

1932, Greece

There was no longer any cloth.

The road was red.

- Yiannis Ritsos

Prologue

Winter's End, 1932
Kléftiko, Strymonic Gulf, Greece

“YOU'RE LOOKING FOR WHAT?”

“The Peplos,” the stumpy built man repeated as he held a tulip flask of spicy cognac to the cave of his mouth.

Mahogany boards, hardened with time, jigsawed the floor while the two men took stock of their situation. A musty smell of damp wall and pungent cigar smoke clouded them. Situated half a mile above sea level and with the tides smacking into the shore far below, the cabin itself jutted outwards like a beak while two protruding girders clung like talons on the mountain's rocky edge.

“I have no idea what it is, let alone where it is,” replied Minos as he waited for a reaction. He had been listening with warranted interest to his visitor's story.

“It's a cloth,” the stumpy man continued. “We understand you are harboring the woman who knows its whereabouts!”

Minos puffed his chest like a rooster. “This is a place of repentance, not of repugnance,” he scoffed and eyed his guest who had delicately wrapped, then snugged his cognac flask back into his bag—Minos had pilfered his previous one.

“Indeed,” he said rifling through his notes. “The Group means no offense.”

Minos feigned a cough as the visitor removed a sheet of paper, on which he scribbled a name and address. He then wrote the word ‘Peplos’ in cursive script, underneath the note. He paused for Minos to read it before turning it over. The reverse side was a ‘Kodachrome’ color photograph depicting an image of a young female.

“I know you recognize her,” he said as he scrawled. “Will God rest her soul, Minos? She has been such an inconvenience.” He lifted the photo and dangled it like a carrot.

Without hesitation, Minos rubbed the paper between his fingers and flipped it over. He read the address and then tucked it into the maze of his cassock linen robes seconds later. *Don't show interest*; he scolded himself. *Don't show concern*.

“I might know her,” he replied with a faint nod. “She lives in Athens. Is this the reason you can’t find her yourself?” he added cheekily. Minos was privy to the fact that the Swiss man opposite him believed that somebody had jinxed his family if they ever visited the Greek capital.

“My father will make a small exception.” He scribbled down another address before passing it over to Minos. “He’ll be there for one night and one night only—waiting for Fate to deliver the Peplos.”

Minos glanced back sheepishly as he crossed his arms. “I’ll need some help retrieving it. I am a man of the garb, not of the grab.”

The stumpy Swiss smiled. “Take a sicarius with you.”

“Sikarios?” Minos repeated wrongly.

“Yes, an *attentäter*! A sort of helper,” he said, and paused. “They come in handy.”

Minos’ stare shifted towards a slight shadow moving from under his cell door. “All this for a cloth?” he said, realising someone else was on the other side. *Perhaps the Swiss’ assistant?* “I could always give you mine!” He grabbed his linen sleeve and laughed aloud to reassure anyone listening in that things were fine.

The Swiss was not amused. “What we seek is a delicately woven yellow cloth. Not some cheap fabric picked up from a haberdasher.”

Minos took in the detail, but hid his intrigue. “This Group you speak of ...,” his voice grew eager as he caressed the part of his chest hiding the photograph, “... does it have a name?”

The Swiss shook his head negatively, and removed a Biro from an inner welt pocket and penned an image on his hand. “You cannot pronounce what has no name. But you can see it.”

Minos jerked back in familiarity as he shielded his eagerness. Then his fingers slowly bobbed out and he shook the visitor’s waiting palm in agreement.

“Let’s consider your inconvenience my initiation.”

Two Days Later
'Sweet Triangle' at Syntagma Square
Athens Center

The young woman panted as she ascended the hillock, and hid behind a thicket of verdant wattle shrubs. The evening cold did little to hide her presence as clouds of breath steamed out of her heaving lungs. The sound of her heartbeat filled her ears like angrily rung church bells. Only yards away, she could discern the silhouettes of the two figures chasing her. They were speaking to a policeman.

“Excuse me, officer,” said the taller of the two men. “Have you seen a young woman come by here? She was wearing a black overcoat.”

“Her hair was in a bun,” said the other man, tapping the back of his head.

Before the officer could speak, though, the incessant clapping of heels on the pavement tapped away the cover of silence. All three men turned, and saw a shadowy figure skulking through the darkness and dashing into a café. They had no idea how she had managed to disappear and then appear so aptly.

The two shouted their goodbyes to the officer as they followed in pursuit.

Not too far off, *Anatoli*—Athens’ first café-pâtisserie, stood out among the rest. Slowing their pace and gathering their breath they entered the *kafenion*. At the rear of the store, the young woman had her back turned, her elbow resting against a counter. She was breathing heavily.

The two men scanned the room searchingly as they walked towards her. Heavy set wooden tables and chairs filled the baroque-style room as male voices chattered away about politics and the Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos’ decision to default on Greece’s debt. Checker pieces slammed onto backgammon boards as a cacophony of slurs and expletives decorated the atmosphere. Both men stood silently for a moment, reveling in the din.

“Excuse me,” shouted the taller of the two. “But I believe you have something that belongs to us.” His hand jousting in the woman’s direction.

Almost instantly, the banging and shouts turned to murmur and frowns, then stillness.

The young woman turned to face them, and a discernible smile of contempt shaped her lips. In her own way, she was telling them it was too late. Only her brother had seen her tuck two envelopes under the cash register.

“I’m sorry, but have we met before?”

Both men held their stare. “Interesting you say that. Let me reintroduce myself,” grinned the shorter of the two as he revealed an M1911 semiautomatic handgun from his undercoat.

“This woman has something of mine. I want it returned, or I will take something else in its place.”

“I’ve no idea who you ...”

Two loud pops cut off any chance of a longer sentence as the woman’s blood splattered. The man behind the counter instinctively moved, provoking the taller man to shake his head in disapproval. “Ts, ts, ts.” The Greeks had many ways of uttering ‘no’.

“No-one else move,” he shouted as the shorter man crouched next to the lifeless body, and searched her pockets and undergarments in a groping frenzy.

“Shit! It’s not on her! The bitch must have hidden it somewhere.” His beady glare rose to scan the room in search of conspiring eyes. “Don’t make us shoot you all until someone confesses!” His steely voice left no room for haggling. “Where is it?” he yelled as his accomplice darted behind the counter in search of their prize—but there was nothing.

The man holding the gun rotated his arm around the room like a clock unwinding, probing for a sign that someone had seen his yellow cloth. Eventually, the gunman’s hand stopped once he met the stare of the man behind the counter. Closing his left eye to take aim, he counted to three. “Ena, dyo, tria ...”

Suddenly, police whistles shattered the deathly silence and the gunman paused as his assistant scurried from behind the counter.

“There’s nothing here and she’s no longer an inconvenience. Let’s go!”

“What about my cloth? We saw her holding it,” replied the gunman.

“Yeah, and the hanging tree will be holding you if we get caught!” The assistant was eager to leave.

Both men frowned in short contemplation and then vanished into the darkness.

It did not take them long to dash to the address they were given. Hopefully the Swiss’ father was still waiting for them—it was important they were not seen on the streets.

Minos rapped three times on the heavy wooden door and waited for movement inside. Seconds later, footsteps could be heard approaching as the entrance jarred open revealing a set of brown eyes and a lowly delivered voice.

“What?” A small puff of air betrayed the warmth inside.

“Das Schicksal ist nicht blind—*Fate is not blind*,” said Minos.

“Aber blendet—*But blinds*,” the old man replied without a hint of reservation. “Have you done what my son hired you for?” he asked, having shouldered his body against the door. His right foot stood firm against the wooden frame’s beveled edge.

“God rest her soul,” Minos said, and bowed his head in a veneering attempt to feign condolence.

“And the cloth? Where is it?” The man’s stare dropped to Minos’ hands, hoping to see him holding the much-coveted prize.

He shrugged his shoulders. “There was nothing on her apart from dirt.”

A finger could be seen pointing from the door opening. “Verdammt! You’ll be damned to the depths of Hell if you’re lying!”

“We’re not lying. There was nothing on her,” replied Minos.

The door slammed shut, and the scratching of a chain could be heard dragging against a steel track. As the door opened, a warm gush of air released itself from the interior of the house.

“Pathetic! My life’s work has disappeared again!” he said creating distance for the two men to enter.

“She must have hidden it.” Minos was quick to speak.

The old man was not pleased. “You must be Minos,” said the Old Swiss.

“I am,” Minos replied and stepped forward. He then pointed to his assistant. “This is Sikarios.”

The Old Swiss smiled grimly in acknowledgement and motioned for Minos to approach him. “You don’t look like a monk.” He stared at his clean shaven face and then gestured for him to follow.

“I always dress the part,” Minos replied, and then followed the Old Swiss into the kitchen.

Sikarios waited outside.

“My failing health has not let me be the best of company lately. That’s why my son came to see you a few days ago and not me.” The Old Swiss plodded towards the rear of the kitchen as Minos followed. “That cloth would have changed things of course,” he said in a glum voice as he stretched his hands above his head to open a cupboard. “It’s everything. It’s priceless.” He turned his back and grabbed a teacup.

“Surely a cloth is not worth dying for, is it?” Minos furtively crept closer.

The Old Swiss laughed. “The cloth is not death. It is life,” he replied, and turned abruptly only to see Minos holding a Khukri knife.

The Old Swiss froze as Minos plunged it into his chest without warning.

Minos then hugged the Old Swiss with his right hand, and turned the knife clockwise with his left, driving the steel deeper.

From afar, it seemed as if the two men were dancing.

As Minos held him upright, he noticed the Old Swiss struggling less to survive and more to speak. He was uttering what sounded like a prayer.

“Gamma, delta, epsilon ...” And then he collapsed.

His last words were the Greek alphabet? Minos quizzed himself.

The body thudded to the floor as a falling hand grazed the table, taking with it some cutlery the Old Swiss had been using to butter some bread. Clings and clatters had echoed in the room during their brief waltz of death.

I’ve come up with a better idea. I think I’ll find that cloth for myself, thought Minos as he gazed at his victim. “After all, its purpose serves only the living,” he said in a low voice. Looking up, he saw the door slightly ajar and Sikarios sneaking a look.

“What took you so long?”

Minos waved his assistant inside. “I was waiting for him to prepare us something to eat. You know how I hate to cook,” he replied with a smirk.

Minos then leaned down, over the old man, and unhinged the blade, wiping it clean on the potbellied cadaver. *Swiss fool,* he thought to himself as he took out the photo of Ariadne he had been given. He flicked it onto the dead man’s chest. *You never kill family.*

The man’s last words still played over in Minos’ mind as he piked a slice of half buttered bread that was left on the table. Lost in thought, he gleefully offered it to his partner with a joust, and recomposed himself.

“You better eat up, Sikarios! The night is still young, and Fate is still hungry.”

Sunday

May 31, 2009

Who can trust Fate? She is not blind, but blinds.

- Nikos Kazantzakis

1

Sunday Afternoon
King George I Avenue
Athens, Greece

PAUL TARSOS WALKED THE FEW METERS FROM HIS POLITICAL OFFICE TOWARD Syntagma Square—aptly named after the nation’s first constitution in 1843. He strode down Greece’s most prominent street, and turned right on King George I Avenue.

Without his bodyguard in tow.

It was unconventional for the Minister of Public Order to roam Athens without any living body armor. Politics had become a dangerous game in turmoiled Greece, and leaving his police guard behind was redolent of mischief and certainly against protocol. *Hadn’t King George I paid the price for similar misdeeds when he was shot like a dog in the streets of Thessaloniki in 1913?*

Tarsos reached the quaint hotel cornering the Square, stopped and looked around cautiously before entering through a small side-door. He bobbed his head to avoid the hobbit-sized opening, and walked across a room bricked with luggage. Tipping the bellhop, he climbed down, then up the few flights of stairs and reached a private elevator. Seconds later, he had risen to the Eden-style roof garden and was sitting in a leather chair next to a Corinthian marble pillar.

“Good evening, Minister Tarsos! How may I indulge your senses this bright afternoon?” the waiter asked as the Minister shifted his gaze towards the alabaster staircase in the distance.

“With a Speyside Single malt whiskey in a Waterford crystal glass,” he replied dryly, cutting the air with his hand. “Naked!”

Seconds later, Tarsos felt his phone vibrate and saw that it was his contact, Lucius. He flipped it open and hoped that all was well.

The voice on the phone was reassuring.

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GAIUS LUCIUS SUNK INTO HIS FINE LEATHER ARMCHAIR; HIS DRAGON THRONE. Paired by rare sambar deer antlers and cushioned by Lama hide, the comfort was unparalleled, as was the view of the Rhine River and Markplatz. ‘Bibere venenum in auro’ was his approach to life—even poison should be drunk from a golden cup. Elegant leather Italian shoes with soft Indian rubber soles and gold leaf aglets were clearly not an overkill but attention to detail, he insisted; vicuna fabric socks completed the portrait feet. It was this ritzy lifestyle which encouraged his nom de guerre, Lucius—a play on his favorite word, *luxurious*.

Lucius picked up the phone from the Dalbergia tinted antique table in front of him, weary not to take the shine, and grabbed a nearby folder.

He read the name on the inside cover, Christopher Higgins—Professor of Semiotics & Communication, Montreal University, and stared at the photo. Higgins was holding a picture of the symbol his Group used to sign everything they controlled. *Bastard, I have you in my sights at last*, he thought with relief.

Prof. Christopher Higgins,
Two daughters: Fay Lydia & Unknown

Attached was also a stained halogen photo that was dated 1932. Lucius flipped it over and saw the word “Peplos” faintly written.

Lucius knew that the Peplos of Athena was hidden somewhere in Athens—after all, his family had died searching for it. He also knew that Higgins’ two daughters had the key to deciphering its location. Two daughters, two letters.

He took out a pen and signed his symbol on the folder to show that he read it, and dropped it on the Iranian Isfahan rug for later.

Looking at the antique clock on the opposite wall, a priceless French Boulle Mantel clock from the 1880s, Lucius flipped open his phone and dialed his assistant, Paul Tarsos.

“We go ahead as planned,” he said in a reassuring voice.

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“SIR,” THE WAITER SAID INTERRUPTING MINISTER PAUL TARSOS. “THERE IS A gentleman here to see you; a Mr Baltas.”

“Bring him over. And top me up,” he said shaking his glass.

The silhouette of a thin, middle-aged man appeared out of the shadows dressed in a suit and tie. Tarsos took his time measuring the man before him. Lucius had reassured him that Baltas was formidable in his job.

“It’s a privilege to finally meet you in person.” Baltas plastered a smile.

The Minister removed a thick cigar from its cellophane wrapping as his stare clamped hard upon Baltas’ features. “Have you heard of the Brazen Bull?” he asked.

Baltas looked back in confusion.

Lifting a matte-finished cigar cutter from the table, the Minister guillotined the leafy tip of his pyramid Padron, and it dropped into the Van Saint Lambert crystal ashtray. He then raised an eyebrow and looked back, waiting for an answer.

Baltas appeared unsettled. “I have no idea, sir.”

The Minister blew out a heavy cloud of smoke. “It’s the hollowed out bronze bull that Phalaris, the Ancient Greek tyrant from Sicily, was given as a new torture device. It was like a huge metallic oven. Once it was heated, the victim inside it would scream, and smoke would puff out from the bull’s nostrils like a locomotive.”

Baltas nodded and waited for the Minister to finish. “Phalaris was so disturbed by the idea, that he tricked the inventor to sit inside it. He then locked the door and baked him.” The Minister smiled. “The inventor’s name was Perilous.”

Baltas stared back questioningly. “And this is relevant because...?”

Placing his hands together, the Minister’s fingers touched at their apex, forming a steeple. “It’s relevant because if this plan of Lucius’ backfires, I won’t become Prime minister which means I will cook you alive.”

Baltas shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Capiche?” The Minister asked. “Now, run through your part of this brazen plan again.”

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“DAD!” MARCIA LOVINGLY CHASTISED HER FATHER. “YOU SHOULD REALLY clean up after your mess, you know. These rugs deserve royal respect. They were gifts from the Shah as a token of his gratitude for my art.” She bent over as her thin legs twined, and her body pear-shaped itself stunningly. She hurriedly collected the papers her father had strewn across the thick woolen Persian carpet.

“You should also get digitized! Folders are so ancestral,” she rebuked teasingly. Marcia pulled up a seat next to her father. “Where am I to create my next masterpiece?” she asked, and winked.

“Your mother would have me piked in the Forum if she knew I had turned you into a ...”

“Dad!” She cut him off abruptly. “Self-expression should be encouraged.” She crossed her arms. “I’m an artist!”

Lucius rolled his eyes as he recounted her last expressive bout of artistry. Interpol had given up on agreeing on a single cause of death, and insisted the homicide resembled ‘multiple deaths’.

Lucius had let her play in one of his prison playgrounds in Romania, but that too was proving disgusting. “Your next masterpiece, eh?” Lucius had decided that this would be her last masterpiece.

“Be ready tomorrow morning, then. You’ll be going to Greece.”

Marcia’s eye lit up. “Amazing idea!” she said excitedly. “The cradle of civilization—a coffin of hope!” She kissed her father on the cheek. “I might even pack both bags!” she said, and left him to his thoughts.

Lucius concentrated on the job at hand, and dialed a number he held to memory. As planned, the phone directed him to a message bank.

“Carthago delenda est.” He muttered the code word, and hang up.

He then sat back and thought of the intricate workings that went behind his latest venture and remembered the words Cato the Elder, a Roman Senator, would incessantly repeat at every speech when referring to Rome’s nemesis and adversary, Carthage. Rome destroyed the city in 146 BCE, sowing it with salt and creating a barren landscape.

Today, though, it was another city’s turn to learn humility, of which Cato—who disdained everything Greek, would have applauded.

If not literally, then financially. ‘Athena delenda est.’

Athens must be destroyed.

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BALTAS RECITED HIS PART. “I’LL MEET FAY LYDIA IN MY OFFICE, AND ONCE SHE shows me a letter dated ‘1932’ I’ll wear my sunglasses. In the meantime, another woman by the name of Ariadne Daldianos will be in the room next door signing some documents.” Baltas hoped he was not in store for another historical spiel from the Minister.

Tarsos smiled in agreement as he straightened his besom pockets. “Touché!” Then he leaned further in. “You’ve reassured me that Fay Lydia trusts you. There can’t be any surprises here.” His eyes bore into him searchingly. “Lucius reassured me that you’ve been planning this for a while.”

“For Christ’s sake, I was engaged to the woman. The only reason she broke it off was because she wanted to focus on her career,” he said taking offense.

The Minister seemed convinced.

“There’s also the issue of the blueprints.” Baltas rushed to remind him.

“I’ve attached them to an encrypted email. ‘Coalemus’ is the password.” Tarsos added, and shook his hand to mark the end of their conversation.

Baltas made little effort to mask his enthusiasm and left, leaving the Minister gushing out another cloud of smoke.

Minister Tarsos seemed content, then calmly made another call.

“Has maintenance been completed?” he asked without introduction.

“We’ve finished, but there was a small interruption during ...”

The Minister cut him off. “There shouldn’t be any buts,” he replied in a stern tone.

The worker detailed the unexpected incident as the Minister listened with interest. “I’ll take care of it,” he replied hurriedly and flipped his phone shut.

He needed to inform Lucius, and called him immediately.

“A police officer was seen talking to our maintenance guy, he ...”

Lucius was unequivocal in his reply. “Get your guy in the Police to kill the cop,” he said, and then hung up.

Straight to the point as always, Tarsos thought.

Lucius’ final words, though, numbed him momentarily for the easiness with which they were spoken.

A murderous eagerness from which he could learn from.