unbroken, pure and strong. Those roots would eventually drag him back, he always knew that.

But maybe even that could not stand as an option. He was humiliated. He had sinned. He had lost his manhood. Even his manly clothes. Well, even if he manages to return, this must be a secret that he must take to the grave. But he doesn't like secrets. He wants the truth. He always wanted to be crystal clear, to be able to stare straight to the eyes of the people he loved. A secret cannot remain a secret.

"Why are you bothering about all this, Darius? You'll never get to Iran. They'll find you here and you'll go to jail, or they'll just kill you, for something that you haven't done".

Not exactly what he's always been craving for. At least, he had seen Mr. Alex again. He was feeling guilty for his feelings, but he knew his feelings were there. And they were stronger than any kind of guilt. He had read about platonic Eros in Plato's Symposium, he had read many analyses of this classical text, but no analysis can explain the mysterious ways people get attracted to each other. He didn't know why he loved that man, if this was love or just gratitude for saving his life.

Somebody sat next to him. He couldn't dare look.

It was Alex's voice.

"48, Socrates Street. Ground floor. You'll find a store called "Neoterismi". It's closed for years. Nassa has the keys, she's trying to find someone to rent it for a client. She'll give me the keys. Wait for me there, in an hour. I'm leaving now, I'll see you then".

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

His voice was trembling. Darius could feel the tension and anxiety all over Alex's body. He watched him stand up, he noticed the sweat on his shirt... he recalled their bodies tangled in one, that day among the trees, under the sun, probably the first and very last moment they were absolutely free.

Darius was now free behind a curtain. Or was he just hidden behind it?

31 | SOCRATES STREET

Socrates is still the most valuable gem of Greek culture. Of course, most people just remember that he was a wise man that was eventually forced to drink the conium, just because he was always trying to serve the truth, and that's all. Of course, he never bothered to write anything at all, he seemed to prefer all those verbs that fly to the writings that remain forever.

Thankfully his student Plato didn't share the same point of view, so he gratefully wrote down his teacher's flying verbs, but it's quite unlikely that most of the people walking up and down the street that carries his name in modern Athens have the faintest idea about Kriton, Phaedon or Symposium.

Socrates street shared the same destiny with most of the traditional center of mid crisis Athens. Once a very busy street, though never a very fancy one, now it was in decline. Most of the old stores were closed, newer stores were opened by immigrants ...another of the Athenian areas that were abandoned by their former inhabitants, who were replaced by people from

the Middle East or Africa. No, Socrates, if you ever come back to the street that your great grandchildren have dedicated to you, it's rather impossible to hear your own language.

One of the many permanently closed stores in Socrates Street, was the place where a young Irani man dressed in women's clothes is waiting for a Greek orthodox Christian man who admires a fascist party's rhetoric to find him a shelter. Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? Plus, this young immigrant with a human is in love with that Greek fascist guy. This is getting better and better.

It's a rather sad picture of a faded world that was turning into something else as time was passing. Faded, like the sign "Neoterismi" (meaning modern clothes, this was a rather common name for clothing stores after pret-a-porter conquered the world of local tailors and self-made clothes, before famous brands took their place) as well... In neighborhoods like Socratous street those fancy stores never came. Their owners preferred bigger streets in the center of Athens.

Now, what's left of the store is the faded sign. Windows were painted white; in some places you could still see the mannequin dolls that used to wear trendy clothes a long time ago. Now they're bald, naked, some don't even have heads or some limb of them is missing. The only brand-new material in this ground floor store is a modern security lock, showing that somewhere there's an owner that is interested in renting the store after a good offer. On the white background of the main window, a blue spray paint sign "FOR RENT" is the loving expression of such an expectation. The entire scenery was so depressing - but there was one thing in favor of Darius. Many ladies in hijabs, some

walking with their husbands, some with their children.

Darius was feeling some kind of safety in his portable hideaway. They wouldn't recognize him; he was a perfect Muslim lady that respects her tradition. But his heart was beating fast. Was this fear of getting uncovered, was this the craving for seeing Alex again.

At the same time, he knew that it was quite possible that somebody from the Party might be around there looking for him, but now he was her. The only fault in his transformation was that his hair was still short, so he should keep his head covered by any means. His face was well-shaved, as well as covered with a thick layer of make-up (this is a luxury Muslim women could still enjoy), he looked totally feminine - he had even rehearsed the way he was walking, his body position, everything.

"Follow me". That was Alex's voice. He unlocked the door of the former store and got in. Darius looked around and got inside behind him. Alex locked the door again from the inside.

"You can't stay in the front. Somebody might notice your shadow behind the painted windows. But there's a separate space that was used for fitting rooms. There's also a toilet there, I hope it works. Nassa said it works. She gave me this sleeping bag and this bag with towels and sheets' '.

"Thank you, Mr. Alex," ...

"You don't have to thank me... She'll try to come and visit you... Either she or I will be coming to bring you food. You'd better stay here for a few days - don't get out for any reason. This cell phone, you must keep it and call her in case you need anything".

"Can't I call you, Mr. Alex?"

"Maybe they're watching after me too..."

“I never meant to cause you any trouble.”

“I know. Just stay here and Nassa will try her best to get you out of this mess”.

They entered the fitting room. Darius took off the hijab, and Alex couldn't help noticing the contrast - his boyish haircut against his feminine - looking face...

“I know I look ridiculous Mr. Alex”.

“I should bring you some clothes too...”

“Again...” They both laughed.

“There's still running water in the toilet - so I guess you'll be able to clean yourself...”

Darius looked at himself in the old fitting room mirror Excluding his short hair, nothing reminded of that enthusiastic classics' student. Nothing...

“Do you think I'm ridiculous, Mr. Alex?”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm dressed in women's clothes”.

“You are trying to protect yourself. There's nothing wrong with this. These people are dangerous. You have the right to feel scared and defend yourself... You know the story of Achilles, don't you?”

“Of course... They were dressing him with girls' clothes when he was a child, trying to protect him from being murdered.”

“That didn't make him less of a hero, as far as I can remember, Darius...”

“Am I still a man in your eyes, Mr. Alex?...”

“You're a brave man, Darius. You're into this terrible turmoil without having done anything wrong...”

“I don't know what I am anymore. A man that lost his manhood... Look at me sir...”

“You'd better not change that outfit for a few days... at least if you decide to go out for any reason.

Here... you can be this Darius we all have known in the first place.”

“Well, literally, when you first met me, I was naked.”

“I guess that was an awkward situation. Actually, this one is too. Look... you’ve got a place to hide now. I wish I could take you to my house, but it’s quite possible that they’re watching me too. I had to stop at the wrong train station and walk for half an hour to come here, just to make sure they’re not after me.”

“I’m so sorry I’ve put you in such trouble”.

“Darius... They asked me to give you in... And I must confess, this option crossed my mind quite a lot”.

“I can understand this... I’ve seen all these pictures on your wall...”

“The fact that I agree with some of the Party’s opinions doesn’t make me a criminal. I have never hurt anyone. I’m not a fascist, Darius. If I were, I would have given you in.”

“I appreciate this a lot...”

“This is hard for me too... All I’ve taken for granted is now in doubt. Everything that I thought was fixed and strong about my ideas and values is under question. For me, the Party was a guardian of our traditions and culture. And... people like you... I mean...”

“People like me are a threat to your culture”.

“That was until I met you Darius... This divided world got shattered. Nothing is clear anymore. You are a man that loves our culture, you probably know it better than I do... So, the enemy is an ally. And there are certain practices of the Party that I don’t approve of... I saw them applied to you... I always knew about some kind of violence, but it was so much different

when I saw you molested outside my door. So, my world has turned upside down Darius... This world of good and evil was clear but now it's so blurry, so tremendously shaken."

"Well... I may be responsible for all this..."

"No, Darius. I'm not blaming you for anything. I'm just so confused... Everything has changed... I'm not very fond of changes..." Alex sat on a dusty 70-s style chair that reminded the old glory of the store (as well as the old glory of his stereotypes).

"I'm not a hero, Darius. I'm a common man that wants a quiet life. I'm not sure I can deal with all this..."

Alex hid his face with his palms. "I'm 55 years old... I shouldn't feel like this." Alex was weeping silently. He was so afraid that someone could hear him - he didn't know if he was afraid for Darius more than for himself. Or maybe he knew.

He felt Darius's embrace, and then a cuddle on his head. He looked towards Darius - yes, the makeup could not hide the tears on his face.

Now they were face to face again.

"I look so ridiculous..." said Darius.

"You're beautiful, no matter what... Because you have a kind heart. I wish I had a heart like yours..."

"You would feel better if I were a real girl, am I right or not?"

"I feel fine", answered Alex and kissed Darius's lips. He could feel that familiar taste of lipstick - it wasn't odd to him, not even for a second. In a few moments, a naked Darius had escaped from the feminine clothes and looked for shelter in the arms of Alex.

Alex was silent. When Darius tried to unbutton his shirt, he stopped him. He took his clothes off by

himself.

“Now we’re even”, that’s the only thing Alex could say. He knew they were both craving for this moment, it was the weirdest craving he had ever felt. A craving that should remain untold, but now it didn’t matter. They were both hidden in a place that had stopped existing.

They were making out without uttering a single word. Now they were staring at each other’s eyes. In a dirty place that nobody would even think of taking a look at, they had found a place of freedom. A place where they could be whatever they wanted.

Alex fell on his knees - now he wasn’t afraid anymore. He grabbed Darius’s hips, kissed his belly button and moved his lips downwards. Darius was cuddling his hair - what was left of them.

“Don’t do something you don’t feel, Mr. Alex...”

“I love you, Darius.”

After a while, they were on the floor, they didn’t exactly know what they were doing, just like the first time. The dusty floor tiles were cold and uncomfortable. They didn’t care... Sometimes their moves were clumsy, but they didn’t really care, they started laughing, and suddenly held back their laughter, as well as their cries, at the mere suspicion that somebody could hear them.

“You know, Mr. Alex... I wish we have the chance to sleep together on a real bed, with a cozy mattress...”

“If we ever have this chance, I won’t let you sleep, Darius...” said Alex and suddenly started tickling Darius on the chest.

“Oh please, don’t do that... I can’t stand the....” he didn’t finish his phrase, he started laughing, and tried to respond... In a few moments, the two lovers were

fighting like college boys in a frat party...”

“If anyone could see us, he might presume we are drunk or stoned” said Alex...

“Or both, Mr. Alex... But I guess we’re two serious and respected gentlemen...”

“Well, that wouldn’t be exactly my description... I don’t look like a decent man. This decent man should get dressed and go back home.”

“Or stay naked and sleep with Darius... I think we can both fit under this towel... You don’t need decent clothes here, sir... We can stay naked forever”.

“Just... appreciate the moment, Darius... This is really something unique... And it is unique because it’s impossible to last for a long time.”

“I know that Mr. Alex...” Darius stood up and walked in the empty room. Windows were covered with papers that had become yellowish.

“The sun will fall... There is still light in here... Mr. Alex...”

“What...? I have to go Darius...” He started looking for his clothes. It was so odd that after a long time they weren’t waiting for him, neatly folded on a chair next to his bed...

“Take a picture of me... Maybe... we won’t see each other again...”

“Don’t be so pessimistic... If you hide here and don’t act foolish, they might never find you”.

“I don’t know... I can’t think of any kind of future... Please, grab the moment. This moment.” Darius stood in front of the paper-covered main window. An awkward light was passing through the ragged paper - it was capable enough to hide the lovers but could not prevent the sunlight from getting through.

Alex was looking at him. He was walking naked in the room and posed like an ancient Greek statue. A Kouros. A smiling young man from the archaic age”

“I don’t look like a Kouros. I’m not that masculine.... And I don’t have long curly hair, though I might have if I had left them long”.

“I would bet you’d like to pose as a classical age Ephebe” said Alex, as he was trying to find out how his smartphone camera worked. He didn’t like taking pictures.

“Classical age statues are thoughtful and worried. Archaic Kouros are smiling and happy... These were times of idleness, not too much philosophy, a joy of life”.

“Come on, you look like a naked soldier standing still before his sergeant.”

“I’m smiling. And... see... I’m taking a step forward. This is a great moment in the history of sculpture. Kouros taking his first step forward. Just one step that changes the world.”

“You look very funny in the pic”.

“I want you to remember me like this. Naked and smiling and funny. Because this moment is ending... You’re dressed, and you just looked at the time on your phone”.

“Come on, I was just saving the pic on my phone...”

“Now you’ve stolen my soul”.

Alex came close to him - they kissed and hugged. Darius’s skin was cold.

“Get dressed... They might not find you, but, please, don’t die of pneumonia” Now hide in the toilet as I open the door. Someone might see...

“As you wish sir”. He ran to the small toilet and

shut the door.

Alex went out and locked the door. Socrates street was as depressing as it was before he entered this deserted store with the filthy windows and the yellow paper covers. He was again a decent gentleman, an anonymous passenger that just visited the place to collect the bills for the owner. He grabbed a couple of the envelopes that were in the mailbox and walked away.

He momentarily looked at himself in a mirror -one of these mirrors that have survived riots and graffiti, at least until now, that may still exist on the street due to good luck. Nothing in his appearance could imply that he was having sex with another man behind a locked door. Well, a few blocks away many sex workers at Darius's age were hanging around, so even if he was considered a possible client, nobody would care. Except for him - it was rather uncomfortable to think that someone might presume he was a middle-aged gay man looking for cheap sex with illegal immigrants.

Literally, he has had sex with one of them. But there's nothing to feel guilty about. Not anymore. He just felt that this was a short and joyful escape from his own self, of his own identity. A sweet escape that now was over and might never happen again. Like a totally independent piece of life that was left locked behind that door of that ghost fashion store.

Together with a naked young man that had nothing at all. Except this weird place to hide. As the night was falling, he didn't feel the need to wear his female clothes. Nobody could see him, and there was nothing he could see. He lied on the floor - he wasn't cold, the weather was still warm - car lights were creating shadows that invaded his shelter, uncovering parts of

his nakedness just to his own eyes. People were passing outside, speaking in various languages, some quite familiar to him, reminding of his homeland. Moments of silence, moments of junkies fighting over a dose of shisha, a living world that sounded so hostile, so strange to him.

This was Socrates' Street. A street named after the greatest philosopher of all times. A dirty, noisy, decadent alley that is so distant from that Greece that he loved, that of the Classical era. And he's locked in there, in a dark cage, like the one Plato had described once, but well aware of his condition - a total dead end. There was nothing to hope about tomorrow, there was absolutely no plan for him. He was away from his books, from the lectures he attended, from whatever he was dreaming to achieve.

But he didn't really care. He had finally found love. That weird love, that is unacceptable for both his own and his lover's values.

Everything seemed totally wrong, but Darius was feeling content. He got up and started walking around, trying to find something that he could write with. A pen, a pencil, a marker, whatever. After stumbling on a few shelves and old chairs he gave up trying. It's not wise to make any kind of noise in a place where people could easily break in without getting caught, either out of curiosity or in need of a temporary shelter, just like him. Well... maybe not exactly like him.

He went back to his safe place - the fitting room... he started searching through his clothes... and there he found it. An element of his disguise, a red lipstick.

He could hardly see anything, and there wasn't a chance of switching on any kind of light.

Darius laid on the floor, looking at the dark ceiling.

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

He used lipstick to write across his torso.

“I’ve got nothing, but I’ve had everything. Thank you, Allah”.

Then he closed his eyes. Now he could only hear his heart. And he could only feel the moisture of tears on his face...

To be honest, he wouldn’t mind if he never woke up again. He wouldn’t mind at all.

32 | WORSE AND WORSE

Menelaos was on the news again. There was a lot of hype on TV and social media about his connection with his wife's death. But he was not a freshman in the publicity game. Standing before a judge, playing the part of the accused was not something he had not experienced. But this time it was different. An alleged femicide is always a very popular topic - gossip TV shows had shown great interest for an interview with him. He had to deal with this entire thing very cautiously, because any wrong move in the media game could become catastrophic. So, he had to manipulate the hype so that this wouldn't become a tsunami of disapproval and rejection. He wasn't stupid enough to use threats or offer direct bribes to the media. But there was always another way. His "legal" companies could become sponsors or pay for ads in certain shows or papers, plus, of course, he had to provide the media with some useful (and probably misleading) information that were focusing on his own version of the story.

Of course, that included a certain dose of post-mortem humiliation for poor Judy. A great and intriguing story to feed the monstrous appetite of the media was already available. The poor middle-aged rich wife of an ambiguous entrepreneur had a passionate affair with a sexy young Albanian that worked for her husband. Some of their sex tapes leaked on the Internet, the sexy guy had mysteriously disappeared - was he dead too? after the lady was found dead. No, it could not be her husband. "I tried to protect her. I tried to erase these videos from the Internet, I paid a lot of money for this, I paid the best lawyers to sue the sites that showed that damned video, but, as you know, when something is on the internet, there's no way to totally erase it. Despite her being unfaithful, I loved my wife. This news made her lose her mind. She started doing things without asking me. After her death I found out she had hired people from the underworld in order to trace who posted that video. I had warned her not to do so. I know I'm no saint. I know I have enemies too and maybe these people want to. But I love her. And I swear to God I'll do anything to help the authorities find the truth."

He knew very well that he couldn't persuade all the people. But he was not going to run for president, and, anyway, it is impossible to be liked by everyone. Of course, a lot of people would still accuse him, but who really cares? He was very familiar with hearing rumors about his actual sources of income, about former colleagues that suddenly were declared missing, about his primary role in Greece's corruption hierarchy. He didn't give a shit. He knew that many of all those rumors were nothing but true. But the main thing was to remain untouched by justice. Menelaos only cared

about having power. Power that made him richer. So this narrative of the sad widower that may feel a little guilty for his late wife possibly paying for his own conflicts with antagonists, could be a good story for the media for the 15 minutes - or 15 days that the topic would be trending.

A few weeks after, he was aware, a new “scandal” with sex and blood would appear, and this story would go down on the tv shows timetables. His lawyer’s phone would ring less frequently for an interview. Of course, the fire will light again if and when a trial starts, but this will take really long. The Greek judicial system is moving so slowly that this might happen a decade after - the public interest would be definitely less - if anyone remembers.

That’s how Menelaos had passed his entire life. Doing his dirty work in the darkness, and casting light only on what could create confusion, and allow him to continue to act in the shadow of his “legitimate” profile.

No, he didn’t feel good. Do you think that the bad guys always feel good? Then it must be fine to be a bad guy, but when You're in this kind of business my friend, there's not the slightest chance you can sleep for an entire night without waking up, and I'm not implying a potty emergency. You must turn your heart to stone, you have to forget about feelings of sympathy, forget every human part of yourself that might indicate weakness to your adversaries. This is what they are waiting for: finding out your own Achilles's deadly spot and shooting you there.

Menelaos already had a lot of trouble to deal with. Any kind of confrontation with the Party would definitely become an obstacle to his laissez-faire areas

in the center of Athens. Of course, he avoided hiring people from the Party -he never was fond of their fascist ideas- and he was always very cautious in order not to get involved in any of their fields of interest. As he was in the street for longer than the Party, some of the Party boys used to work for him. Of course, the Party offered him a more recent occupation, in the name of the Nation. They didn't smuggle drugs; they were just beating up people for the holy purpose of protecting the nation. A clean and appreciated work that offered them a messianic allure, although their own personal Jesus would have probably crucified the real one.

But now Menelaos was willing to challenge the Party boys in a certain safe way, that wouldn't prevent him from his undercover merchandise plans, but, as a good former communist that changed his career after the second world collapsed, he wanted the fascist assholes to draw back. Acting like they're the governors of the Athens center should be halted as soon as possible.

Well, there was a certain missing link that could help him with his plan. Plus, sometimes you have to form an unholy alliance to deal with emergency issues.

“I must admit I’m astonished”, said Nassa when she heard Menelaos’ voice on the phone. “Are you willing to confess?”

“If you still believe I did it, I shouldn't have called you. We’re on the same side on this. I want to find who did it too...”

“We’ll never be on the same side. Why should I believe you? You had been abusing her for years.”

“Maybe I’m a monster, but not that kind of monster. I need your help to find the murderer. Do

you think I could pretend to have a stroke after they told me she was dead?”

“Well, I’m not sure about that, but I’m quite sure you’re able to purchase a fake diagnosis”.

“I am. But I did not.”

“I’m not like those fascists... You know I used to be a member of the Communist Party”.

“I think I have extensively examined your biography. I’m not the suitable person to help you. I couldn’t do this to Judy... At least let’s show some respect to her memory”.

“I know your ex is one of them. This is maybe why you don’t want to mess up with the Party”.

“What are you trying to say, Menelaos? Just leave him out of this thing”.

“I can’t do that. I know about the poor Arab guy... These bastards will pay. But there’s one thing I cannot understand”.

Nassa was feeling awkward - she couldn’t really decide what kind of point Menelaos was trying to make. What does he know?”

“Your protege is safe as far as I’m concerned. But I didn’t expect that you’d be so kind-hearted”.

“This is none of your business.”

“I know you’re a human rights activist. And I appreciate this. You know, I’m helping many immigrants too. In my own way”.

“You’re not helping them. You’re taking advantage of their need to work”.

“Well, I’m an entrepreneur, not a charity foundation. Did you know your little Arab was working for me?”

“What do you mean?”

“He was one of my delivery boys - you know, just

picking up packages and delivering them- on foot, always. He was a very kind guy; he had that intelligent aura that made you forget he's a little more dark-skinned than the average Greek. You know, we claim that we are not racists, but if you want to deliver orders to a high-class apartment around Sintagma and Kolonaki, your guy is a perfect choice. He has an exotic look - he's quite handsome, he's discreet enough to avoid asking questions about the content of the package, and he speaks excellent Greek”.

Nassa couldn't believe that Darius was a part of Menelaos' network.

“What? Did you think he's a saint? Well... he is. He is a loyal and decent worker, always on time. I have never met him in person. I cannot even remember his name... But the fascist bastards probably knew his connection to my companies. Didn't you ever consider why they attacked him? “

“He was wearing the same T-shirt as Tony”.

“I have paid for that T-shirt for most of my guys. They're original merchandise you know. This is for the guys that deliver packages to rock parties and clubs. I want them to have a similar look to the client's place. Of course, Tony no longer did deliveries. But he's a fan of the group... Do you think that the Party boys would attack and treat a random person with such brutality? You can't believe this, you're such a smart lawyer to believe such a thing.”

Nassa remained silent, trying to process all this new information. Of course, she was wondering, “Why did they choose Darius” - but the thing was too complicated to give this detail more attention.

“It makes sense, Nassa. They knew that one of my guys had sex with that poor girl. They had no pic; they

just knew he was not Greek. Well, they attacked the wrong man. Lucky Tony - he's probably now showing off in his village..."

"So Tony is in Albania."

"Well, maybe I shouldn't share this detail with you. What did you think? That I killed him?"

"He was Judy's partner. Can you blame me?"

"He was just a toyboy. Well, she might have feelings for him. But he's just fucking around. I think I did the right thing. He's safe there".

"And he cannot testify against you, of course."

"He wouldn't testify anyway. He was a son to me. I made him what he is today. And you know what, he doesn't know anything about Judy's murder. Let's say I had the chance to ask him a lot of questions. He knows nothing."

"How can I be sure he's alive?"

"He has a new day and a new ID there. And... a new Instagram account. You can find him as @supertony. He left his family village in the north, as far as I know he's now moved to Sarande and works as a receptionist in a hotel - a good friend of mine accepted to offer him a chance to escape from feeding pigs at his father's village".

"Looks like everyone in this world is your puppet..."

"I just tried to protect him".

"By making sure he remains silent".

"You know, there are many ways to achieve silence. But I respect the people that I work with. I wish I could do the same with your guy... What's his name?"

"Darius".

"Yes... the wise buddy, that's his nickname - I think I've never met him in person".

“You can still help him right now... It’s not late...”

“Well... I can send him abroad. But... would your ex-husband approve?”

“I shouldn’t even begin this conversation. My husband has nothing to do with this. He just offered a wounded man help.”

“Well... he’s affiliated with the Party. And the Party will not appreciate his behavior”.

“Well... I think that ending this affiliation could be a positive development”.

“They don’t like traitors... It’s worse to be an ex-member of the party than an opponent...”

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Menelaos? Are you threatening that you’re going to tell them?”

“I’m not that kind of person. I’m just telling you he’s in trouble. Bigger than you think”.

“Could you just leave Alex out of this?”

“Your ex is fucking your Arab friend. As simple as this. And it’s a matter of time for the Party to find out about this. And then they ‘ll fuck him too.”

Nassa hung up. Things are getting more and more complicated.

33 | NUDE DAYS

There weren't too many of them. But in a world that was becoming more and more paranoid those were their only way to enjoy each other's company. It was not just about sex, though it was apparent that they had found a way to set themselves free from the initial timidity. Alexandros would come in the afternoon, after work, with a takeaway package for their lunch, and maybe a beer for himself. Darius insisted on denying drinking alcohol. He was always trying to tidy up their little nest by any means he had available. Now he had a small divan to sleep, but that had space just for one person. So, a towel on the floor was their only alternative luxury for making out, and sometimes having sex. Day by Day their bodies were becoming more and more familiar, one's arms could easily find a place on the other's body. Now there was no shame, at least they were forgetting about fame any time their bodies were united. And sometimes they remained naked on the floor next to each other for hours, telling each other jokes, playing chess or just sharing jokes

that weren't even funny. They were together, and they knew that it was impossible for their togetherness to last long.

But who really cared? They had a world of their own, one they couldn't enjoy out of the windows of this dusty abandoned place. They knew the limits of this world were so narrow. Darius couldn't even exist outside this room as himself. He was wearing his female clothes to get outside and walk for a while.

This is ridiculous Mr. Alex...he said. Maybe you think I'm a coward. Maybe I am. But I'm scared. I have lost everything. Even my own identity. You know what Mr. Alex...this might sound a little peculiar to you, but only when I am here with you, I feel I am a man.

"It's okay Darius. This is temporary. We're working on finding a way out of this madness. I can understand how you feel...."

Sometimes Darius was falling asleep on his chest, with Alex cuddling his curly thick hair. The most tormenting moment was when Alex had to leave. No, Darius was not complaining. But Alex was feeling so guilty to leave him naked and asleep. Sometimes he was thinking it might be better not to ever return to normal life, to stay forever in this hideaway. He was afraid he couldn't love him as much as Darius did, he couldn't define what he was feeling. A relieving sense of comfort and tenderness following their passionate moments was so fulfilling ... If only he could overcome the stress of going back home, alone, wearing the uniform that looked so tailor made for him but was a brilliant disguise.

He couldn't yet accept the fact that he was having sex with another man. Technically he felt that it was quite manly to be on top, and he was relieved by the

fact that Darius never asked them to switch roles. But deep down he was anxious about the moment that such a thing would happen. Sometimes he was catching himself getting prepared for such an option. He could never see Darius as a woman, actually he detested seeing him in those female Arab clothes. He was making love to a man, Darius's body was thin but strong, he loved exploring his partner's body, and he felt so happy when I Rahim was responding with pleasure to his cuddling. They were both treating each other with absolute respect. To Alex, Darius was a spotlessly innocent object of desire, and to Darius Alex was a savior and an eromenos (a beloved) according to Plato... an older mentor that he was mentally and physically attached to.

Alex had learned to switch off his passion for that young man during his everyday activities. For I Rahim things were harder. He was putting on his female clothing and started wandering around, mostly to open archaeological sites and ancient streets of Athens. Acropolis, The Hephaestion, Keramikos... Everything that reminded him of the life he used to have. The life he had totally lost, just because he was scared.

"I'm not Darius anymore, Mr Alex. I have nothing. Nothing at all. I'm not even Darius anymore. Look at me in these clothes... I cannot be myself. I'm myself only when I'm with you. But ... This is not the old Darius. This is someone I didn't know and I'm now discovering."

"I understand... I'm discovering a new self right now, of course I still enjoy the privilege of having my old life too... Darius..."

"What?"

"I don't know how this is going to end... I don't

know where we're going... I feel we are trapped”.

“We are, Mr. Alex. I understand this is not going anywhere... But you know what... We shouldn't spend our moments together thinking about something we don't know anything about”.

All they had was each other's nudity. When they were getting dressed, they were separated. When they were laying on a blanket on this floor, next to each other, that was all they had. They couldn't imagine anything beyond this one single scene that was repeating almost every day.

“I've always wanted to know exactly what's going to happen, Darius... I've always wanted to have a plan”.

“I know. Every Time, you come at the same time... I've noticed you even have the same pattern in the order you're getting dressed and undressed”.

“Looks like I'm totally predictable”.

“Now, you're not. I know that this is too much for you...”

“I'm scared too, Darius”.

Yes, he was scared. Every single moment he was scared. All Alex wanted was a quiet life. Even if that life had such a pathetic content as his.

“But you know what? I'm glad that I've met you”.

“Anyone else would consider all this as a misfortune”.

“To tell the truth, there are moments that I wish this couldn't happen... I wish you had never had the chance to feel this pain. But what you've been through gave me the chance to meet you... To meet a wonderful person...”

“I'm not a wonderful person, Mr. Alex.”

“I've never been with any other man in my life,

Darius. I've never felt anything about any other man and I'm almost sixty years old... I'm an old man, not this kind of old man that craves young flesh. I just felt this weird connection with you... I'm not sure that I can explain why. I just know that this is happening, but I cannot describe what "this" is".

"Do we have to explain everything? Do we have to try to understand?"

Well, they didn't... Alex was bringing him books - classical works - Darius was reading poetry to him from the original text. Alex couldn't read Homer, Darius could - and this was so admirable about him.

"You are Greek too, Darius. You are Hellene... Because you are educated like the Hellenes".

"Well, typically I'll always be a barbarian to some people's eyes".

"If they knew your love for Greece, they wouldn't dare touch you".

"Well, I didn't have much time to show them my knowledge of Greek. And I truly don't believe that they would appreciate it at all... an immigrant will always be an immigrant to their eyes. And you know what? I don't care about what they think of me. I care about your thoughts about me Mr. Alex. I care about the man that I love."

Alex was feeling awkward every time Darius was confessing his love. This was all way beyond his beliefs and values, or at least what he considered as beliefs and values until then. There was still a part of him that was questioning his affection for that kind of a person. Because this kind of person in many of his qualities was not matching the criteria of what he accepted as a decent social contact. There are thousands of Darius's wanderings in the streets of Athens, but Alex would

never feel the slightest kind of interest for any of them. On the contrary, he would possibly avoid hanging around with them, he still can remember himself moving further inside the bus corridor when immigrants were sitting or standing near him.

“Darius... It's hard for me to explain... What I see in you is your passion for this ancient spirit that fascinates me as much as you... I'm in love with your Greekness...your philosophic mind... your passion for that great heritage...”

“But now we're two naked men next to each other. A while ago we had sex... our bodies were together and there was no philosophy involved, Mr. Alex...”

“You're trembling Darius... you're cold...”

“Mr. Alex...I'm not the reincarnation of a Greek philosopher. I'm not even the decent person you consider me to be... I'm not the innocent, pure and crystal-clear person you think...”

“Both of us are no saints, Darius. I don't want to know... all I want to know ...”

“I was one of Menelaos' couriers... I was into big shit... I knew that I was carrying was something illegal, but I never found the strength to open one of those fucking packages...”

“Please Darius I don't want to know”. Alex was still caressing Darius in his arms...

"I have lied to you, Mr Alex..."

"Please stop talking... I don't wanna know. I don't care about your past. I wasn't there. And I don't know anything about the future... I don't know if there's any kind of future for both of us.

"There is not... but this is why I want you to know the truth... You have loved the ideal Darius like Plato would have done. But you're holding a human being,

who has committed many sins... who is not only an enlightened scholar that you only can admire... I am ashamed of many things I have done Mr. Alex... and know that we are close to the end, so I feel it is my duty to be honest.”

Alex was looking at his lover. His eyes were moist, his limbs were nervous. Being there together was so extremely beautiful.

“Please... don’t look at me like this, Alex...”

“Why shouldn't I? You're so beautiful.”

“I'm just a piece of shit, Alex...I feel guilty for having lied to you.”

“No matter what, I can see your truth. You’re here next to me, you look so clear and transparent. I don’t want to know anything more”.

“There have been other people before you, Alex... Other men”.

Alex was trying not to show that he was feeling more and more weird. But he was feeling the room was getting darker, colder, and hostile...

“I have been with other men, for money. I needed the money... I wanted to stay here and finish what I had started”.

“So, you chose the easy way”. Alex’s voice had changed. It was trembling, just like Darius’s body.

“If I had a choice, I wouldn’t.”

“Please, let’s not talk about this anymore... I need to go”. Alex got up nervously and started putting on his clothes.

“Please...”

“It’s fine... I just have to go... It’s your life, your choices... And I appreciate that you finally shared this with me. You could have done so from the very beginning... This entire thing, the poor virgin boy that

was raped by the fascists was not necessary... “

“Alex, this has nothing to do with the rape... I never lied about that...”

“How could I tell... Please... I don't feel like talking about it right now... I need to go back home... I've got to prepare some paperwork for tomorrow...”

Alex looked too cool - this looked too good to be true. He said goodnight, though without a kiss. Darius said nothing. He stood up, walked towards the dirty windows, and watched Alex calmly closing the store's door and walking towards the metro station. No sign of feeling upset. For a second Darius realized his solitude and nakedness, standing in the middle of this dark, abandoned place, that was his little heaven cage a few minutes ago. He was suddenly freezing - he ran and hid under one of the blankets on the floor - he covered his entire body - Alex's perfume was still around, and so was his body's odor. The night had fallen, the alley was dark and quiet - his familiar junkies were the only walkers, murmuring curses that he couldn't understand, in many different languages. It seemed like the first time that Darius had noticed these curses. He felt them like nails in his ears, like threats coming from an outer world that was, as always, full of fear and desperation. Now he was a part of this world. He was nude, alone, locked inside a deserted place. Just like the past few days, but now it was not the same any longer.

Darius started mumbling a prayer. One of his own.

34 | WATERFALL

Heavy rain in Athens is a curse from Zeus - or maybe Poseidon, to be more accurate. Traffic gets horrible, cars and buses might get stuck for hours, streets, even in the center of the city can turn into tropic rivers. The metropolis of Athens was built without a plan. The only plan was to build every free space, for at least five decades. Sometimes, in the narrow alleys, rainwater “waterfalls” wash the dirty buildings and end up on people’s heads. “A rain falls, the state paralyzes” is a motto commonly used in this country. Everyone acknowledges the problem, nobody does anything to solve it, because “We live in Greece, what do you expect?”. Maybe the buses or trolleys that take forever to arrive at the stops, with hundreds of people under umbrellas patiently waiting for them, without many chances to finally get in. This rainy chaos is a total normality in the city of light - probably it’s meant to operate only under sunlight.

Alex never complains. He always walks patiently to his house, no matter if it rains. He prefers this to

waiting for the bus or arguing over the next taxi. Sometimes he gets soaking wet, but he doesn't really care. Well, maybe he does a little, but today he had many reasons not to be bothered by any external conditions. What was happening inside his head was way fiercer than this common rainfall. Plus, if it wasn't raining, one could see a sample of human tears on the tip of his eyelid.

He was always quiet. A typical public servant that was just doing his work, that never wanted to establish close friendships with anyone, that everyone thought was just indifferent - if he wasn't so dedicated to his projects, dates and duties, one might say that he didn't exist in the office. He had no enemies, because nobody could see him as a possible threat. Neither had he any close friends, because it was hard to discover anything that attracts one's attention. He didn't feel bad about it. That's the way he is, and he could not change. He could not trust anyone, except for Nassa, even after they were divorced. But now he knew that he could not discuss this matter with her.

He trusted that young man. He adored him. He believed in him. They got so close. And it would be perfect if he had remained a happy man that ignored everything. "Why did you tell me Darius? Why did I have to know that you have lied to me?" This was the first question that was repeating itself inside his head. A question that remained unspoken.

It's been fifteen days since he hadn't gone back to that empty store near Omonia Square. He hadn't seen him - he didn't want to see him. No, he was not angry. He was scared. He was betrayed, but fear was the sentiment that had prevailed. He was afraid to have to hear his explanations. He was afraid to see him crying

and begging him to stay. He was afraid to be close to him, next to him, feel him... No, he couldn't deal with it. This was a total mistake and should be over. There were also some torturing thoughts that crossed Alex's mind from time to time. "Is he alright?" "Does he have anything to eat?" He was sure that Nassa would have provided him with everything necessary. Various thoughts... "Has Darius talked to Nassa?" He shouldn't, that would be a total disgrace. Nassa should never find out about their affair. "Did Nassa know about his past or he fooled her too?" He couldn't believe that he was just one person in a long row of Darius's sexual partners. He believed he was the only one, and that was another aspect of their unique relationship. Just like Darius was the only one for him. The only man that he felt something strong for. The only man that made him betray his traditional values. What would his dad or grandpa say? Shame, great shame for the family, for that Greek family of heroes and soldiers. What had he become? A humble public servant that never had any chance of becoming a hero. And, furthermore, a poustis, a homosexual, who was getting laid with an illegal immigrant... What could sound worse to his ancestors' poor ears?

What was hurting him the most, though, was that he was just one of this boy's lovers. Or should he say "clients"? That young man was so intelligent, he looked so brilliant-minded, Alex felt honored to be his kinder soul, he adored him partly because he admired him - and Darius looked like he admired him as well. But maybe he was just pretending. Maybe it was one of this toyboy's cunning techniques. God knows how many times he has used those very same citata and that sophisticated profile for his clients. Well, this couldn't

be true - people who are looking for cheap sex with immigrants don't really care about their cultural status. They're just craving for young flesh that doesn't need any active brain cells. "Did you talk to them about Plato before or after the blowjob Darius?" "Were you mumbling verses from Euripides when they were fucking you that night?". More and more questions, getting worse and worse and more vulgar and harsh, especially when Alex was alone, when he had nothing else to distract him.

Work was this time unable to serve as a full remedy to his condition. Today, the weather was not helping at all - all this out-of-tune concert of car horns, thunder and curses was rather a factor that encouraged more introspection.

His phone rang. It was Nassa. He didn't respond. Once, twice, three times. A text message came a few minutes later.

"Alex, I've got good news for Darius. Maybe I can enroll him in a family reunification program. I managed to find his mother in Germany. The paperwork and all the bureaucracy might take about one month. I'll go tell him this evening. I know he wouldn't accept to leave Greece easily, but he can continue his studies in Classics there."

Alex turned off the phone. Well, there's going to be a happy end in this after all. He's going to leave, and everything is going to be forgotten.

"Forgotten, not forgiven". Well... deep down he felt relieved. Darius would travel far away, there wasn't a chance that he'd see him ever again. Raining was getting harder - and he could feel that his jeans and shoes had started to be annoyingly soaking. Maybe it's better this way. Maybe he's going to become a great

scholar, or even a luxury toyboy, or both. He's certainly going to make it.

"You used me, Darius... I benefited you, and you exploited me... You didn't have to get laid with me, you didn't have to lie to me, you didn't have to hurt me. You could have achieved your goals without devastating me". More unspoken thoughts.

Rain was harder, so he kept walking towards his neighborhood. "You devastated me. And now you're leaving. You're leaving me..."

Damn it, he was almost sixty years old, and that guy fooled him like he was a little child. An idiot. He shouldn't have let that happen. He shouldn't be so naive. But Darius was kind, he looked so innocent, like a saint of another religion. But maybe he was the Satan dressed up just to make Alex tumble into the reign of sin. How could he get over this? He would never tell anyone, and nobody would ever find out, unless... Unless Darius... No, this is not possible. He couldn't. He's a Muslim, he would never reveal anything. But what if he says anything to Nassa? That would be a total disaster. Your ex-wife finds out that you're no longer a man. Well, it's been fifteen days since he hasn't seen Darius. What if he has talked to her? What if he was revenge? Well, he cannot prove it. He couldn't have any photos or videos. His phone didn't have a camera. The only thing was that picture of Darius that Alex had taken that day... But it's gone too, together with Alex's old phone. There's no evidence. Whoever took it probably threw away the SIM card and just sold it - there's nothing, absolutely nothing...

He was close to Victoria Square when he felt someone pushing him towards the entrance of an old building... The next thing was two hands around his

neck and a full-face mask on his head.

“I don’t have time... where’s your Arab pussy?” Alex felt a cold metal on his belly, “Don’t waste my time... I can rip your guts in a second, mother fucker”.

“Please” ...

“What, you old fucking fag?”

“Please... I have friends in the Party.”

“Fuck the Party, I want two words, Street, and number”.

“Socrates street, number...”

“Spit it out”. Alex was terrified. He leaned on the building’s door, trying not to collapse, but things were worse. He was suffocating.

“48”.

“Now you’re a good girl”. Well, this was a different voice. Of course. The two hands were still around his neck... The knife was no longer pushing his belly. “Now listen. You’ll never get your mask out for the next five minutes. Then you’ll go back to your house... And forget all about this. We’ll forget about you too... You shouldn’t worry... You are a good girl, and you’ll remain a good girl... and nothing happens...”

As they left him, he collapsed outside the door. That might last a few minutes, until a passenger noticed that weird aspect of a well-dressed man with a totally non-matching gull face mask sitting like a beggar outside that building door.

“Sir... Sir... Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thank you. I’m fine. Totally fine.”

He was still looking at the world outside his full-face mask. He took it off and saw that the passenger had left one euro next to him.

His head was empty.

Everything is over.

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

“You need to go home. Stand on your fucking feet and go home...”

35 | CALL ME MAYBE

“They burnt it down, Nassa. But nobody got injured or hurt. They didn’t find anyone inside”.

“Well, there’s a lot to tell the owner, thank God, I’d persuaded him a couple of years ago to make an insurance contract. Otherwise, he’d lost everything. And of course, he will never know I was responsible for offering accommodation to an immigrant chased by the Party”.

“Do you think he had escaped before they arrived?”

“Well, all we know is he wasn’t there. He won’t answer any calls.”

“Could your ex have any idea where he is?”

Alex was not answering Nassa’s calls either. He hadn’t reacted to her text message about the solution she was working on for Darius to move abroad.

“I don’t know if Alex knows. But I’m sure they must have taken him”.

“I must notice, Nassa, that this is not their style of operating. The Party boys want to present themselves as guardians of social security. A fire in the center of

Athens isn't their style, since this place was not anything connected somehow to immigrants or illegal actions. Besides, Darius is an eponymous target for them. They would never make him disappear. The most preferable option for them would be arresting him and handing him over to us. He would be put to jail without any kind of bail, and their friends there would kill him before trial. Nobody would care, everyone would be talking about the "unwritten law of prison".

"Well, maybe Darius tried to disappear... Maybe this is all a coincidence. I don't know what to say anymore".

"Nassa, don't you think that you have dedicated too much energy for this case... I can understand your humanitarian motive, I know about your hidden passion for activism, but maybe the risk for you is getting bigger..."

"I know... But there's that guy out there. The best scenario is that he's hiding somewhere dressed as a woman, apparently desperate."

"Could he have set this thing up?"

"Well, I don't think he's got the guts for such a thing. He's a timid guy that cares only for books."

"... and delivers cocaine packages... and sells himself to horny fat middle-aged Greeks in Omonia. You shouldn't underestimate that part of him."

Nikos was right. This was a side of Darius that she hadn't analyzed a lot. That brilliant and sophisticated guy was also one of the hundreds of anonymous illegal immigrant sex workers that were eager to offer any kind of services at a ridiculously low price in dark parks and alleys.

"Does your ex know about his boyfriend?"

“I regret telling you about this...”

“Maybe you’re trying to process it too, Nassa... Do you know how many distinguished members of the bourgeoisie are hanging around with guys younger than Darius, in the dark?”

“Alex is not that kind of person. You don’t know him as well as I do”.

“It seems to me that you don’t know him either, Nassa. But this is none of my business. I mean, as an officer.”

“Well, this is not exactly a discussion between an officer and a lawyer.”

“Indeed, it’s not. He’s a kind guy. I like him. I’m just trying to decipher his dark side”.

“I think that finding him is what matters the most, Nikos.”

Her phone rang. It was Darius’s number. To be accurate, it’s Nassa’s old Nokia phone that she gave to Darius in order to communicate. “Can you trace him?” - she asked Nikos, and his nod could be translated into “maybe, maybe not. Try to keep the line open, until I contact Cyber Crime Unit”

“Darius... Where are you?”

“Hey, Nassa, this is Tony”.

“Tony! I thought you were in Albania.”

“Well, it looks like I’m back... It’s not that I wanted to return, but they insisted”.

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know... I had a bag in my head all the way... I’m with your friend... I think we’re moving, or maybe it’s because I’m high... These people have given me good stuff back home”.

“Darius?”

“Yes... the Arab guy... Well... I don’t have much

time... There's a dude with his gun pointing to my head... The other hand is holding the phone. I'm tied up. Together with your friend."

"Is Darius well?"

"I don't know... He's kind of in a trance. I think they've drugged him too... They've tied us together... Fuck, he's talking so much in his sleep... Sometimes he cries, he laughs..."

Nassa didn't know how to deal with this.

"How do I know he's there with you?"

"Your fucking Nokia has no camera... And I don't know what they did with mine... Wait... Bro, take it easy... he's fragile..."

A noise like a slap was heard, probably its destination was Darius's face.

"Wake up mother fucker".

Nassa could hear Darius's voice.

"I'm sorry... Alex... I'm sorry". Then he started mumbling something in Farsi.

"Do you believe me now, Nassa?... Now he won't stop talking..."

Tony was not lying. They had them both. But who? The Party? What did they know about Tony? Nikos had opened his tablet and gestured to Nassa to try to speak more".

"Nassa... can you hear me?"

She knew that voice. Tony was scared to death. And who could blame someone that thought that had escaped from something that he caused, and now he's tied in the middle of it?

"Listen... There's this cafe... At Hilton hotel... This really cool one... You should go there... Now... Or... He says he'll shoot me. A table is reserved in your name. ... But you should come now... Come alone.

No company. Hey, dude? What else do you want to say?"

Darius's cries and Farsi laments were heard as a music carpet under his voice. "Would you shut the fuck up, bro? Nassa... Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I'm leaving now, tell them... How do I know you're safe."

The call ended, rather unexpectedly. That was probably not Tony's decision.

"They were in some kind of vehicle. The signal was moving but now the phone is shut down. They were somewhere in Piraeus, near the port - I have sent my people to search the area, at least we might find the phone. Are you sure you want to go to Hilton?"

Nassa's phone rang again. It was Yannis, her son.

"Hi, sweetie, say it fast, I'm in the middle of something really important".

"Mom, dad had a heart attack - he's in Hippokration hospital."

Well, this is typical Alex. A silent person that will never bother you. But when he needs you, the time is totally wrong.

"I'll go there as soon as possible. Where are you now?"

"I'm going there. Can you come over as soon as possible? He doesn't have anyone else."

"Ok Yanni, I'll be there. Stay calm and if anything happens before I get there, just call me. And remember, it's not our fault that he doesn't have anyone else. It's no use feeling guilty for everything, Yanni. Where's your sister?"

"Well, she's on a school trip to Korinthos. I didn't call her. She wouldn't care anyway".

"Don't be so sarcastic, Yanni. You're older".

“I know, I’m the man of the family. Got to hang up to catch the train.”

Well, Alex had a heart attack. Is this a coincidence? She didn’t know anything about him having heart problems. Could he know anything?

Yanni was just seventeen, could he handle the possibility that his dad won’t make it?

The kids didn’t feel any kind of connection to Alex - even when they were little. He was rather distant, it’s not that he didn’t love his kids, he just didn’t know how to express his feelings, not only to his kids. Yanni could never forgive his dad for not offering him the chance for a role model.

“I got to go, Nikos. I’ll go to Hilton and then to Hippokration, it’s only ten minutes away”.

“Well, should I come with you? I mean... I can have my coffee on another table and keep my mind on you. I know their cafe is a rip-off but their macchiato is great.”

“They said I should go there alone”.

“I knew this would be your answer. So, I have an alternative. How about this little silver brooch? I think it matches your coat perfectly. Plus, there’s a mic connecting you with my phone. I’ll be ten minutes away, I guess Yanni might need a little help with his dad. I hope your ex doesn’t get another heart attack when he sees me”.

Nassa accepted the offer. “Just remind me not to accept any ring you’re about to offer me before checking it for hidden gems”.

“You should always beware of cops.”

Nassa pinned her new silver brooch on her coat, took her purse and closed the door behind her. “Thanks Niko”.

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

“Take care. Stay in the lobby or in the cafe. Don’t follow anyone anywhere”.

36 | SICK AND TIRED

“Well, dad... I know you’re scared, but the doctors said there’s nothing to worry about. Everything’s going to be fine”.

His son’s voice was the first thing Alex heard, as he was coming back to the world of the living.

“Yanni...”

“I know, it’s been a long time since we’ve been hanging around together... But here we are... Don’t worry, mom will be here anytime.”

“I’m sorry, son... I didn’t mean to bother you with this. I don’t know how they got your number”.

“Maybe from your social security details... They found you outside your house. You fell on your doorstep. Lucky you, if you had gone inside nobody would have noticed”.

“Well... don’t you think it would be better that way...”

“No dad... cut the crap. You’re going to be fine. They said the cardiac arrest was rather because of stress. The doctor said you have to take some pills, lose

some weight and get some rest for a while... A surgery might also be needed in a few weeks, depending on various tests you must take.”

“You know I won’t survive a surgery... I’m afraid of anesthesia.”

“Well, dad, it looks like you shouldn’t. You know, you had a minor operation in order to survive, and you did very well...”

“They should ask my permission”.

“Well, even if they did, you couldn’t listen. You’re stronger than you think...”

Alex wasn’t fully aware of what had happened. After he was attacked, he returned home. He was crying and throwing up all night... The next morning, he woke up like nothing had happened, took a shower, had breakfast, brushed his teeth, wore his neatly ironed clothes and opened the door to go to work. And then the pain came. It was strong and quick; he can’t remember much. He collapsed on his own doorstep. He remembered nothing after that. He didn’t have any time to panic, any time to think that he might die, he had no memories of the dark tunnel and the white light that he’d read so much about. Absolutely nothing. An enormous pain, he falls and that’s it. Probably what he could describe as an ideal death, that finally didn’t happen.

“I can’t remember anything... So, I had an operation. Not a single thing...”

“You don’t have to bother yourself - it doesn’t matter, dad. All you need is some rest.”

“Your son is right, Alex”. Nikos’ voice was heard. He was sitting close to the door of the room, trying to have the proper distance from that rather uncomfortable moment of father-son bonding. “I

spoke to the doctors - One of the cardiologists is my friend, he's really good. He said you were very lucky to get away with this. You're going to be fine."

"You're her boyfriend, aren't you?" said Alex.

"I think we've met before. Let's say we collaborate with your ex-wife in many cases, including this of Darius".

"I don't think it's a good time to discuss this," said Alex. "Son, you shouldn't put yourself in all this trouble".

"Dad, I'm not in any kind of trouble. Plus, we had a test in Algebra today, so I should thank you for this".

"You're making me feel worse".

"Yanni, there's a great coffee shop across the street. I really hate hospital coffee, so I'll buy you one if you go and get it..."

"Espresso with stevia, right?" said Yanni and left.

"I'm glad you're getting along with my children. I don't think he knows what kind of coffee I like", said Alex.

"You don't drink coffee... that's what he's told me. Listen, Alex, you should relax now. If you want to share with me what happened to you, I'm glad to listen. I'm here as an officer, nothing else..."

Alex felt uncomfortable. He couldn't help comparing himself to Nikos. He looked younger and stronger - he's working out a lot. He's handsome, definitely - he might be younger than Nassa, he looks kind, of course, she deserves something better than her ex-husband. Should he trust him? If Nassa does, then he could too... He's better in sex than Alex.

"Alex, I feel you're scanning me right now, but... I need you to forget my relationship with your wife. I want you to focus on what happened. The more you

remember, the more helpful you can be”.

“They attacked me. They threatened me. They had a knife on my belly. And I gave them the address. I don’t know who they were. They were speaking Greek very well.”

“Were they from the Party?”

“I don’t know... I couldn’t see much... They put a full-face mask on my head. It lasted for so little, just a minute... And I gave them the address... And now... did they find him? Did they kill him?”

“No. They didn’t. This is all I can say so far. For your own good, you should get some rest. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did everything wrong”.

“Well, Alex, listen, you need to look after yourself a little. You survived a heart attack. A serious one. You did the best you could. And we’ll try to fix everything, OK?”

“I abandoned him... I shouldn’t be so selfish. He is a man in need. I should understand. But I got furious when I found out that he lied to me. I felt betrayed again and I was angry at him, as well as at myself, for being so credulous, so ridiculously credulous”.

“You don’t stop blaming yourself. It’s totally useless. Try to recover - you are no God; you cannot fix anything. It is totally normal to feel betrayed when someone you care about a lot unveils another face that you didn’t know...”

“Wait... I...”

“There’s no need to explain, man. You didn’t do anything wrong. And you don’t have to apologize for your feelings...”

“Wait... I didn’t say that...”

Yanni got inside with the coffees... “Well dad, for

you, only hospital tea for today. Your little heart is broken”.

Alex reacted with a smile.

“Well, it looks like it is...,” said Alex.

Nikos asked them to excuse him for a second. “I’ll have to be distracted for a few minutes, please allow me to activate my Bluetooth headphones... You know, my job won’t allow me the luxury of a few idle moments, nor even the chance to visit a friend at the hospital”.

“You know what, Nick, I’m glad you’re getting along together, my old men... This is really cool.”

Nikos nodded that he agreed with a thumbs up gesture. But it was obvious that he was listening to something important. He seemed a little anxious - it definitely wasn’t a phone call. Yanni admired Nikos for all his gadgets - once he had said that he was seriously thinking about becoming a police officer, in the forensics department. Alex’s job was too boring to inspire his son, this was beyond any doubt. Another “con” in the comparison with mom’s new boyfriend.

“Hey, dad... You shouldn’t be so melancholic. You’re not alone in this. I’m here for you, remember? And mom will come anytime...”

“Thank you, Yanni. I don’t think I deserve it... I know I should have done more...”

“It’s fine, dad. I could have been more willing to see you when you asked me to.”

“Does your sister still hate me?”

“Oh, come on... She hates everyone. She hates Nikos too... You won’t believe what she told mom one day... No, don’t worry... Nikos is absorbed in whatever he’s listening to... and, anyway, he already knows. Your taste in men is getting worse and worse.

You shouldn't have divorced dad...

"Well... I could take this as some kind of compliment... Ouch!" Alex tried to laugh but pain stopped him.

"No worries, dad, it's probably the stitches..."

"Nikos looks worried... And I assume your mom is busy."

"She said she'll be here as soon as possible. Maybe she's stuck in traffic. She'll be there any minute. Listen, now you should focus on yourself. You need to recover. Mom will be alright. She can handle her own business, trust me."

Nikos got out of the room, Alex could see him walking to and fro in the corridor. Within a few minutes, he couldn't see him anymore.

37 | BACK TO BACK

“Are you alive, my man?”

Tony could only feel Darius’s back leaning on his, but it’s been about an hour since he had stopped his delirious monologues in Farsi. An hour of total silence, which is more torturing than any other noise. The place they were taken was totally silent, though Tony could hear vehicles passing by from time to time. It was dark in there so he couldn’t tell what time it was. All he had was that young man handcuffed with him, though he couldn’t see him.

“Darius! If you’re alive, just say something, my man”.

“How do you know my name?”

“OK, you’re back with us - you were stoned, my friend, for hours... I don’t know what they give you”.

“I want to throw up”.

“Not again, this is totally gross. Of course, I know you. We both worked for Menelaos.”

“I can’t see you... I don’t remember... Where are my clothes?”

“I don’t know... I asked myself the same when I woke up.”

“Where are we?”

“Well, I wish I knew. They asked me to call Nassa. They want her to meet someone at the Hilton Hotel”.

“Alex? Is Alex alright?”

“Hell, I don’t know. You were always saying something about that guy in your language. Listen, Darius, since we might not have any other chance to discuss this subject... I feel the need to apologize to you... Maybe I am responsible for what has happened to you... You know, we worked for the same guy, we wore the same T-shirt, they were looking for me, they busted you instead. I didn’t want any of this to happen.”

“They say I’m a rapist and a murderer...”

“I know. I’ve seen that on social networks. Trust me, Darius, I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do anything against her will.”

“But she killed herself. And now they blame everything on me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I wish I could have fixed everything. For me, it was just a one-night stand. I know everything is fucked up. I was in a relationship, she was married, I cheated on her too, I didn’t want to cause all this pain. They’re both dead, Darius. Judy and that poor girl. And it’s all my fault. I can’t stop thinking about this. I was sent back to Albania, I tried to change my life, partly I made it, but the one thing that can’t get out of my head is this feeling of guilt. Listen, my man. I’m prepared to take full responsibility. I’ll tell them I’m the one they should go after. I’m sorry, my man...”

“It doesn’t matter anymore... “

“It does to me. I want you to be safe again. I know

they harmed you. I know you suffered a lot”.

“I was raped. I’ve been hiding ever since. Nassa helped me.”

“She’s a great lady, my man... I respect her a lot. She has helped me too...”

“Listen, there’s no need to apologize. We cannot control everything - and we cannot judge everything by means of reason. We’re subject to randomness. To the coincidence of the moment. Something just happens without a reason- it can be our death.”

“You’re in the mood for philosophy, my man. I thought you were just one of Menelaos’ drug couriers... I’ve also heard rumors that you were hanging around Omonia square for a few euros...”

“I’m not a saint. I had to survive. And I couldn’t have a full-time job - I wanted to continue my studies. Menelaos was not paying well, you know that...”

“Well, I was one of his golden boys, but I can still remember the beginning of my career. So, you’re a studious person”.

“I study classical Greek. I wanted to finish my master’s and then continue with a doctorate”.

“Would you have more money, then?”

“Well, I should probably continue my two jobs in order to achieve this... But I didn’t mind. I believed that one day I’d be a university professor.”

“I’ve never heard of a professor that used to be a slut. I think that something is wrong with this story, my man. What if you ever meet one of your colleagues on the street?”

“Well, I have met a couple of them... But they would never admit, and I would never mention. They were still in the closet, they had families...”

“And you’d become one of them as well...”

“No... I hated myself for every single day I have done this. I’m a Muslim...”

“So, are you ashamed of being a gay Muslim or a Muslim prostitute? This is the one thing I cannot understand”.

“I don’t know. It’s all so complicated. I thought this was just something dirty I had to do to survive. I believed that one day everything would be over, I’ll have my office at campus, and then, maybe, a family, a regular family, a wife and children. But after they did that to me...”

“Well, my man... From what you’re saying, this was not the first time someone did this to you.”

“That was against my will. I always negotiated with the clients. I asked for condoms.”

“You were a pro, my man. So, you should have accepted that being forced to something you didn’t agree with, was an option”.

“Have they ever raped you? You could have told the difference”.

“Listen, my man. I’m straight. But some women can treat you worse than men, especially when you’re in need. Of course, we’re tough guys and guys never talk about these things. But you’re right. I haven’t been raped. Because you were in my place. I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for everything”.

“There’s no need to. If you can save yourself, do it. I don’t have anything to go back to. I don’t have any papers, I don’t have anyone out there, the fascists will keep on going after me, I can’t continue my studies. There’s no way out for me. I betrayed my family, my religion, I betrayed the one person I loved”.

“Well, talk to me about betrayal. But if there’s

someone out there that you care about, isn't it worth it to try to survive this shit?"

Darius started weeping.

"Come on, shut the fuck up, Darius. Listen... There is actually a reason out there".

"No, there's not. I lied to him too. He didn't know about my past, and he found out... the man he loved didn't exist. Besides, this could never work between the two of us. He had a life in the closet too."

"It's this Alex you were mumbling about... Is that Nassa's ex?"

Darius didn't answer.

"OK, he's Nassa's ex. I don't know a lot about him. I'd say he's a jerk for letting Nassa go, but since he's gay, well, it looks that I had a totally wrong impression. I thought he and Nassa have kids."

"They do. I was his first."

"But he wasn't your first. And he was pissed off, I guess."

"He was the first man I loved. This is all that matters. But this was hopeless too. I can't imagine that anything could happen... So, I don't stand a chance. Any chance. I don't care what happens to me..."

"Listen, we're both here in our underwear leaning on each other's back, handcuffed together. It's quite likely we share the same destiny. I'm not willing to die. I said I'll accept I'm responsible, I didn't say I'm going to give up. And I won't let you give up too... I'm wondering what Nassa will be doing. I hope she handles this well".

"You really believe in her," said Darius.

"Do we have any other hope? We don't even know who's brought us here. These guys outside are not really interested in chit-chatting with us. To an extent

that I suspect they might not want us to recognize them... Could I possibly know them?"

"Well, were you somehow connected to the Party?"

"No, man, what the fuck, I'm an immigrant too, I might be a heartbreaker, but I'm not a fucking fascist. Were they the same that caught you?"

"I don't know... It was my time of prayer. I guess they knew that. They rushed to the place I was hiding and then punched me in the head. I can't remember anything".

"Well, how can you be so sure that it's the Party?"

"They are the ones looking for me".

"Maybe, but... not for me. There's something that just doesn't fit. And... your hair is itching my back, my man..."

"And you're kind of sweaty, sir..."

They started laughing. This was rather a nervous reaction to their situation.

A disturbingly squeaky noise in the dark implied that a sliding door opened.

"Are you having a good time?"

Tony's sweat felt way colder than before. He knew that voice.

38 | BRUNCH AT HILTON

The Athens Hilton is a landmark of the Greek capital. Built in the 1960s, in a prominent spot near the center of the city, between two of the most emblematic highways, and really close to the National Gallery and the National Research Center. All built around the same age, are strong symbols of the era of post-war reconstruction of Greece. Though their modernist design is not really appreciated in the 2010s, they remind of that time of a rather overestimated optimism that Greece was a new growing power of the western world, situated under the mouth of communism. Of course, this threat of communism was the excuse for the military coup in 1967, that ended democracy, though not the constructional development.

Even in these years of crisis. Hilton is a place for the elite. Its luxury cafe, Byzantinon, is a place where you can see politicians, businessmen, high military officials, ambassadors, and, of course, journalists interacting with each other in various combinations while enjoying their gourmet brunch, or their exquisite

flavors of coffee, tea, in prices that a middle Athenian would find rather high.

That's why Nassa felt that it was a really weird venue for a meeting - a place of great publicity is not ideal for meetings about secrets, murders and, of course, kidnapped people. On the other hand, sometimes this openness can work as a curtain, a disguise hiding what should be hidden under the etiquette of a fancy brunch at a hotel.

When the kind *maitre* showed her the table that was booked in her name (a quite smart move for whoever made the reservation), to her great disappointment, nobody was waiting for her. The place was not really crowded, no more or less than every day. The first thing that got on her mind was that someone in there might be watching her. But she wouldn't show her insecurity all around. She grabbed the menu, pretending to be cool and patient, though she couldn't really read a single word of it.

Fifteen minutes of waiting lasted like an eternity. Quick glances at her phone didn't help with anything new.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The question in Menelaos' voice behind her head was rather sincere. He was there, not expecting to see her.

"I was about to ask the same", said Nassa in a crescendo of coolness. "I'm glad you didn't say this too loud - we're in a fancy place."

"You mean it wasn't you who arranged this?" Menelaos sat down - Nassa noticed he was dressed in a fancy suit. There was something attractive in his look. Of course, she had seen him a lot of times dressed in a suit, but now nothing implied that this man is coming

from the underworld of Athens.”

“Nice outfit, Menelaos. No, I didn’t invite anyone. You should tell me what’s happening.”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? My secretary said there was a phone call from the Parliament - One of its vice presidents wanted to meet me”.

“I knew about your deals with high society - I just couldn’t expect that your clients could also be members of the Parliament.”

“Oh, come on, my client list is much more impressive than you can imagine”.

“Is this your guy?” Nassa noticed Paraskevas Argiropoulos, an old man recently elected with the Party. As the Party was the third power in the Parliament, after the 2012 elections, they were entitled to elect a Vice President from their own Party. This was a scandal for the political system - A Party with apparently anti-democratic views having a key position in the house of Democracy, in a land that gave birth to democracy, was like a hungry wolf working as a shepherd. Argiropoulos was rather milder than the extremists that caused trouble occasionally, in the Parliament, but he was still considered a very dangerous man. A former army official that had a minor role in the junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, he was the “link” between the Party and the fans of that regime. He was one of the few that weren’t accused of being connected with pro-Nazi clans and groups. He was a very close friend of businessmen and archbishops of the Orthodox Church, a “human face” for the Party, who, of course, was fully aware of their criminal actions. Nassa always believed that these people were more dangerous than the brutal Party boys

- the latter were showing their real face to the world, and maybe they were convinced by their mentors that whatever they were asked to do was for the good of the country.

“My lady, Mr. Menelaos, it is so nice to meet you”.

“It is our honor, Mr. Vice President”.

Nassa would like to greet him with a “Fuck you” - this is the most uncomfortable situation she’s ever been present at. “Good morning”.

“I had an invitation from your PR department, Mr. Menelaos. But I wasn’t fully informed about the agenda of this meeting, nor the presence of Mrs... Mrs....?” Argiropoulos didn’t seem to know what they were about to discuss. Menelaos thought he was invited by Argiropoulos. Nassa was very curious to see what’s happening next, especially who would be opening the cards.

“Athanasia Petrides”.

“The lawyer?” said Argiropoulos. “I have read some of your articles. Of course, we have a totally different way of interpreting things, but I’m always paying attention to all views. Mr. Menelaos, I almost forgot, accept my condolences for your loss... Actually, I wasn’t expecting to see the two of you sitting on the same table”.

Nassa didn’t trust either of them. But deep down she felt that there might be something that none of all knew. And she was right.

“What a pleasant moment to see the three of you on the same table!”

“Emily!” Menelaos did not expect to see his daughter here. “Mr. Argiropoulos, this is Emily, my daughter.”

“Daddy don’t introduce me to Mrs. Petrides. We’ve

already met. Mr. Vice President, thank you for accepting our invitation”.

“Our invitation?” said Menelaos.

“As a PR manager of one of the biggest courier companies in the country, I thought this is the appropriate place to discuss a matter that all of you are involved in and that must definitely be solved”.

Emily looked so identical to her mother, and today she had given up her casual post-teen outfit for a more appropriate for the situation - Nassa could swear she had seen Judy wearing this elegant ensemble in one of her first visits to her law office. Her notebook and golden pen had her mother’s initials.

“I have to say, I cannot really understand what the subject of this meeting is, since this is the first time that I meet Mrs. Petrides and I have seen your father once or twice in some public events. I don’t see what we might have in common”.

Nassa couldn’t help asking. “Did you arrange this, Emily? Because my invitation was rather unusual, and I’m very worried about the person who invited me...”

“Don’t worry Nassa. I know how worried you are... And I will explain everything.”

“Mr. Argiropoulos, I think that you are aware that members of your party have used the social media in order to trace an illegal immigrant that is accused for the rape of a young girl that eventually killed herself”.

“I am aware of this case, but not in many details. Our Party is organized in a very democratic way, and our local offices have some kind of autonomy in their social welfare activities?”

“Well, Mr. Argiropoulos”, said Nassa, “I would never expect that a term like “social welfare” would be used to describe the activities of your members”.

Well, Nassa was not actually surprised. Many violent actions of the Party were justified as “action of social responsibility - voluntary auxiliary help to the authorities for the sake of social order.”.

“We’re trying to collect information to help the police arrest criminals. This is our definition of social work. But I still cannot understand what you’re talking about”.

“Maybe my dear father could explain to you, but I’m sure I can do it a little better...” Emily was looking towards her dad, who had turned red.

“This man that you’re looking for is coming from Iran. His name is Darius and he’s a postgraduate student in classical philology. He also worked for my father, for some courier services. The most important thing is that this man is not guilty. You’re looking for the wrong guy”.

“Well, if you have more information about the real suspect, why don’t you go to the police?” said Argyropoulos.

“Because another of my father’s employees was the person that actually had seduced the girl... I’m using this verb because he claims that whatever he did was with her consent. This man was also my mother’s lover, and... it seems that he had a short-term affair with my mother’s lawyer”.

Nassa was shocked. Did Nikos hear this? This was just a one-night stand that nobody knew about - or at least she thought so.

“I have to inform you, madam, that my mother had found out about your affair, as well as for Tony’s adventure with that poor girl”.

Menelaos was now looking at Nassa.

“There’s more that you should know, Mr.

Argiropoulos. The young immigrant was saved by a person that you knew very well. You were his father's colleague. You had baptized him."

"Alexandros! This is impossible!" said Argiropoulos. My godson would never do such a thing. He's very close to our Party.

"He also got very close to Darius, if you know what I mean. You know, the way you're all staring at me makes me feel very odd".

Menelaos tried to intervene. "What are you trying to do?"

"I have them both. You could say I have arrested these two men. Don't worry about their safety, if you worry at all."

"Bullshit!" said Menelaos, rather louder than acceptable by the etiquette - he should lower the volume of his voice. "Tony is in Albania."

"Of course, because you sent him there. You wanted to save yourself from trouble. But you won't, until I find out who killed my mother."

"Tony didn't, and neither did Darius," said Nassa. "you're holding two men against their will; I suppose you know this is illegal. They're both innocent".

"This is temporary. I know that Mr. Argiropoulos' boys want them. You can choose whom they're going to arrest, Sir. Do you want the Albanian Casanova? You got him. Do you feel more comfortable with the Muslim? You can have him too. You may decide whom you want to be handed over to the police. I don't really care. I only want one thing. One of you knows who killed my mother. I want you to trade my mom's murderer with these two guys".

"This is absolutely crazy", said Nassa. "We're not in a jungle. You have every right to feel the utmost pain

for your mom's death. But whoever did it have to be tried before a court of law. You can't play the part of a judge here".

"Oh, yes, this is a jungle". Plus, Mr. Argiropoulos, I assume you also care about your godson, who happens to be the lady's ex-husband. He's suffered a serious heart attack - He managed to survive, but sometimes accidents happen in hospitals. Besides, his sexual orientation will not be appreciated by the Party - imagine whatever happens if his inappropriate relationship is revealed. You were something like his mentor, his spiritual father. This is not going to be good for your reputation".

Menelaos started weeping. "I swear to God, I didn't kill your mother".

"But you know who did, don't you?"

Menelaos nodded negatively. "I wish I knew. I would have found him."

"Is this your last word... It seems that you don't really care about Tony..." How about you, Mrs. Petrides? Tony was not just your key witness. And not only that. Do you want to save him, or do you just want me to hand him over to the Party? Or you'd prefer to save Darius, your little protege who's been so sweet with your ex-husband?"

"I insist that you reconsider this entire plot of yours. This won't go anywhere. I realize you're in pain and I understand that you cannot handle this without impulsive reactions. But I can't give you a person, not even a name. When I first heard that your mother died, I thought that your father might be responsible. But I'm not sure. I cannot prove it. I still don't have any kind of evidence. You can end this now; you can release those two guys and I am sure all of us will agree

that this meeting never happened”. Nassa was trying to play with time, hoping that Nikos wouldn’t have given up listening after learning about her relationship with Tony.

Menelaos, that great mobster, looked totally powerless. He never expected that he would have nothing to offer and nothing to win from a negotiation. He didn’t expect that his daughter would have followed his tactics. He thought he had managed to keep her away from all the filth that he was dealing with. He dreamt that his daughter would become a doctor - that he’d open a modern clinic for her. Maybe she would heal enough people to balance the harm he had made. She didn’t pass the national exams. He sent her abroad to study, in a very good English-speaking University in the Czech Republic, but she didn’t want to continue. She didn’t want to follow her father’s dreams, so a bachelor’s degree in business administration in the American College of Athens was a mediocre but acceptable solution. Maybe she would like to create a startup of her own; maybe she would like to participate in the “clean department” of the courier service. He had the money; he also had the power to give her initial push to the market. Whatever market she decided she wanted to start a career at, except for his underground business. So, his disappointment when he realized that his daughter was well acquainted with methods of the mob was enormous.

“Listen, Emily, dear. I think we can find a mutually beneficial solution, a way of understanding each other’s needs.” Argiropoulos broke the silence. “I have my information about the situation. And I can confirm a lot of the information you have shared with us. I have

very strong indications that the Albanian guy killed your mother.”

“Tony! This is impossible. He was madly in love with her”, was Nassa’s reaction but nobody listened.

“The bastard! I had raised him like a son - I took him from the gutter, I even tried to send him back to his country in order to get away with it.”

“Can you prove it?”. Emily looked very upset. How do I know you’re not bluffing?”

“My contacts in the Police said they had traced a very personal object of his in the place where your mother was killed. An earring with the Albanian eagle”.

“I had told the bastard not to wear such things in Greece”, said Menelaos. “Where are they? Tell me where they are, and I’ll take care of him”.

Menelaos wanted to smash the table down, but once again, his self-control dictated that nobody in the room should notice”.

“Anyone can have planted this in the crime scene”, said Nassa. She knew that he had the earring, he had told her once that he was attacked by fascists and realized it was better to be more discreet - Nassa bought him a little black dragon.”

“How can you be so sure that your boyfriend is innocent?”

“I don’t think he’s wearing this ring anymore”.

“Well, Mrs. Petrides, the DNA on the earring matches your friend’s DNA.”

“He is my witness, not my boyfriend”.

“So, it is natural that you don’t know him so well. According to my sources, it is a matter of a few days before the Police make an official statement. But, allow me to continue. You have the murderer of your mother. And you also have the rapist of that poor girl”.

“The same person”, said Emily.

“No, I think that the two of them are important”.

“Darius is innocent,” said Nassa. If you’re so sure about Tony, surrender him to the authorities and release Darius. He’s been through so much without having done anything”.

“Please, allow me... The young man is dangerous for all of us. He is not the angel that you’re describing. He wants to survive and in order to do so, he can share more information than necessary. He has worked for you, Mr. Menelaos, and he’s probably participated in many of your actions that may be beyond the border of lawfulness. He has also been subject to rather unacceptable violence by people that he thinks are related to our party”.

“They are members of your Party”. Nassa wanted to scream, but she wouldn’t risk ending this conversation.

“As far as you are concerned, Mrs. Petrides, that young man had an inappropriate relationship with your ex-husband, who also happens to be a person that I’m closely related to. People can become a threat when they are desperate. Maybe he’ll start blackmailing Alex, who is a very respected man, a very good patriot, a very responsible public employee that one day might become a general director of the ministry. We cannot have a shadow threatening him. Furthermore, our Party has set a campaign to trace that man for a serious and sensitive case, and this campaign has a very huge publicity. If this entire campaign proved to have started against an innocent man, a great deal of harm will be caused to our Party’s efforts to protect social security”.

“So, all that matters is to find Darius, even if he’s innocent? So, this is what everything is all about?”

“I’m not that heartless. I believe in Greek justice. He’ll be arrested and have a fair trial. If he’s innocent, he will get away with it. At this moment our Party has a very important mission. To protect social security.”

“Well, nobody asked you to. You know that he’ll probably die in prison before the trial is over and this will last for years”.

“Of course, but, as I explained before, his silence is precious for all of us. I can guarantee that he will be protected in prison, and I’m sure that with your kind assistance the trial will have a very positive result for him. About our mission, maybe you live in the suburbs, in a safe neighborhood with alarms in your apartment, or maybe a subscription to private security services. Unfortunately, not all Greeks enjoy the same luxuries. Crime has gone very far, and the police’s hands are tied. It is our duty to help them fight the crime.”

“We’re talking about an innocent man. An innocent man.”

“A man that has been delivering drugs and has a second job as a sex worker in Omonia is far from what I would name an innocent man.”

“He loves ancient Greece more than you do. He’s a master’s student.”

“This is the decadence of Greek universities. So many Greeks are left out and a criminal can take their place and study, just to get a green card, with Greek tax-payers’ money. You shouldn’t worry. We can even arrange that he can continue his studies from prison”.

“Nassa... I’m the one who negotiates. I’m the one who decides. And I have to ask you to leave now. I’ve made up my mind.” Emily looked very confident about what she was saying.

“You know I can call the police right now.”

“I know you won’t, Nassa. You see, your ex-husband is in the hospital right now. Your new boyfriend was with him, but now he’s gone. And your son has left to go to his school. He’s alone in the room, I think you should go find him, because anything can happen to a sick man without anyone to look after him.”

“If anything happens to Alex...”

“Please, take Mr. Argiropoulos with you and go visit him. He’ll feel very happy to see his godfather. Dad, you should go back to work too... One of you will receive an address on his mobile in exactly an hour. Until then, nothing happens to anyone. I promise. I want justice, and I’m sure we all do”.

“Emily, listen to your father. Just give me the spot - I want to see that bastard before he’s behind bars. Please... it is a matter of honor”. Menelaos stood up and asked for the bill. They hadn’t touched anything from the dishes on the table. God, they looked delicious, especially this club sandwich with a ton of ham, cheddar cheese and bacon.

“You can ask them to make a pack for you, dad. But don’t eat everything. Your cholesterol is already too high, I’m too young to be an orphan...” Emily collected her (mother’s) stuff and left with a smile. “It was a very constructive meeting. We’ll be in touch”.

“Please give my best wishes to Alexandros, Nassa. I have to attend a committee at the Parliament in about half an hour. I’ll come visit him later, maybe.”

Nassa left alone. On her way out of the fancy hotel, she rang Nikos.

“The subscriber you are calling has probably deactivated his mobile phone. Please try later”.

39 | I'LL STAND BY YOU

Alexandros was sleeping in peace. His face was pale, and he looked very tired. Nassa was sitting on a chair next to his bed in Hippokration Hospital - she literally ran there right after she left that awkward meeting. She wanted to be sure that Alex was alright - she had also called her son, he was alright at school, and of course, underlined that it's better to text him than call him - it's more polite, according to the teenager's etiquette. Calling someone means that there's a big emergency. You must call only on special occasions. For everything else, use some messenger app, send a text or voice message. The other person will see it and will answer whenever they have time. "So why do you need a mobile phone if you don't use the phone service?" Nassa always asked. "A phone isn't just a phone anymore. Who cares about the phone" was her son's answer. "You should live in the 1980s, when we were trying to find a newsstand to call when we were outside".

Nassa felt that this new generation was totally

different. That “gap” we always talk about was not just a gap, it was the size of a solar system. Things change so rapidly. Menelaos’ daughter was only five or six years older than her son - and she was acting weird, too. Her cynical attitude, the way she manipulated three people that were experienced in negotiating and manipulating was getting on her nerves. The way she blackmailed all of them to get what she wanted, which was not really clear.

She was also angry at herself. Angry because she couldn’t find the way to react more effectively to Emily’s blackmail. That she got scared about Alex and her son. She was also anxious about Nikos’ reaction if he had heard about what happened between her and Tony.

“You look so preoccupied...” Alex’s voice was low and calm but made her almost jump off her chair.

“You scared me. Are you alright?”

“Nothing can scare you Nassa”.

“Well, I wouldn’t say this is the perfect moment to hear this. You know, I’m human too...”

“I know. Thank you for coming. I’m so sorry for all this. I feel that I’m responsible for whatever you’re going through right now... And I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to you... or to Darius... They forced me to tell them the address...”

“This is a very complicated situation, Alex. And it’s still developing, so I’m not sure if we can discuss anything right now. It’s a big mess. And it’s not your fault”.

“I did things I should not have done...”

“There’s nothing wrong in falling in love, Alex.”

“Well, I don’t know if I can discuss this either. Especially with you”.

“Why is that? We loved each other back then. And now you fell in love with someone else, just like I have done, not only once I must admit.”

“You know it’s not the same. It’s a little embarrassing... For a man of my values”.

“A fascist has also the right to fall in love. Don’t get mad. You’re not a fascist. You’re just an alt-conservative nationalist.”

“A polite way to describe a fascist. Nassa, there’s been an enormous battle inside me... And it’s still here, and it’s a great torture. What I felt is against everything I am, it’s against all my beliefs, my lifestyle, my reputation”.

“But it’s what your soul told you to do. Doesn’t your soul matter at all?”

“I don’t know who I am, Nassa. Not anymore. I can’t recognize myself”.

“Do you still have feelings for him?”

“Nassa...” He was begging to avoid answering. She didn’t insist.

“All that matters is getting back on your feet again. Now you should focus on this.”

“Even if... Even if I see him again... It’s impossible... There’s no way that... We can’t...”

“Just pray for him now... His destiny doesn’t depend upon you, or me, or anybody that we can trust.”

“I wish I could see him for one last time, and explain...”

“I don’t think you have to explain anything to each other.”

Alex tried to take a few steps - he was indeed getting better, though he was still weak. “No emotional challenges” were the doctor’s directions.

“I really need a shower. I hope I don’t stink... I've been like this for a few days. You know how much I hate not taking a shower every morning...”

“Of course, I remember... I remember the exact time. Even now I don’t go to the bathroom at this time, I’m convinced that you’d be in there showering and shaving”.

“Do I need a shave too?”

“Do you need some help with this? I have seen you naked, remember?”

“We were younger then...”

“I don’t know about you, I’m still young and beautiful...”

“You’ll always be young and beautiful Nassa...”

With Nassa’s help, Alexandros enjoyed the luxury of taking a shower with a little help from Nassa. She really tried hard to keep him standing up, he was still weak.

Touching each other, even in this non-erotic condition felt odd after such a long time.

“You’ve gained a lot of weight, Alex...”

“I’m getting old I guess...”

“No worries, you’re still handsome... Your skin is still soft - as always...”

“Like a baby’s butt, you used to say...”

In a few minutes, Alex was back in his bed, feeling much more comfortable - in less than ten minutes, he fell asleep.

Nassa was feeling tired. Really tired.

The feeling that she was in the middle of a turmoil that she didn’t have anything to do with was so strong that an annoying headache was gradually preventing her more and more from thinking rationally or planning anything that could end all this madness.

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Like a Deus ex Machina her phone rang. Nikos' number was on the screen.

40 | CRASH

When Nikos entered the building doors were unlocked. That was a sign that the abducted were either released or eliminated. It was not the first time that he didn't know what to expect. So, he was prepared to expect the worst. But in seconds the voice of a screaming man came from upstairs. He followed the voice. Someone was still there, still alive.

Nikos's discovery was a mixture of relief and disgust. Tony was lying in his own blood, screaming with enormous pain. His underwear was thrown a little away from him.

"Sir... I think ... they have castrated him".

"What the fuck? Call the ambulance..." Nikos was trying to process everything. He had traced the phone call, he had driven like hell to get in time to that almost ruined warehouse, but he didn't expect to find something like that.

Plus, Darius was missing.

He grabbed Tony from the shoulders. "Don't you dare die... Help is coming... Tell me where Darius

is...

Tony kept screaming... “They... said... to the police... She... Oh God, I’ll die... I don’t want to die”.

“Who did this to you? The Party People?”

“No, they just took him...” Tony fainted, he had lost a lot of blood, but Nikos was pretty sure that he would make it.

The ambulance took Tony. Nikos was so confused about the way things had turned out to be. Who did this to Tony? And where was Darius? A closer look around the room didn’t provide him with more information. Who has taken him? Did the Party boys come first, or was it anything else?

Nikos went out on the balcony and threw up. The city looked uglier than it was. Clouds were gray, just like the walls of those warehouses of this industrial zone that no tourist would ever prefer to visit. Okay, Tony was Nassa’s lover, at least for a while, but what happened to him was not a common practice of the Party boys. It indicated a much deeper urge for revenge, a hatred that couldn’t be satisfied without an act of utmost humiliation. Well, that poor girl’s father or one of her relatives could have done that, providing that he knew who the “rapist” of his little girl was. But everyone believed that Darius was the man they were looking for. So, someone else must have punished Tony. Could it be someone from his ex-boss’s environment? Possibly. But this couldn’t be Menelaos. Menelaos had provided Tony with a safe exit from the country. Plus, was that the same person that took Darius away?

He rang Nassa and let her know about everything, avoiding the nasty details about Tony’s injuries. She would find out, eventually.

A few minutes after their conversation, they both checked the notifications on their news mobile app.

“The rapist was arrested. “Civil guards” of the Party had traced and trapped the young rapist. He is an immigrant from Iran, aged 25, who was a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens.”

According to the news, the “civil guards”, a “volunteer organization” of the Party Youth that “was founded to contribute to the public safety and assist the Police in their fight against crime”, had traced the rapist after running a social media campaign. The young man had not resisted. He looked terrified, and didn’t make any statements to the reporters, insisting asking him “Why did you do this?”. He is held in the Police Station of Piraeus - though some decades of angry citizens are gathered outside the building, threatening to lynch the accused.

“Oh God, I got to go there...” She was feeling guilty, she had failed to protect this innocent man, and now the media will present him as a monster. It was a matter of time to search his social media and show his face everywhere on the Internet.

Of course, they did. Darius’s face was everywhere. Though it is against the law, all his personal info was all around. Of course, his presence in the social media was not corresponding to the image of a perverted rapist. Book covers, Darius with girls in the University in Instagram stories, before his first encounter with the Party members, that “nox horribilis”. The girls were messing up his curly hair, in one pic they were stripping him off his shirt in a party - this was the picture that most media preferred to focus on.

“The charming usurper from the East” - a

disappointment for all those that expected that the arrested would be something between a member of some Islamic terrorist group or a drug dealer. But there's always a way for the media to create their own reality. "His photographs do not imply that this charming and educated young man could have an undercover life that led him to assaulting women". Even if you can't find anything against him, the media have the alternative option to present this absence of evidence as something even more suspicious.

In a few hours they would find those girls in the photos, they would have interviewed them. "He looked timid - he had never proposed to one of his colleagues to date - he wasn't coming to parties, he didn't drink alcohol, he didn't do any drugs." Of course, the wise tv hosts would conclude, this was his way to hide his second life - his toxicological exams had shown that he had had a rather strong cocktail of sleeping pills that could make an elephant fall to coma for hours.

To the man-eater media was a shocking proof that you cannot trust appearances. It was obvious that this young man had a double life - his everyday life was a mask hiding the face of a male Medusa.

"I haven't done anything." This was the sole phrase that Darius managed to utter. He was still under the influence of the drugs. The cameras zoomed on his face. His gaze was lost in the chemistry - but also in terror. Within a few minutes he would have totally lost his senses. They dragged him inside the police station with the crowd screaming and shouting. No, the "crowd" was not only clean-shaven jarheads with swastika tattoos and black leather jackets. Many other people had gathered... In times of crisis, hatred and

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rage are getting bigger and bigger inside - and then you think that the only way to deal with this enormous feeling is just to spit it out against whoever you find available. This violence seems to be a necessity to some people.

41 | MONSTER

In the next few days Darius was everywhere - on the TV channels, on tabloid newspapers, on various internet sites, on social media. It was indeed an intriguing kind of plot. An educated young man from the east that was hiding his real primitive self behind the curtain of an ambitious scholar. An excellent academic that could not overcome his “violent nature”. This was of course the beginning of many interpretations that were suitable for the Party’s agenda: No, education cannot change man. Of course, he related to the values of the western world. Greece had given him the chance to stay and study classical philology and philosophy, the holy grail of western civilization. But it is impossible to change the elements that made him a violent attacker. Above everything he was a Muslim that was grown with a completely different system of values. You cannot tolerate anything different; you impose your power by conquering, you fight to prevail. Even in the mouths of relatively moderate analysts, this was leading to one

conclusion: Foreigners cannot change. They don't deserve a chance in a western world, they don't deserve tolerance. simply because their nature (according to pure racists), or their culture (according to the right-wing "democrats") does not include that tolerance. They cannot accept democracy, because they don't know what democracy is.

Fancy scenarios were invented, while the media were trying to find connections between Darius and the bleeding man that was found by the Party members. The explanation was easy to find, and very likely to be widely accepted. This was another proof of Darius's primitive nature. He castrated that poor man probably as a means of revenge, or just another way to impose his power on people.

Trying to interview Tony was impossible. He was stubbornly refusing to say anything about what caused his condition. In the very first days, he was in shock, and he went through a harsh but partly successful operation. Having sex would be from now on a challenge for Tony, and probably more treatment would be needed. Another parallel wave of racist jokes and posts swept the internet. The "Arab" that castrated the "Albanian", was another aspect of a cultural conflict between two generations of immigrants.

The Albanians came to Greece in the early 1990s, after the communist regimes collapsed within a few months. Now a second generation had come, the Muslims from western and central Asia. Comparisons were inevitable. The "old immigrants" were definitely better than the new ones, according to many people. Maybe because it was easier for them to incorporate in the Greek society. It was a pretty good chance for the media to start an endless conversation on the relations

between the various subcultures of Greek immigrants.

Darius's colleagues from the faculty of Philosophy were again in the morning TV shows, though it was once again impossible to get any spicy information about the "monster" about them. And where there's no such information, there's always the alternative explanation that can also be sold well to the public. Monsters are everywhere. They don't show their real nature. Don't trust anyone, no matter how kind or educated he looks. Of course, all groups of interest could interpret the fact from their own perspective. Feminists were claiming that this is proof that patriarchy is still there, no matter if one lives in a western-type environment, in the 21st century. Nationalists had a different perception: Our society has a lot of problems. Poverty, Unemployment, a continuous threat for bankruptcy. We cannot tolerate this kind of crime that is caused by illegal immigrants. Many different explanations, hours of endless and useless discussions on television, most of them heading to only one conclusion. Darius is a monster.

Nassa tried to reach him in jail. He refused to see anyone. He denied legal support from any lawyer, all that he said to police was "I didn't do anything". It was a huge issue for the media for a few weeks, but as it seemed to increase the popularity of The Party, the hype from traditional media soon faded away. It was not very useful for the government to see the Party boys becoming heroes, or to be encouraged to play their part as guardians of the society.

Nikos had only managed to see him once or twice. His relationship with Nassa had gone through a lot of trouble, but they could still communicate and cooperate.

“Nassa, it’s no use trying anymore. You can’t help someone that doesn’t want to be helped.”

“What did he look like when you saw him?”

“I couldn’t recognize any sentiment on his face. He looked indifferent, like everything was happening to somebody else, not him. He looked like he was wearing a mask. You know... If we believe the rumors, he was raped again in prison - this is the “prison law” for child molesters. “

“But why doesn’t he want to contact me? Why doesn’t he have a lawyer too?”

“Maybe he has lost all hope. Or... he’s trying to protect you from something”.

“Are they going to extradite him to Iran?”

“He’s dead if such a thing happens... Either as a rapist, or as a homosexual, he doesn’t have a lot of choices. How’s your ex by the way?”

“Oh, please Nikos, don’t start again. Whatever happened between me and Tony was before we met, and don’t you think he paid a high price for whatever he has done?”

“I meant your ex-husband...”

“Alex... He refuses to discuss anything. He’s still going to work, like nothing has happened, I’ve heard he’s even dating one of his colleagues. A woman. The bastard...”

“Are you jealous?”

“No, I’m just pissed off because he’s trying to hide his real self once more”.

“Maybe he’s bisexual. He was married to you, remember, and you had children...”

This is what Nassa hated about Alex. Whenever he was crossing any kind of line towards what he really wanted, he was always trying to show the others

something really impressive, to the exactly opposite direction. He was always trying to hide his own truth, because he was always scared that his choice would never be accepted, and everyone would reject him. Now he was probably trying the same - though almost nobody was aware of his relationship with Darius.

“He has his own demons - and after his heart attack I ‘m trying not to shout at him a lot. Thank God the Police didn’t interrogate him.”

“Isn’t this weird? Darius was for a while a sex worker; how could anybody testify something like this?”

“You know, Nikos... Who of his clients would willingly come to testify? You know what... I’ve been thinking about it in the last few days. What if we whistle blow the media that Darius cannot have raped a woman, because he’s gay?”

“What is this, are you trying to defend him from a distance? He refused to see you, he refused to see anyone, to speak to anyone.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to come out that way. But if this is our only chance to save him either from prison or even from extradition, we could do the outing for him. Of course, it would have been extremely helpful if my dearest ex-husband testified that he was in a relationship with him, but I’m convinced that he’s not going to accept”.

“Don’t you think you’re intervening a lot in Darius's life?”

“I’m trying to save his life. I must find anything that can prove that Darius was a toyboy for men.”

“You’re not his attorney anymore, remember?”

“Well, I still care. My job is to care for justice and despise injustice.”

“Well, not all lawyers think the same.”

“I’m not all lawyers”.

“I know, Nassa. I’m on your side, remember? But I think you might become too emotionally attached to this case. There’s just one thing you could do, but you didn’t do it.”

“What is it?”

“Persuade Tony to confess that he did whatever he did.”

“I haven’t seen him ever since...”

“And you probably think that he’s already been punished enough”.

“Not at all. We’re punished for what we do, not for what we are. Tony did this to the girl, I don’t know if there was any kind of consent. He has a lot of things to explain, and I’m not sure that he’s able to. But he should definitely testify that he was the one who had the affair with this poor little girl. And, you know what? I think that the Party people already know that Tony did it. But they preferred to put the blame on Darius, because this side of the story was more convenient for the Party’s rhetoric about illegal immigrants and Muslims.”

“They weren’t the ones that did that to Tony, though. This was done before the Party people had arrived.”

“So, there must be some other person involved - and I think Menelaos could give us some answers.”

“I shouldn’t say this, but Menelaos came and testified this morning. He asked for protection - and maybe for some kind of immunity”.

“I hope this doesn’t mean that he will get away with it about Judy”.

“He was not the one that killed her, Nassa. It’s complicated. But I cannot tell you more”.

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“I thought we had no secrets”, said Nassa.

“I was thinking so too, until I found out about you and Tony”.

“I understand your objection”.

“This is not a trial, Nassa. Trust me, I want justice as much as you do.”

42 | REMEDY

Alexandros had to deal with a new routine, that included taking his pills regularly and walking 8000 steps a day, and a strict diet that made him lose some weight. That heart attack had scared him - he knew that he shouldn't get involved in situations with a great deal of tension, plus, he should minimize all factors of stress that could cause a consecutive, and probably lethal, heart attack.

He was trying hard. He returned to work a few days after he got out of hospital, though he could have taken a longer leave. "I prefer to return to my normal routine; I think it will be worse to stay at home - I'll be so bored that I'll eventually feel more anxiety."

He was right, at work he was calm, focused, and had less time to think over what had happened.

But it was hard, so hard not to remember. He felt like he had abandoned Darius, like he hadn't done the best he could to save him. And he hated himself more when another thought crossed his mind again and again: "What if nothing of all those ever happened?"

Darius would probably have finished his studies, and Alex wouldn't have changed anything in his life. He would keep on going on with his daily role, the one that he was so good at playing for so many years. That isn't as bad as it sounds.

“But I met him, and we both loved each other. And I've never felt like this before. And I hate myself for all this, I hate myself for not being the man I wanted to be, I hate myself for being the fag that I was always mocking and looking down on, but this is what I am.”

If they had never met, he would never have realized that yes, it could be possible to fall in love again. Yes, it could be possible to love a man, no matter if he had loved passionately a woman in the past. He feels guilty about this sometimes, but most of the time he's guilty for all these times that he attended the Party meetings, for all the time that he was not commenting on racist comments that the Party boys were making about immigrants, about women, about homosexuals, about anything that didn't fit their own archetype. He regrets that sometimes he felt the need to mock those people too. He regrets the time that he was feeling uncomfortable when an immigrant or a weirdly dressed person was sitting next to him in the train, he regrets considering that it is disgraceful for a man to kiss his boyfriend in front of everyone, though he admitted that he would never dare kiss Darius in public.

But this was all over - his colleagues at the office were trying to set up dates for him - and sometimes he accepted to hang out with some lady for a cup of coffee or a quiet dinner, maybe a second or third date would occur, but nothing more. “It is so obvious that he's not interested”, said Martha, one of his colleagues who took that challenge, without any outcome. “He doesn't

want to get involved in an affair; it is crystal clear. I made a move on him, and he reacted so awkwardly and cowardly, I must note. Looks like he's suffering from some kind of trauma. Or he's not interested in women at all".

"Get out of here, this is bullshit! He had a wife and children."

"Well, that might strengthen my argument. That might be the trauma. Otherwise, what is he waiting for? He's almost sixty, and he's kind of cute, but he's certainly not the silver hair charmer that you could easily set your eyes on..."

Alex's sexual life has returned to the zero levels of the pre-Darius period. Neither women, nor men, nothing at all. He was still feeling scared. He felt the need to trust someone, to dedicate himself to a sexual relationship, but he was scared. "I don't want to get hurt or hurt anyone else". What was left for him was exploring masturbation - and in this field the Internet was a way to find helpful material. Viewing gay websites didn't count as a sin for him anymore - maybe it was the only way to feel free. He still hadn't found the strength to interact or use any gay dating apps, or even open his webcam, but watching videos was his way to get aroused and find some pleasure. Alas, as he was getting older, this pleasure was not difficult to reach, plus, according to church, it was a sin, but he was justifying himself by explaining that this sin is somehow personal - he doesn't corrupt other people, just like he thought he did with Darius.

But Dar was not really a virgin. If he should ever believe what he was telling him, the love of his life was not as pure and innocent as he was claiming. But deep inside Alexandros was hoping that he was Dar's first

real love, though not his first lover. “Maybe I was the first man that he had sex with for no money... Maybe he really loved me... Or he was just trying to show his gratitude to me for saving his life that night...”

This was a real torture for Alex. He knew his love for Dar was real. That he had felt, and he was still feeling, that weird connection of their souls. But did Dar love him the same way? Or he was just feeling that he has “owing him” his affection?

“I’ll never know. I’ll never see him again.”

He couldn’t stop watching the news about him. Nassa was begging him to stop. But the news wasn’t the real thing that tortured him. What was unsupportable was the thought that Alex could save his life and guarantee his freedom, if he only had the strength to go and testify that Darius could never have raped a girl, because he didn’t like girls. But what could this testimony mean for Alex’s reputation? There have been days that he was determined to go and testify, but he changed his mind right when he opened the door of his house. He returned to his pathetic sofa, blaming himself for everything for the rest of the day.

He stopped joining the Party’s meetings. This didn’t go unnoticed. “We lost you, Alexandros” ... “It’s been a while, is everything alright?”

“I’m just a little tired... You know, after the hospital, I’m not yet back on my feet. Maybe it’s the medication, I hope things will get better, because I really missed the lectures on ancient Greece”.

“You shouldn’t worry about our trust in you... We know people are mumbling bullshit, but we feel you’re a member of our big family and this cannot change”.

He knew that there was a lot of hype on how he was connected to the “Paki rapist” case, though he was

neither a “Paki” nor a “rapist”, but nobody cared, since that version of the story was very useful to The Party. He also knew that all these reassuring comments about their trust in him weren’t necessarily real.

He just wanted to forget about everything.

“I need some rest. Not from work. From what happens next. From my free time. I wish I could work all day” he told Nassa.

“Definitely, this is the solution. You’ll get another heart attack in next to no time”.

Alex was trying to read books - he bought an entire series of ancient Greek philosophy. But Darius was in each and every phrase he was reading. He could hear his voice speaking as Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus, Thales.

“I know you’ve read them all, Dar, but please get out of my head... I don’t want you to read me anymore. I know how to read by myself... I don’t depend on you.”

Liar.

Nothing was the same, even now that he knew that Darius might be suffering inside his cell, waiting for his trial - but why cannot they see that this guy would never rape a girl? He’s so delicate, so sophisticated, so polite and timid... Of course, he was also a toyboy.

This was happening every day. The same succession of thoughts, agony, and finally doing nothing. Until that day.

He was awake for the entire night. Writing on pieces of paper, tearing the pieces, throwing them all over, and then collecting them back again to remember what he had written, during his next attempt. He stopped only when he was going to the toilet to throw up and then return to writing with more fury.

He took a shower, for the first time in years ate nothing and left for work, like every day. Another day of hard work, without any break... At four o'clock, after he was done with the Ministry paperwork, he kindly denied Martha's offer to have lunch together.

"There's something really urgent that needs to be done, I'm sorry Martha, I apologize". She would soon give up trying to get closer to him, this was obvious, but he just couldn't think about this now.

He took the train to Piraeus, and he went to an Internet Cafe near the port. It was obvious that hundreds of people were using it every day, most of them could be passengers.

He created an Email account with a name that sounded realistic and quite common to his ears. "Constantinos Angelopoulos" ... The mail was sent to the public prosecutor's office in Athens, to the Minister of Justice office, to the Embassy of Iran and all the major media and blogs of Greece, to the local office of Amnesty International and anti-racist organizations, as well as some gay rights groups. Also, to the personal mails of many journalists that would be willing to reproduce the news.

"You understand that I cannot give an official testimony on these facts, because I am not willing to put my reputation into danger. But I cannot close my eyes to this profound injustice.

The accused, Darius, is definitely not guilty for raping that poor innocent girl. I can assure you about that. On January 25th, the date that the rape was committed according to the victim's family, I spent the entire day and night with the accused. This young man was a sex worker to earn his living and fund his studies. So I had hired his services for the entire night, for 150

Euros. He accepted very willingly and thankfully. As I have been his client for many times, I can reassure you that this young man is homosexual. Our sexual intercourse has never been possible to occur with him in an energetic role, though I expressed this claim once or twice. He had explained to me that he was really afraid of being severely punished in case of returning to his country.

So, all these accusations against him are totally false. To prove my relationship with him, I hereby attach a nude photo of him that he had dedicated to me in one of our meetings.

I know that all this material cannot be used in a court of law. But I also know that any kind of information can be used by criminal justice in order to find the truth. I thereby ask you to go to Koumoundouros square and ask his colleagues about him. You will not find clients that will be willing to confess, as most of them, like I'm doing, will deny everything. But these guys will tell you how fragile and delicate Darius was.

If you are looking for the person, who did it, try to search for a little more information about Mr. Tony Rexha, the man that was found, severely wounded, next to the accused by the Party team. He was taken to hospital the day of the arrest, where an operation was performed to save his manhood. This was the man that was related to that poor girl. The people in the girl's neighborhood will probably recognize him.

Please do not try to contact me or find me. Consider the consequences of a failed court decision. An innocent homosexual sent to prison for a crime that never committed. I might not be as bold as needed to testify, but I cannot stand to see an innocent man

convicted.

So, I'm begging you, please, uncover the truth. And the truth is that Darius is not guilty. Tony Rexha is the man you're looking for - that explains that someone tried to castrate him."

Alexandros pressed "Send".

He paid for the Internet Cafe... Wow, he's been there for just an hour and a half, but that looked like his entire life.

"Thank you, Mr. Angelopoulos. You really did something that I'll never forget".

He had no idea whether this entire thing might work. But at least he had tried.

43 | TEN YEARS AFTER

According to schedule, the lecture was to start at 20:00. There has been a little delay, as there were many people still waiting outside, trying to find their seats in the Hall. There were about 500 seats available, but they were all taken. It is somehow unusual for such “scholarly” events to attract people's attention, but the situation was a little different this time.

Athens in spring is still a dull city with a lot of traffic and nerves, but there are moments when someone can feel the charm that this place carried for many centuries. The colors of the sky at noon, providing that one's eyes can reach it above the high buildings, can give you a momentary feeling of pure freedom, and compensate you for any stress and fatigue through the day. So, this sweet Wednesday evening of May, with less crowd in the streets of downtown Athens, a lecture on the Ancient Greek tragedy by a distinguished scholar from abroad that has emerged as a “Classics pop star” in the Anglo-Saxon world, that “has reintroduced the excellence of classical texts to the

postmodern world” was something both flattering and attractive for the Greek audience.

Still, there was another thing. It was the first time that this young man was speaking in the country where he started his studies, in rather unfortunate conditions.

The lecturer was already on the stand. He knew that a substantial percentage of the audience had come to see “the illegal immigrant who suffered in Greece but managed to move on and made a significant academic career abroad”, rather than actually listen to what he really had to say about ancient tragedy. He knew that they would expect him to say something about that time. And probably he should.

He was standing there, looking at the crowd, his slides were OK, the projector was working, his notes were on the stand, but he felt that he shouldn’t take the slightest look upon them. He was wearing a gray suit, a lighter gray shirt, and a darker gray tie. His hair was as dark as ten years ago, no white hair visible, now neatly combed and fixed with some hair styling product. He was still in good shape, a typical example of a 35-year-old man from the Middle East with a western education, totally integrated in the British academic nomenclature.

“Of course, I will speak in Greek...” Those were his first words that made the audience clap with enthusiasm. “Thank you all for coming here, this is very important to me, I’ve spent many significant years of my life here. I’ve had my first academic experience here, in the University of Athens. Greece should be proud of the academic standards of Greek Universities, though I am well aware that during the decade of the economic crisis they were poorly funded. But I must say I feel blessed for my academic experience here, and

I'm very honored, as well as a little anxious, like I'm taking exams again, to see the faces of my beloved professors tonight. This is my chance to say a big "Thank you" to all.

I can also understand that in Greece I have been more notorious than in Britain, where I live and work in the last decade. So, it is quite normal that in your eyes I carry another identity that is beyond my academic work. Many of you have come here out of curiosity, to see what happened to "that" guy that was arrested, imprisoned for almost a year, and eventually moved illegally to Great Britain to continue his studies, hidden in a container full of horses. It is absolutely rational to feel this way - I have to accept the fact that in the country I adore most I have a totally diverse reputation than anywhere else in the world. This will not change, and I totally respect that.

Sometimes even us, normal everyday people, are stigmatized for just one of their characteristics, no matter what they have done. This is also happening in ancient Greek tragedy. We remember Antigone as the young girl who resisted against human authorities, considering that she should obey laws that were beyond human limits, that were always here and forever will be. Antigone decided to bury her brother, no matter if this was illegal according to human law, a law that is not universal, and is temporary, no matter if she was put in prison afterwards, and in the end, she killed herself. This is what we'll always remember Antigone for. Maybe she was a brilliant daughter, sister, and girlfriend. Maybe she had a beautiful voice, or a talent to create beautiful ornaments. Maybe she was the most beautiful girl of her time. Or maybe not. We will never know - what we will always know is her

resistance. This covered everything else.

Audiat et altera pars, though. How about Creon? He's a leader of a state that has been through a lot. A horrendous civil conflict has ended, and he has to bring back everything together. He must hold Thebes still, his duty is that the city must continue to exist, not because of some kind of obsession, but because the city of Thebes is its people. And he's responsible for their survival and prosperity. We always feel that he's the bad guy, because he's on the part of the government, that eternal tyrant that limits people's lives with laws and regulations in general. We feel that he's heartless because he won't allow a girl to bury her own brother. But he's got to keep the city stable. And he might have done well with this so far, maybe he's a good governor or maybe not. But there's one thing that we'll remember him through the years. His stubborn attitude against a girl that emotionally could be totally justified to break the law, any of us wouldn't stand to see the body of a sibling rotting outside the city walls, without being able to do anything. Creon will always be a bad guy, though he might have been a great governor, a great father, a great person.

This has nothing to do with the "tragic" of the situation. Because the fate of tragic heroes is beyond human choices. Tragic is beyond human powers, but at the same time is a consequence of a totally conscious human choice. There are superpowers around everywhere, powers that our mind cannot even conceive. Remember what Hamlet had said to his friend Horace. But what triggers the tragedy is a free human will that decides to move against these superpowers being totally aware that he has no chance to win. It's a lose-lose game between humankind and

powers that no one can control.

A tragic hero is a human being that chooses a momentary lapse of freedom to obeying to the laws of the universe. And this choice is made not by some kind of impulse but is driven by human reason. You just don't jump into a volcano or kill yourself out of desperation, but after a logical judgement, based on your own cosmotheory, your values, your cultural background, your idiosyncrasy, your own, well-constructed ideology. This freedom causes destruction, because a human being is very weak against an irrational universe. But they -very rationally- decide that what matters the most is freedom - a freedom that leads to destruction, but this freedom is a temporary victory of a weak animal of a small planet against the universe.

This is, in my humble opinion, the meaning of tragedy. I am not really sure if there are any chances that we can find tragic heroes in modern dramas. Thinking more and more over it, I would confess that no, we can't. The world has become too complicated, is torn into millions of pieces, our personalities also are more complicated, our acceptable choice is to survive and prosper. A typical example of a modern hero is Odysseus. He suffers a lot, but he always manages to get away with everything. His perspective is more focused on this world. It is more practical and realistic. He must survive, no matter what. He crashes upon things, Gods, monsters, lotus fruits that promise a new life through oblivion, beautiful women that also promise him the brand-new world through magic, or just affection.

But Odysseus is not a tragic hero. He might fight against a God, but he's definitely not willing to fight

against a universe, as a tragic hero would do. He uses his brain and every aspect of human reason. Arguments, rhetoric, lies, everything he can, but not as his means of a momentary freedom before a glorious destruction, but as tools of defense against any kind of threat. He doesn't care to defeat the Gods, he just wants to survive.

Odysseus is closer to what we all are. We use our minds to find ways to get through the day, not to momentarily touch the glorious moment of freedom. Will he ever find freedom? I believe not. No matter where he goes, his past is always both a burden and a reason to move on. We carry our memories and traumas, and these are defining our future acts. He misses Ithaca, his wife, his kingdom, and this is defining all his future actions, and is urging him to deny every other possibility.

This is of course a choice. Odysseus could choose to live with Calypso, or even Kirke. He didn't. And this was a decision that was not totally free. It was dictated by his past. By his memory.

Odysseus is not a free man. Antigone just became a free woman for the one and only moment of her conflict with the unknown, the undefined, the one of unlimited, absolute power.

Would you be an Odysseus or an Antigone?

Now, I would like to make this more interactive. I would like to hear questions from you, and opinions. I feel that I'm going to exhaust you if I continue with this monologue. Even in ancient tragedy too many monologues are not really theatrical. Sometimes a stichomythia, a crosstalk, can be more fascinating, creative and constructive... So, please, feel free to take part in this...

A huge applause followed his last phrase.

“We are not finished... Please, feel free to ask. Anything.”

The first question came from a young student of the Classics Department.

“Are you an Antigone or an Odysseus?”

Darius smiled.

“None of the above. I’m definitely not Antigone, I’ve never felt that I’m in the battlefield against the powers of the universe. And I wish I were Odysseus, but I don’t know if I’d have the strength to travel all the way back to Ithaca”.

“But now you’re back. And, not in rags, but as a guest of honor” said the same guy.

“Well, am I back to Ithaca, or back to Troy? I’m not sure if I can tell”.

His professor when he was a student raised his hand,

“Sir... It is so awkward... I’ve never seen you for so many years.”

“Well, I’ve read all your papers, Darius. And your PhD is excellent work, even though you disagreed with some of my opinions...”

“Thank you, sir, ... It is a great honor for me to hear this from you. You were my mentor, and you will always be”.

“Well, my dear colleague. I was in my early fifties when I became a full-time professor. You’re not even 40, are you? “

“I’m 36.”

“What was this superpower that forced you to achieve all this academic distinction in so little time, providing that you have been through a period of turmoil”.

“Maybe that turmoil made me whatever I am. I had the passion sir, I had it ever since I was your student. I loved the Greek world, of course then I was more focused on Art... After the “turmoil”, as soon as I realized that I was given a second chance to continue, I was determined not to miss it once more. I arrived in England together with a dozen horses that were bred in Greece and were sold to race in Britain. I was born in Iran, I grew up in Greece, I was sent to race in Britain, I am horse #13, or just some Odysseus hidden in the Trojan Horse. I feel lucky that I had the chance to meet people like you in my typical education; you inspired me and made me more determined to succeed. You opened my outlook in a way I could never imagine, and under conditions that were not exactly favorable for my academic development”.

“Well, Darius... allow me to confess that I’m really proud of you. I believed in you. I believed in the sparkle of curiosity and willingness to discover. I didn’t do you any kind of favor. You deserve everything you have achieved. Maybe even more. I wish we could have you one day in the University of Athens, but I’m afraid neither Oxford will let you go, nor would you like to leave Oxford for Athens”.

“Sir - I apologize to all our guests for this small conversation... I am so touched and flattered and honored and blessed. Thank you so much, Professor. My biggest dream when I was attending your classes is to become your assistant someday. Unfortunately, that turned out to be impossible. I was not a legal immigrant, and of course everything that happened back then would never allow me to remain or do anything significant in Greece. I say this with a great deal of pain. Because my body lives in England, my

mind works there - and it's quite possible to cooperate with you and your colleagues in the Faculty of Philosophy. My heart and soul have remained here, and maybe they'll never get reunited with the rest of myself'.

"Allow me to make an announcement to you, Professor. Her Excellency the President of the Hellenic Republic has decided to award you with honorary Greek citizenship, for your contribution to the analysis of Ancient Greek Tragedy." said the University Dean to Darius. "Your books are not just excellent scientific work. They have become very popular in the English-speaking world. I might say, "you brought the classics back to fashion".

"This is a pleasant surprise. I'm grateful for this. It is a great honor for me. I guess... I'm becoming legal now..."

The audience started laughing and then clapping... These texts don't need me or anyone else - we need them, and they will always be modern, we'll always feel that they were written yesterday. Don't you feel that Homer and Plato and Sophocles and Aeschylus, and, of course, my beloved Euripides know us very well, even though they died 2500 years ago? This is because what they were discussing is universal and eternal. They probably didn't know. I might dare say, they certainly didn't know. But they are so powerful that they'll exist as long as mankind exists, and they'll fascinate future generations just the way they did back when they were originally written. I just tried to explain some small percentage of the treasure they contain. Because, as we all know, we can never say that research on these brilliant texts is completed. They're just a fragment of a great deal of material that was written back then, that

probably was saved by coincidence or just because some Alexandrian philologist preferred this to that. I tried to persuade the readers not to read these texts with the prejudice that they're really complicated, really hard to understand. No, they're not. They're simple, because they talk about you and me”.

The next question came from a journalist.

“You've been through a lot of traumas here. I know that it is not appropriate to discuss this in an academic lecture, but you have faced a great deal of negative publicity and of course, a great deal of abuse. Plus, you never had the chance to explain your own point of view to the public. And, trust me, there are many people that will want to know about this.”

“Thank you for your question, sir. You should not worry - nothing is inappropriate, all questions can be asked, and I wish that all of them could be answered too... But I'm not trying to slip away... Indeed, there was a lot of publicity that lasted for a short time, until the moment I was released from prison and all charges against me were dropped. I am also quite sure that most of the people might remember the accusations, more strongly than the fact that I was proved innocent. But sometimes this is enough. All the hype against someone, might well stigmatize him with a stainless tag. From the very beginning I knew that no matter what I do in Greece afterwards, if I will ever be able to do it, no matter what I achieve, I will always be that Muslim that was illegal and imprisoned as a rapist. There are so many details that might exhaust the audience. Is there anything specific that you want to know? Not just you, everyone. I know this isn't about classical literature anymore, but let's pretend we're in Orestes' trial. Well, with a small difference. He was

guilty of murder.

“Is it true that you were physically and sexually abused? I can understand if you don’t answer”. This was another journalist.

“It is fine. I was raped. Not just once. A few times, I might say.”

His voice was clear and stable - the audience was impressed. Among them, Nassa was extremely furious to hear the question. Nikos, with a sigh, stopped her from interrupting the answer.

“This is not a trial, Nassa. Let him handle it. He’s strong. Can’t you see him?”

“Probably some of you might think that this happened to me because I was a part time sex worker back then -it was my way to pay my rent, buy my books and attend my classes. During that time, there have been some threats, but, no, no client had forced me to do things I didn’t want to. Of course, I was beaten up a few times, but nothing more than this.”

“So, this happened to you in prison”.

“It happened in prison, as well, quite a few times. I had the rapist “tag” on my forehead, and this is, as you all know, some kind of ‘applying the Prison Law’. The first time I was raped was before my arrest and imprisonment. But this was also connected to this entire case. My crime was that I was wearing the same T-shirt Tony Rexha was wearing that same day. Just a Metallica T-shirt was my means of identification. I was taken for another person. A classic example of misunderstanding in the drama of all times, which by the way doesn’t count as an element of tragedy. Oedipus didn’t know that he was sleeping with his mother, but this is not what, in my opinion, makes him a tragic hero. This T-shirt changed my history. That

doesn't sound tragic. This first time was more brutal and, as far as I can remember, more traumatizing”.

“So, they thought you were Mr. Rexha and...”

“They wanted to kill me, but first they had to humiliate me. I must admit I never bought another Metallica T-shirt again. They probably thought I was dead. But there was a person that saved my life, a person that found me naked and abused, and opened their door to me, and offered me shelter.”

“No gender mentioned” ... murmured Nassa. “He will not say anything about Alex”.

“I might say I was born again that night. Naked and covered with blood. And I owe everything to this person. They became my Savior. Without them I would never have been able to survive. They have hidden me; they have covered me with love and affection.:

His voice tone was starting to tremble, as well as his hands. He drank a little of his water.

“We shouldn't put any more pressure on you, sir. You've been through a lot”.

“This is fine. I want to thank that person from the bottom of my heart. And there were other people that helped me through this uncomfortable situation. My lawyer, Mrs. Nassa, was always here, even when I felt hopeless, when I gave up. I can see her in this room, Nassa, I'm grateful, I'm so sorry I was so stubborn after I was arrested, we've discussed that via E-mail quite a lot... I hope we'll have the chance to talk to each other in person. Thank you for persuading that client of mine to send that message to the Police and the Press, and I'm sure he persuaded Mr. Rexha to confess that he was the one related to that poor girl”!

“Well, this is partly accurate” said Nassa from her

seat - knowing that he couldn't hear her.

“Sometimes we are doomed by coincidences and of course might be saved by coincidences. I won't be the one to claim that we're subject to kismet, though I am a respectful Muslim if we exclude the fact that I am homosexual. But even this characteristic of mine was the reason that I had to escape to England, when, after my release, it was decided that I should be expelled from the country as I had no legal documents - I applied for the status of a refugee, but it was rejected, meaning I had to return to Iran. As you understand, it would be really hard to avoid being arrested in my homeland, due to my homosexuality, I guess it was something impossible to hide. My chances would be either imprisonment or having an operation, which is totally legal in Iran. But I am a man, I feel good about being a man, I am a homosexual man that was to continue living as a man. I would never choose to deceive any Iranian lady that would be willing to accept to marry me. So, I had to flee the country before I was sent back to Iran. I had lost contact with my family, and I knew that the UK was still then a member of the EU, so it was quite possible that I would be arrested and sent back to Greece and then to Iran... But I think the risk was worth taking. Of course, I cannot reveal details about who put me in the horse's container, but I must declare that I am grateful to this person...

“Menelaos” ... said Nassa. Maybe his last (and probably his best ever) good act. Of course, one or two tokens are not enough to avoid his prominent place in hell.”

“Well, he suffered a lot, too,” whispered Nikos.

“He got what he deserved”.

“So, in England, you had a second chance to start

over again”, this question was from a young student.

“I might say a third one”, answered Darius with a smile. “My second chance was when that kind person saved my life. But, yes, England was a good place to make a new start. Of course, one cannot restart from zero. We all carry some kind of luggage that we can never get rid of. It’s our past. We cannot erase our history, even if we try or pretend to ignore it, it will appear somehow in a very painful manner. Oedipus found out that he had killed his own father and got married to his mother. Of course, he wasn’t aware that this man was his father, nor that the woman he had children with was his mother, but he remembered quite well that he had killed a person when he was young. There is a nucleus of one’s acts that will always follow them as a burden. I wish I could have left behind all my memories, all the things that I had been through. But that would be impossible, and totally useless. I went to England without money, without my books (and this is a torture for someone like me), with just a backpack of few clothes, and, most important of all, without the people that are significant for you, the people that you feel so close to. This is the hardest thing of all, especially when it happens perpetually. In England it is easier to disappear. Of course, I knew that it would be difficult to find solidarity and assistance in the Iranian community. My homosexuality was of course a serious obstacle. But there was the LGBT community willing to offer me a temporary shelter and maybe some connections in order to find a job. These people embraced me, and, to tell the truth, many of them are Muslims, like me. But what we had in common was discrimination of various kinds in various places. So, just in case anyone is interested, I

did not continue my career as sex worker in the UK”.

Many in the audience laughed. “I think he has successfully been through a phase of self-acceptance,” said Nikos. “Unlike my ex”, answered Nassa. “It’s more complicated for Alex... Especially now, in his condition...”

“I was offered accommodation in a refugee shelter, and I applied for refugee status. My application was accepted. So, I started offering community service, by teaching English to other refugees, and organizing events for them. I should confess I was good at that. But what tempted me most was going back to Classics, to universities. So, I applied to Oxford, and was accepted, with a scholarship. It was kind of hard, because I had almost nothing to prove my identity and degrees so far taken, but I managed to order the latter online, and, thankfully, most of my papers were also online. I had nothing on paper with me, but I wanted to take this step so much. And ...it happened. I started a new PhD, I worked hard, really hard, but considering my previous experiences this was like heaven to me. From the moment I put my feet on Oxford campus I knew that this would be my last opportunity. So, I couldn’t hold back. Until then there have been many times that I wanted to give up, because I was physically and psychologically exhausted. But even when I was tied up in a dark room, the only way to maintain my sanity was trying to think over research hypotheses. I know this sounds crazy, you probably think I am paranoid and maybe you are right. But after I got there, I was determined that nothing could stop me from my own pursuit of happiness... I guess I should stop, this is turning to look like some kind of motivational speech, and I don’t think I am an excellent

motivational speaker. Sometimes I'm diving deep into darkness, but it is that same time that I begin to start looking for the light."

"The people that have chased you, those that abused you and even illegally arrested you are now in prison. How do you feel about that?"

"Are you sure that they're all in prison? I deliberately didn't pay a lot of attention to whatever happened to the trial of some Party leaders and members. Of course, I was satisfied with the result. But ten years ago, even after assassinating a man, their popularity was not affected at all. They managed to get even more seats in the Parliament. So, when I left, I thought that Greece was tumbling towards a dystopia of extremism and hatred. Thank God I was wrong. I may be good in Ancient Greek, but I would fail in Greece's modern political History, I guess. I don't know what happened to the people that abused me, because I hardly know who they were. I am sure that there are many people free out there that may have committed serious crimes, maybe manage to get away with it. What I consider positive is that The Party is now weak. But the ideas they were supporting have not died. They're just hidden because those accepting them are currently hiding their real faces. And, I believe, there's nothing wrong with ideas. Really, you are not obliged to love me. You have the right to feel disgusted by me. What is problematic is actions. Actions cause damage to society, and actions can only be punished. You are all free to think that the man that is speaking is just a cunning person who doesn't deserve whatever he's achieved because he's a stranger, he's not a Christian, he's not a 'real' man, he has done illegal or even immoral things to find his way to his goals. This

is OK with me. What is beyond limits is when hatred is expressed with actions.”

“But doesn’t hatred always find a way to become actual abuse? Could you really forgive them for all these horrible things they did to you?” This question came from an adolescent - one of his ex-professor’s sons.

“I think it’s hard for hatred to stay in the closet. It is like an internal trauma that either you try to heal, or it eventually starts bleeding, with true blood, in most of the cases not your own blood. And it’s harder to work or find the proper environment to heal this trauma than letting it grow bigger and become incurable. I think those ideas will always be accepted by a part of every society. There will always be people with fear for anything that looks ‘alien’ in their own culture or subculture. And sometimes I think this is explainable. Think about Medea. She left everything to follow Jason to Greece. But the wild world she was grown in followed her, as both a mentality and a reputation. In Greece she was never accepted. She was a stranger not for what she had done, but for what she was. And after she had committed her horrible crimes, as an answer to her husband’s infidelity, she escapes in a divine way. There are always people that will feel uncomfortable with whatever is different from what they’re used to, and that they would prefer not to coexist with that different person or situation. The thing is, can we learn to tolerate what looks ‘alien’? Can we learn just to respect each other? I know that some people will always despise me for what I am, not what I have done to them. But I cannot really do much about this. But what I demand, what all societies must teach people, is mutual respect and tolerance”.

“Are you still afraid of them?” the boy continued.

“Yes, I am. Not of them. I am afraid of hatred, because I have never been able to feel it. Antigone said that she was born to love, not to hate. She’s not the only one. We were all born to love, not to hate. But there’s also fear in our souls. And this fear sometimes is mutated into hatred. I am afraid of this hatred. I feel relieved that these hard times of a decade ago seem to have passed, but we must always be trying to prevent it from prevailing again.”

“I asked you if you have forgiven the ones who did all those things to you...”

“No. I have not forgiven them, and I cannot forget anything. As I said before, I wanted to forget. But it is impossible. Oblivion is a luxury we’re not equipped with, at least until some of us get Alzheimer’s. But even then, these traumas have such deep roots that become the last things we’ll forget, if we ever do. You know, I still could press charges against them, at least for some of these crimes. But I can’t. Because I don’t know the names of all these people, but mostly because I am still scared. A rape victim is always scared. And there is no court decision or punishment that can take away this fear from me. After ten years, I still feel terrified when I feel a hand on my shoulder or on my back in the Tube. I still have panic attacks when I must walk through dark roads and alleys. I have worked on this with therapists, and it’s getting better. But I don’t want to get tangled in a process that will be more traumatic. For a long time, I didn’t want to return to Greece because I was afraid that I would meet some of those people by accident. But, most of all, that everything will be reminding me of what I’ve been through. Of me, walking desperately, sometimes dressed up as a Muslim

woman, fearing that I'll get uncovered. And my last desperate route to freedom. I was put in the police car to be taken to the airport to be deported to Iran. Every day, every single moment I was wishing I would die before going back. When we arrived at the airport, I realized that everything was over. I was sitting in handcuffs, escorted by two policemen. One of them tripped on my legs and spilled his coffee all over me. I considered this another act of contempt. Especially when I heard him say 'What the fuck are you doing with your feet? Look what you've done, asshole... We've given you clean clothes, and now you'll go back to your country looking like shit.' I knew that there were many policemen that were voters of the Party, so I said nothing. He made me stand up and led me to the toilet. I was scared again - and even more when he asked me to take off my shirt and pants". He took a clean sports uniform out of a backpack that he was holding. 'Get your ass in these clothes" I'll be waiting outside. Don't do anything foolish.' He slammed the door behind me, and I took a deep breath. I was still trembling. I put the uniform on and then I felt two hands grabbing my shoulders and a piece of cloth in my mouth." I tried to scream but it was too late. I felt like I had no voice, that, yes, indeed, everything was over. Momentarily, this was relieving. But it didn't last long - I fainted, When I woke up, I was in the container with the horses. There was a wallet in my pocket with a few pounds and a note.

"You're safe. You're going to England. The horses are friendly, feed them and they'll feel grateful. Unfortunately, you'll share their toilet, we couldn't do anything better. Your own food is in a box you'll find on the top of the container. Be patient. You're going

to be delivered by the same people that will deliver the horses. They'll take you in the stables, there you'll get your bath, and they'll tell you where to go".

"I remember every single word. Because this was the only thing I had to read during this trip".

"Nikos, you did a great job..." whispered Nassa. "And I know you risked your career".

"Come on. you should be praised for planning this trip. I just had a little headache after I woke up. Menelaos' boys used more chloroform than necessary... Plus, it was a good reason for me to ask for a leave. This was the first one-month vacation I ever had. And of course, an extra asset was that I spent it with you. It was that "reconciliation trip" that we both needed."

Darius tried to conclude - it was rather obvious that he was getting tired, despite his cool attitude.

"I know it's getting late, and maybe many of you don't really care about so many details. I tried not to be over-dramatic; I hope. I'm glad I'm back in Greece. I think I have managed to handle all my fears, and the proof is that you're seeing me in front of you. And, of course, now that the first tape is taken, I will try to come more frequently. There's absolutely no reason to postpone dealing with your fears and traumas. The longer you're waiting until this happens, the more painful it remains. So, here I am, having returned to my own Ithaca, my ideal Ithaca. And it feels good. I know that many things have changed since the last time I was here. I'm a different person and things have changed in the country. The crisis is not the same as it was back then, Things have gotten better. The Party is not as trendy as it was, though I'm afraid that too many of their supporters remain silent and feel insulted, and

maybe are still waiting for a second chance to be back on top. From what I've learned so far, we must stand still against racism and hatred and violence. There is something ironic about this. These people, who despise and attack democracy, when they're in danger, they try to take advantage of every single democratic right that this Democracy has granted all citizens. They're trying to use democracy just to take it down. Democratic people do not have this kind of luxury. They must defend the values of liberty, equality, democracy, and solidarity without hurting other people's rights. We must try our best to include everyone in this democracy, even those who hate us. We must show tolerance, but we also need the power of justice to punish people for their actions, not their qualities. This is what I'll always try to fight for. And, if there's no more questions, I would like to add a last phrase, before expressing my warmest thanks to you. There are many ironic things in our lives. The person that saved my life the night I was attacked and raped was a friend of The Party. They hated immigrants, they believed that I, like all of them, are a danger to the existence of your nation. But in this very critical moment their humanitarian values defeated his nationalist and probably racist obstacles. That person, whom one probably would call a racist, or a fascist, or even a nazi, opened their door to me, offered me shelter and something more than this. The warmest hug of care and affection. Sometimes it takes just one moment, one very tough decision, to make you an angel or a demon. That person defeated their demons and became my guardian angel. Thank you for your attention, your interest, your support. Please, never lose hope, we are designed to love and hope, and we

all deserve our own way to feel good and useful... Thank you so much!"

What followed was a standing ovation that lasted about a couple of minutes. Darius was obviously exhausted - emotionally one might dare say. He had given many speeches, under really challenging circumstances. Defending your PhD in front of a team of Oxford professors isn't an easy thing, and having to answer really mean questions by older scholars in scientific conferences is like fighting against a lion in a Roman arena. But this was a totally different thing. He sat down on his chair and tried to drink some water, but even this seemed impossible. Of course, he should be patient for a few more minutes, for handshakes and photos and congratulations before he finally collapses in his room.

But there was another thing that had to be done.

"Nassa, he's brilliant. He's worth all we have been through", Nikos told her.

"I wish Alex was here to listen to him. Listen, we've got to start moving towards him before they'll drown him in their congratulations".

44 | TAKE ME THERE

“So, you’re the policeman...” Darius realized that there were a lot of things that he didn’t know.

“I had to be rude with you, sorry for spilling my coffee over you... At least it was frappé.” Nikos told him.

“I know... a couple of ice cubes slipped in my underpants...” They both started laughing.

“I am in the same car with two sexist pigs that made me drive while they chit chat in the back seats”, said Nassa.

“You don’t want anyone to drive your car, plus, my right hand is still useless”. Nikos said. This was another part of the story Darius had no idea about.

“Is this serious?” Darius asked.

“Well, I’m lucky to have both my hands. Menelaos wasn’t as lucky as me”.

“Is Menelaos dead?”

“You shouldn’t mourn him, Dar...” said Nassa from the front. When everything was clear - and Menelaos had a serious contribution to this, I have to

confess - he asked and was offered the status of Protected Witness. He should get a new ID and a new address and a place to stay somewhere abroad, in exchange for all the information he offered. He should give nasty details for many of his enemies, who happened to be significant members of the Party hierarchy. Plus, he had enough money to live in comfort for the rest of his life, since after his revelations he couldn't stand in his business field anymore."

"And I was the lucky one to accompany him to testify. After his testimony, I was driving him to the airport, undercover. We had to follow an unusual escape plan, to avoid any chance of ambush. But we didn't," said Nikos. They were waiting for us in a place that no one could ever imagine that it was possible to pass from. They had Kalashnikovs. Too many bullets, my friend. They found almost forty on his body, and ten on mine. I'm lucky to get away with just a paralyzed hand - and an honorary compensation...The worst thing of all is that this lady is always arguing that she has to drive the crippled guy".

"Oh, Allah, I'm so sorry..." Darius said.

"These people were relentless, Dar. But you shouldn't worry about yourself. They weren't interested in going after you from the very beginning. If they had, they would have found you". Nassa sounded more cynical. "You were just a small piece of the puzzle that knew nothing. Your ignorance saved you".

"Menelaos helped me too, I feel so sorry for him..."

"No, Dar, you shouldn't. Of course, his testimony was critical. The fact that he persuaded Tony to confess

that he was the guy that had the affair with the girl is of course of some importance”, Nassa said.

“You helped too in this, Nassa”, added Nikos.

“I didn’t have to do much. Tony was convinced, even before Menelaos talked to him. He was devastated...”

“What happened to him? The last time I saw him in court he was in a really bad condition”.

“He’s fine. He’s released from prison - he’s offering community service at the time, and he had a couple of successful surgeries.”

“We had the chance to talk a lot when we were tied together in that room... He’s been through a lot as well... He swore he did nothing against the girl’s will”.

“Dar, you tend to see the saint in any person. We, lawyers, on the contrary, have the tendency to discover the devil and try to make him look like an angel”, Nassa said. Tony should be more careful - this is a shining example of how careless behavior that doesn’t seem dangerous can have catastrophic side effects. Two women died and a lot of trouble and confusion was caused. But I think he’s gradually recovering from stupidity, probably faster than his sexual functions.

“Why didn’t they go after Tony when they found out that he was the one that abused the girl?”

“Because he has been one of them, even for a while. Ha has been one of the Party boys, a flesh from their flesh. This story wasn’t as suitable as your story. You were Muslim and from Asia, it was easier to present you as a threat to society. You were just a poor and strange devil that would make it easier for them to go on with their racist activism. Albanians are integrated into society, as the first generation of immigrants, some of them have even mixed marriages with Greek

women, it is not a really strong argument for a pogrom against 'aliens'."

"There's a lot of trouble that can be triggered by actions that seem irrelevant", added Nikos. "Sometimes I feel that our lives are not guided by reason, just by coincidence. Another bullet could have killed me, a bullet less, or a different route could save Menelaos' life as well as my arm..."

"Sometimes I feel that we are helpless against powers that we cannot control. Or maybe I'm affected by all these tragedies I've been studying through all these years. Sometimes I feel like a puppet, there are so many things that happened that cannot be connected to each other, like a session of irrelevant things. I really admire you for figuring out what happened...". Darius took a deep breath.

"Maybe finding out the truth is another coincidence," said Nassa. Tony had an affair with his boss's wife, and at the same time with his boss's daughter and his lawyer, who had persuaded him to testify against his boss for abusing his wife. This is already complicated" laughed Nassa. But I could not imagine that his daughter would kill her own mother with a bullet, nor that she would set up this entire plot to punish Tony and her father. Plus, that poor girl, the Party that got involved... That girl's motivation was triggered by pure hatred against her dad and her lover, two sides of the same coin. She considered that those two men had destroyed her life, but her rage targeted her mother, the only person that she trusted, and the last person that she expected to betray her. She was the one that ordered Tony's castration. She tried to destroy them all, and I think she won. But her destructive power went beyond her expectations. When you open

the gates of doom, there are more things that are carried by the whirl. And she didn't have an escape plan. She didn't care. She just wanted to destroy everything."

"You should have watched the final battle in court, Darius", said Nikos. "Nassa pushed her so hard that the iron daughter broke and confessed".

"Well, she was already broken too..."

"They broke you, Dar, but you didn't kill or hurt anyone. I know you're not a saint, but you just didn't... You have paid for things you haven't done... And you're lucky to be alive and kicking..." said Nassa.

"Maybe I broke Alex... He had a life, and then I invaded and turned it upside down..."

"Alex had no life. What he defined as life was just an everyday routine that he felt comfortable with. Alex made choices too... He opened his door to you. He fell in love with you. He went over his limits".

"Is it a good idea to visit him? I don't want to put him in any kind of awkward situation."

"Dar, do you want to see him?"

"More than anything in my life."

"Well, I'm sure you remember this doorstep, Dar. Here we are..."

45 | THE PROMISE

Their son, Yanni, opened the door. “How’s dad?” asked Nassa.

“He’s already fallen asleep... No worries, his pills make him a little sleepy. He was watching the speech on the Internet... Hey... You must be Darius... I’m John, you know both mom and dad. I’m glad I’m finally meeting you in person, I’ve heard so much about you...”

“It’s nice to meet you... You look a lot like him. Same eyes, same smile. Maybe we should go and come back tomorrow... I have a little time in the morning before my plane leaves. I wish I could stay longer, or I could just come when this Greek citizenship event happens”.

Nassa tried to explain. “Listen, Dar... This is something you both waited for. There may not be another chance. Alex has retired from work after a second heart attack that was followed by a stroke. He’s still on medication, he rarely decides to go out, he’s given up a lot, especially after his retirement, his life is

totally empty. He stays inside all day, just reading, surfing the Internet..."

"We also play League of Legends together. He's good. He always beats me -not a sign of gratitude to his son, who taught him how to play... What a boomer!" Yanni laughed.

"So, there's only tonight, and he's in a delicate condition, Dar. So, I have a suggestion. I'll take Niko and Yanni home and you're going inside and wake him up. He can't sleep all day. Yanni, get your ass in the car..."

"This is domestic violence, Darius... I think my mother is right. Get in there and wake him up. He will have a lot of time to sleep... I'm getting my ass in the car now; can I drive at least?"

"Absolutely not."

"Nassa..."

"Dar, I said, absolutely not. I'll pick you up tomorrow, you don't need to get ripped off by taxi drivers to get to the airport. Goodnight".

"Nassa... Does he know I was coming?"

"Absolutely not. Surprise him!" Nassa and Yanni got in the car, started it and left within seconds, and Darius was standing on Alex's doorstep. The door was open. Now he was the one standing up and the man inside was weak... "Maybe this is all my fault..." thought once more. He sat down a little on the marble doorstep... The pavement was dirty, just like that night, this marble looked like a white sign in the darkness. Maybe this is what attracted him that night. A motorbike passed - the noise broke the silence and Darius almost jumped with astonishment. This was another reminder of "that night". The sound of motor engines all over his head, their boots hitting him all

over his body, his torn clothes... He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He finally made it. He was back where everything had started.

The house looked the same, well, all the furniture seemed to be in the exact same place, thus, the paint was faded, some of the 70s wallpapers were torn, some of the posters weren't there anymore. Yes... those of national pride. He stepped in the kitchen, the picture was the same, like nothing had changed, except their lives. On the sofa, there was a pile of books, one was left open. Looked familiar. Dar turned on the lights and looked at the cover. "Discovering the seeds of Greek tragedy in modern times - by Darius Badjani, 'The Times' best seller". His online articles that he had printed and binded with hard covers. "Dar 2019", "Dar 2020" ... "Dar 2021" ... He hadn't missed a single thing.

A mixture of anxiety, craving and sadness for all those years lost and put in scientific papers made his body sweat like in a sauna, and his eyes full of tears. He slightly opened Alex's bedroom door. A small light was on, that very same light he had for years. There he was. Sleeping quietly, in a weird serenity, like he was expecting that something great was going to happen no matter if he was sound asleep, or, something horrible was about to happen so he'd better not be awake to experience it.

Darius tiptoed towards Alex. He was not expecting this kind of reuniting and he was extremely nervous. He moved back and headed for the bathroom. The very same picture. Same tiles, same colors of the towels, even the same toothbrush and shaving foam brands. He was sweating like hell - so it wouldn't take him long to think it over. He took his clothes off,

folded them carefully, and entered the shower. Yes, same shower gel, like the one he washed off blood and mud that night. Now there's only sweat. The water was relieving, now it felt like washing away all these years of agony, of escaping, of finally finding a way to dream and create. An entire decade was washed away, now he was clean, calm and safe, like that night when this old-fashioned house became his shelter.

He used Alex's towel to dry himself - he felt his scent, after so many years. Now everything was like before. He walked off the shower, no need to put clothes back on, and went again to Alex's bedroom. He lifted the sheets very carefully and laid next to Alex - trying not to wake him up.

"After all, we're together again". Alex was sleeping on his side, so Darius could cover Alex's shoulder with his arm. Now he was touching him again. Now he was giving him shelter."

"Allah, now the world can end. Thank you for making this promise come true".

Dar closed his eyes - in a few minutes he had fallen asleep.

Peace.

46 | CEASEFIRE

Alex wakes up a few times at night. When you're 65, your prostate doesn't allow you a night of continuous sleep. But this time everything was weird and different. He felt something heavy on his shoulder that wouldn't let him move freely. He panicked. His heart was starting to beat faster, he felt that he was choking, a wave of fear and anger triggered his self-defense mechanism, at least what was left of it. He felt somebody's breath on his neck - this was the moment that his subconscious instincts decided it was time for action.

He grabbed his pillow, stood on his knees towards the invader, and attacked. His pillow was the only arm he had.

"What the fuck! You bastard! What the hell are you doing here?"

A naked man was sleeping next to him. He couldn't see Darius' face; he was already pushing the pillow on it.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Dar couldn't speak. He was trying to move, but Alex was above him, pushing the pillow harder and harder. He tried to move his hands, and tried to utter something but it was impossible. He tried to defend himself with the rest of his body, but he felt immobilized by that surprise attack... He was never good at defending himself.

Alex, on the other hand, couldn't think of anything. He kept pushing and pushing. The one thing he was afraid most of all was somebody breaking into his house. His place of safety and rest. He was locking the doors very carefully every night, he had put iron bars outside the windows, he even had an alarm system that he was sure was activated.

"I'll kill you bastard. How dare you get inside my house?"

Darius felt less and less air in his lungs and his defense was becoming weaker and weaker. Awkwardly, he felt no agony or fear, on the contrary, one might notice that he was sexually aroused.

Within a few moments, the intruder's resistance was over. His hands stopped pushing back the pillow and were released, his feet stopped moving...

Alex was sweating and stopped pushing.

"Oh God... Oh my God..."

Has he killed him? Is he still alive? or he's just fainted. He saw the man's erected penis - he's heard that this happens to people after they get hanged.

"Oh God... oh my God..." He removed the pillow and saw his face.

"Darius... What the fuck?"

He started shaking the naked body on his bed... He hadn't the faintest idea of what had happened, all he was sure about he's living a nightmare."

“Oh my God... Oh my God... No, no... it is not true... This is not real... I...”

He didn't know how to find his pulse; he had no idea of CPR. He lifted his arms upwards; they just feel lifeless. He noticed a tattoo on his left arm - Alexander the Great's face.

All he was saying was “Oh my God”, repeating after taking a short breath. This was way beyond the worst thing he could deal with.

He stuck his ears on Darius' chest trying to listen if his heart was beating. He wasn't sure if he could hear anything. He was so confused that he might hear his own heartbeat. Dar wasn't moving...

“Oh my God... oh my God...”

What more could he do? Of course, press the chest! Press the chest!!! How the fuck am I supposed to do this... I've seen it on Netflix but I'm not sure I remember how it's done.”

“He started pushing Darius's chest harder and harder”. No response.

“Mr. Alex, I suggest you move to the kiss of life. You're hurting me...”

He was alive.

“Bastard! I thought I had killed you...”

“I had to stop moving otherwise you would probably have killed me for real...”

Alex fell next to Darius - they were both looking at the ceiling.

“Oh God” ... said Alex. I may have had another heart attack...

“Allah Allah...,” said Dar. This turned out to be less romantic than I imagined.

“You creepy bastard - you even had an erection... What were you expecting me to do? If you woke up in

the middle of the night and found someone sleeping next to you, what would you do?”

“For your information.... I still have an erection...”
They both started laughing...

“You sex-maniac, creepy Arab... I thought you had become a serious respected scientist”

“I’m Persian, remember... And I’m a respected scholar - you’ve been reading my books, so you can tell... I didn’t want to wake you up... Plus, it was like a dream to me that we were next to each other again...”

“This is unbelievable”, said Alex. They both couldn’t stop laughing... “You haven’t changed at all... though you’ve gained some weight... back then you were so skinny, I couldn’t recognize you without seeing your face”.

“Well... I’m 36 now... Too much work, no time to exercise...Junk food in the office... You look good too...”

“Well... I’m 66... I’m an old battle axe. And definitely I’m in worse shape than you remember... I’ve lost a few kilos after the heart attacks and a lot of hair since then...

“Well, does it really matter? Now I’m the chubby guy and you’re the skinny one...”

“You are young and handsome as you’ve always been, Dar. I have seen that with my own eyes, you kinky Persian... I can’t believe you got naked inside my bed...”

“Have you forgiven me for lying to you back then?”

“I haven’t forgiven myself for giving up on you...”

“You never did, this is what I feel...”

“It’s not enough just to love someone, Dar. One should show it. You needed my support, and I deserted

you.”

“Everything was irrational back then. You should not feel guilty, Mr. Alex... You had your own demons too.”

“And now I tried to kill you.... Oh my God... I almost did... for a few moments I thought you were dead and...”

“Stop thinking about that. Now we’re here, we’re together, and... it’s 4 o’ clock in the morning.”

“How could I have wasted so much time without trying to find you? I’m now an old man, there’s so much we both have missed...”

“It’s not your fault. Just think we’re together, here and now. Could this last forever? I wish, but it won’t. And if it lasts forever, it will be boring as hell... Well, can I still lay next to you, or you’ll try to kill me again...?”

“Won’t you put something on, Professor? This is the first naked professor I’ve seen in my life!”

“I suggest you take some clothes off instead”.

“You were timid when I first met you... Where’s that shy guy?”

Darius jumped on the bed and tried to take off Alex’s shirt...

“No, no, please... I think I need a shower, professor...” Alex got up. His pajamas were soaking wet in sweat.

“And I think I need to join you Sir”.

“Don’t you dare”...

“Try me, Alex...”

He got inside and locked the door behind him. He felt uncomfortable with his body - could he still be attractive in Darius’ eyes? That crazy little Persian...

“Stop knocking, I’m not opening”.

“Oh, come on... You can't stay in there forever”.

“I'm not young anymore. I'm not the guy you fell in love with back then... I don't want you to look at me and feel any kind of pity... or disappointment.”

“We're both older, Alex. But I don't want you to feel awkward. I'll be waiting outside.”

“Just put something on”.

“I can't, Alex. You have locked my clothes in your bathroom: ... He started laughing...”

“You always have an argument for everything”.

“That makes me a professor...”

After his shower Alex unlocked the door and went outside in a bathrobe. Darius was sitting cross legged on his bed.

“Now what? Is this some kind of naked meditation” Alex said.

“OK, I'm going under these sheets, and you'd better follow me, because I'm naked and cold and I need a hug...” He went under the sheets and covered his face. “I can't see anything. Get in”.

Alex took off his robe and got under the sheets too... “Happy now?” he asked Dar.

“You can't imagine how much.”

“Oh yes I can... Dar...”

“Yes, you can, Alex... Please... let's have a big big hug man...”

They hugged and stayed silent for a few minutes, just feeling each other's body.

“Body remembers, Alex, no matter how long it's been... Plus... if I can judge from what touches me down there and is definitely not mine, all this old man stuff is bullshit...”

“You're a pervert, professor”.

“No, I just love you, old man...”

“Have you forgiven me Darius?”

“Don’t repeat the same question... This is over. All that matters is here and now. Now that we have each other, this is a moment of utmost happiness... We should take advantage of the momentum...”

“I want to tell you so many things... I want to explain...”

“For the time, get started with a kiss... I’m not sure I can hold back for much longer” ...

Alex started with a kiss... and then there was silence. They made love like the first time... in the same clumsy, almost funny way, but they didn’t care...They just had each other... and this was everything that mattered in the entire universe. Alex felt alive again - in a few moments he took over as the power player of the game... The Professor was shyer than his words implied - he totally let Alex explore his body and take every initiative. For both, it was a moment of atonement.

They couldn’t sleep after. They were just laying on their side, looking at each other. Straight in the eye. Trying to read all the history that they couldn’t tell... That they didn’t have the time to tell.

“Did you have many boyfriends up there in the UK? Is there someone now in your life?”

“After prison, it was impossible for someone to touch me. I panicked and ran away. This was totally ridiculous. This lasted for a couple of years. Afterwards there have been some people in my life, but nothing stable or lasting for longer than a few dates including sex. You know, I had to deal with stereotypes there too, no matter if they knew absolutely nothing about whatever had happened here. Everyone was OK with my homosexual identity, but my Muslim one was

sometimes making people act weird. To some people I was an exotic young man from the Middle East that could be violent, and this is what they expected. There were of course some one-night stands after alcohol in students' parties -and of course some people that really tried to understand... But nothing lasted. There was a moment in our relationship that they realized I was just trying to offer them the kind of pleasure they wanted, just like when I was a toyboy”.

“Just like you did a while ago... You let me do everything...”

“No, it's different. I did it with all my heart. I could die right here, right now. Grab your pillow and choke me again... I don't care...”

“Now, is there anyone in your life?”

“There's this guy... Elliot... We were hanging out for a few weeks... He's handsome... he's nice... but he's bisexual... he just wants to have a traditional family and keep an open relationship with me...”

“Interesting”, Alex said... “What do you think about that?...”

“We broke up. His wife didn't know about me... And I didn't know that he was already married with two children. So, he had his family and just wanted me for some fun...”

“Do you love him?”

“I don't. I care about him. I like him. But... I can't say this word to anyone except...”

“Except?”

“You, Alex.”

Darius's head was now on Alex's chest, hearing his heart beating fast.”

“You're crying, Professor... Men don't cry”.

“Oh, please don't stop me... It's been years since I

wanted to cry, and I couldn't".

"Fine... Do as you feel."

"You, Alex? All these years..."

"Nothing has changed, Dar... Not even my pajamas... I remained alone, because I realized that's what I wanted. I have my children, just like your boyfriend Elliot..."

"He's not my boyfriend. I said, we broke up."

"I think that I've walked my own way. I was so lucky to have you in my life - after you were gone there was nothing I could really wish for. On the one hand I looked like having a totally empty life, but deep down I felt complete."

"It is really hard to say that you don't expect anything more..."

"Come on, I'm 65... and ten years ago I met a person who became my kindred spirit- and will always be... Now I'm having him again in my arms and I'm cuddling his hair because the bastard is crying like a baby..."

"This is not fair for you Alex..."

"You know what wouldn't be fair? Keeping you here in my arms forever... In a few hours, you'll get your chubby ass off my bed, find your clothes in the bathroom and get your plane back to England. And I'll be happy and proud because you're moving towards your dream. And I'll be happy because I really love you, and this is why you need to feel free from me".

"You could come with me to the UK..."

"Of course, I will come... but as a tourist, for as long as I'll be able to travel by plane... I'll be coming up there and meeting my old buddy, if you are in a relationship or... who knows, are married, or... if you're still free, we could repeat this session on your

own bed. And of course, you'll be coming here to meet me whenever you have business here, and... hang out..."

"Come with me... We can get married there. It is totally legal. We can stay together... Or... even if you want to stay here... I can find a job in a university here and come back... I mean this... I can do anything."

"Listen to yourself, Dar... You don't deserve this. Now you're 36 and I'm 65. How about in 10 years? You'll still be young, and I'll be 75. I don't want to imagine, or even mention the optimistic scenario of me being alive in 20 years. Then you'll be at the age I was when I met you and I'll be your old husband that you probably won't be able to stand with his manners, his health problems... None of us wants that. None of us deserves that. You deserve to build your life. And I deserve to enjoy your company without being a burden. I love you so much to do this to you..."

"You'll never be a burden for me... Please don't say this..."

"Listen, Dar... You said I shouldn't bother about the past. Now I say you shouldn't bother about the future. We have here and now. These were your own words. There's no reason to make any kind of plans. You have a great career in front of you. And I really feel great to see you and make love to you and chat with you. We can have it again and again if we want it - but you must be free. Free to hang out, to love, to have sex and marry anyone you like. If I know this, I'll be happy. Otherwise, I'll feel like a ghost that haunts your pants, you little bastard - though at the time you're not wearing any..."

They started laughing.

"Do you promise you'll leave this place feeling like

a free man...? This is what makes me happy. And you want to make people happy, I'm using your own fucking words”.

“Please, don't make me promise this”.

“You have no choice, professor...”

Darius took a long deep breath...

“I love you”.

“Yes... I love you too, but I set you free...”

“Could we stay together a little longer?”

“As long as you won't miss your plane...”

“Nassa will come and pick me up...”

“Okay, professor...”

“Okay, old man...”

Another kiss... Another hug... more chit chat... until they both fell asleep. Darius' s phone was out of battery, in his pants pocket in the bathroom. Alex was always setting his phone to flight operation before going to bed.

Nassa tried to call them both. But there was no answer. Passing by the house crossed her mind, as she had a spare set of keys in case of emergency, but it didn't seem exactly necessary. Yanni persuaded her not to: “Come on, mom, he'll catch the next flight, no big deal. Chill out...”

Yanni was right. Because if she had gone and opened the door, she would have found two naked men sound asleep, hugging each other like young fairytale lovers, or, even, like angels, providing that angels are allowed to make out.

Well, two sleeping naked men can resemble an aspect of true love, can't they?

THE END

ALEXANDER VS. DARIUS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elias Toumasatos was born in Kefalonia, a Greek isle, in 1974. He has two bachelor's degrees in law and Drama Studies (both at University of Athens), a PhD in History (Ionian University) and a MSc in Educational Psychology (University of Nicosia, Cyprus). He has worked as a Director of the Corgialenios Library (Argostolion, Kefalonia). He is currently living in Kefalonia, Greece and works as a Social Sciences teacher (Vallianion Lyceum, Kefalonia), and a substitute lecturer (Ionian University).

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Alexander vs. Darius is his first book written in English.

Alexander vs. Darius is a romance between two men of different cultural identities, in a controversial social context. The title, as well as the main characters' names are inspired by the two ancient rival kings of Macedonia and Persia.

In the mid-2010s Greece is going through an enormous economic crisis. Banks are closing, enormous numbers of people are under the threshold of poverty. High unemployment rates, closing banks, people losing their homes. Violence, crime and xenophobia are rising too, as well as racism. In the center of Athens, an ultra-nationalist Party organizes pogroms against illegal immigrants.

Alexander is a middle-aged man living in the decadent center of Athens, He is a rather isolated person, a rather peaceful, lonely public servant who supports the ultra-nationalist Party, believes in the values of Greek supremacy and considers all immigrants a threat to Greek identity.

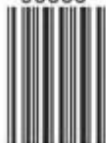
One night Alexander offers shelter to Darius, an illegal immigrant from Iran who that is sexually attacked by members of the Party.

Alexander and Darius get to know each other, and a romantic relationship is developing, despite how different their social, cultural and ideological backgrounds are.

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