

# Polaris over Olympus

(Severnica nad Olimpom)

by

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Excerpt 1:

## CHAPTER 3

The Easter party on the lawn outside the ancient villa near Corinth was almost in full swing, but all Spiros could think about was the text message he hadn't had time to read.

"*Signomi*, Kostas my friend, something I have to see to," he went into the house and, slipping into a room with a bolt on the door, excitedly read:

I'LL BE THERE! May 10<sup>th</sup>, 6 pm, Café van Gogh near Mistral's monument in Arles. Aino.

Spiros' feet felt weightless. He danced about the room with the cell phone in his hand, singing: I'LL BE THERE ... I'LL BE THERE ... I'LL BE THERE.

A hand drummed on the heavy door.

"*Babá*, is everything all right?" he heard his younger daughter Afrozina.

Quickly recovering his wits, Spiros chanted:

"I'LL BE THERE, I'LL BE THERE, with you, right away."

Outside, he motioned to Manojlo the undertaker to turn down the volume of Theodorakis and announced:

"I'm taking a trip in three weeks' time, and I'll be probably gone a few months."

His family and friends stared at him in wonder. He had never before stayed away from home for more than a fortnight.

"But *babá*, I'd like ..."

Spiros raised his hand to interrupt Afrozina and proclaimed his piece of wisdom:

"Life is like the sea. You either drown in it or sail beyond its horizons."

The thoughtful undertaker immediately understood it was time to turn up Theodorakis again.

"*Opa!*," called out Efigenia, "unfurl your sails, Rubens, may Aeolus give you favorable winds!"

For over seven months Spiros had been fastidiously hiding the fact he was corresponding with Aino from Finland, and he had re-grown a mustache. When he received a computer from his children for his sixtieth birthday – that was eight years ago – his room with the Graces and *Agia Maria* became the stage of another world. He was long past living in the false belief that Rubens made his horizons broad enough. He always made time to visit museums and exhibitions when traveling; he flew to Madrid to see the original *Three Graces* and other paintings by Rubens, he went to Reims to view Cezanne's grand exhibition, was in Venice at the time an exhibition of ancient Egyptian art opened nearby, and after he had seen virtually all noteworthy pieces of ancient stone at home, he went to acquaint himself with temples and amphitheaters in Africa, Italy, Turkey, and France. When he was at home, his beloved Atena and he never missed a show by the Athenian National Theater put on at the magnificent Epidaurus, listened to Yiannis beneath the Acropolis, and enjoyed the concerts of the singer-songwriter Papakonstantinou.

Three days before his departure, Spiros took his boat out to sea toward nightfall. He did that whenever he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He believed everyone should have a place to lay aside his burdens, to divest himself of them, to trade them in for new hopes and yearnings. A place where a man can contritely admit his own unworthiness as well as his grandeur, allowing him to live his life, experience happiness and love, suffer and be disappointed. A place to be aware that one should attempt to gaze inwards at any moment, and that the only person entitled to look inside one's soul is oneself.

He dropped anchor in a bay of Agistri Island near Aigina, which he called *my haven*. Spiros saw his story with Aino like a part of the ancient drama of Medea, in which a mysterious actor at front stage accompanies the events onstage by gradually drawing a large circle on the floor, completing it at the end of the play. After her last message Spiros felt he could draw the first quarter of the circle.

When he stumbled upon the English travel site where people were looking for fellow travelers at the end of October last year, the message seemed to write itself:

“I’d like to share long, even several-months long wanderings around Europe with a woman aged 60 to 65. I am 67, from Corinth, a lover of Greek antiquity, the sea, nature, and above all pleasant conversation. Reply to Odysseus, stranger.”

The very next day Odysseus received three answers. Anemarie from Hamburg was an instant no when he recalled that other German, Inge, who had practically thrown him out of her room in Thessalonica; the Croatian Vedrana was primarily interested in expenses, she wrote she was willing to contribute one third of the money because her company was not for free, which made Spiros angrily mutter, you goose; and the Dane Astrid asked point-blank whether there would be any sex. Spiros did not reply to any one of them.

Two days later Aino sent her reply:

“Hei, Odysseus. I find your offer interesting. I come from the outskirts of Helsinki in Finland, I’m 62 years old and retiring in a few months’ time, and I would like to completely change my life. Would you like to talk some more about traveling? And about us, of course. Best regards, Aino.”

Spiros’ intuition – which he always relied on – immediately responded that this could be the right one. Also his cunning kicked in; if this were to turn into a more intimate sort of friendship, the Finn was located far enough away not to go babbling about his droopy manhood all over Greece.

He wrote back the same day:

“Nice to hear from you, Aino. I have a business which my three sons are now running, while I have been traveling around for a few years, seeing new countries and meeting new people. I’ve come to realize that I would like to travel with company, we’re made to socialize, aren’t we? Would you find Provence an interesting start? By the way, my name is Spiros and I wish you my best. Is Aino your real name?”

Spiros then learned that Aino really was Aino and that this was a name from the Finnish epic the Kalevala, that she’d been divorced for over five years, and that she had two grown-up children. He replied explaining his situation, added his two daughters to his sons, and, lest Greece lag behind Finland, mentioned the Odyssey and the Iliad. When Aino wrote she’d listened to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony at a concert, he quickly bragged about Theodorakis and Yiannis, mentioned Ravel’s Bolero, which his older daughter Sofia liked to listen to so much, and admitted that his ears and heart most rejoiced at the sound of the Greek bouzouki. After the first month of corresponding Aino told him she had visited Provence once as a teacher, but only for a day, and that she had always wanted to see its every nook and cranny, to get her fill of it.

Then she added:

“Dear Spiros, I think it’s important on a journey that both partners share a strong enough desire for a coexistence without prejudice, or clichés, or preconceived notions, but rather with a great deal of tolerance and constant willingness to see what is pleasant and to deal with the less pleasant aspects with humor. Setting out on a journey without feeling all these feelings inside me would certainly be a wrong decision. I find it most important to work this out for myself. The sympathy one might feel at first encounter can be misleading, and indifference even promising, if a person has the thing I am ‘pontificating’ about. So much for a start, I hope we’ll discuss this at length later. It’s no wonder my favorite movie is *The African Queen*. All the best, Aino.”

Spiro took two days to write back. He immediately rented *The African Queen* at a video store, and saw it three times before he realized what Aino meant. Not only the indifference, but even the aversion between Bogart and Hepburn was in reality only masked attraction that inevitably led two such disparate people to grow close.

“My *jajá*, my grandmother from the island of Lefkada always said that a person was young as long as they could fall in love,” he wrote. “Zeus probably knew that too, no woman was safe from him. Have you perhaps seen the film *Innocence*? Two people who part in their youth meet again at our age, fall in love, even enjoy the pleasures of the bed, and are very young in that. We have a saying here that the more women a man makes happy, the better favor he is in with the gods. This is probably a relic of the times of antiquity or comes from mythology, when men were warriors, wise and crafty, while women stayed at home to watch over the hearth. Let Eros enlighten you! Spiros.”

Aino completely threw him off track with the thoughts she sent back:

“Dear Spiros, I believe I’m pretty enlightened in matters erotic. People, and not only people, are undoubtedly erotic beings, it’s primeval, in our genes. I don’t know how a prehistoric ancestor of mine behaved, he may have been quite nice for his time, but as his descendant I understand the erotic as embodying the integrity of life. A thought is erotic, a movement, a look, a touch. I believe the erotic is there with us at every step, from the subtlest, barely audible tones, to a crescendo. The erotic is also all around us. Isn’t it beautiful to see birch tree branches caressingly intertwine in a tree top, or an apple-tree blossom eagerly awaiting a bee, and the spring air full of pollen, without which there is no life? Doesn’t Vivaldi take us into a world of giving oneself, Liszt’s love for his country is full of the erotic, as is Sibelius’ Finlandia and your Bolero. Isn’t reading Lorca erotic? And what about the Song of Solomon! You might say that I’m exaggerating, that I’m obsessed. The way I conceive of it, the erotic is the sanctity of life. Your grandmother’s right, when a person understands the erotic in this way, he can fall in love even at one hundred. And can worship better than a young man.”

Spiro knew he had to take time to mull this over, that what she had written could not be weeds, as he liked to call everything not to his taste. So he just asked her briefly:

“Would you share with me what is most important to you and what your fundamental virtue is?”

“To live my life,” she replied succinctly.

The dusk had dissolved into a warm night, and Spiros turned on the signal light on his boat. A strong beam of light had just rounded the promontory of his haven. When the light drew closer, he could make out two men in a long wooden boat checking the sea bottom.

“You do realize fishing’s forbidden in May, don’t you, sir,” the man in the stern called out.

“I do, I know, I’m just thinking,” replied Spiros, sounding ridiculously unconvincing even to his ears.

The men circled him, shining their light assiduously around his boat, and, failing to spot any net or fishing line, drew away.

“Have some deep thoughts, sir, good night!” he heard a derisive voice from the dark.

When the light vanished behind the next headland, Spiros angrily started the boat’s engine. Serves me right, what kind of a fool would be thinking here in the middle of the night. He took his boat out of the small bay, and instead of heading for Corinth, turned left, hiding behind the point of a peninsula jutting out into a large bay below the hills of Epidaurus. Giant squid would come there to mate every few years, and Spiros superstitiously resolved that Aino was destined to be his if he managed to pull one out quickly. He fixed a colorful artificial lure on a large hook. It was too early to fish for giant squid yet, they only bite after midnight, so he took a nap and dropped his lure over the side of the boat around two o’clock, shining a strong light into the water at the same time. The fifty meters of fishing line were soon off the spool; he dropped some onto the bottom of the boat, and stepping on it, put his right index finger under the taut line. That way he would feel the gentle tug when the squid took the bait. Jerking lightly on the line, he made the lure come alive in the depths, all the while glancing out at the sea. He certainly did not want to get caught fishing illegally.

Some half an hour later he landed a squid that weighed at least a kilogram, getting soaked as the squid squirted water on him. While Spiros was pulling it out from the depths, the fishing line cut deep into his finger. He threw the squid into the boat adroitly, cut off the final meter of the line, extracted the hook and bait, and, taking the animal by the head, set it free in the water.

“Say thanks to Aino, you beauty,” he whispered as the squid disappeared into the darkness of the sea.

Excerpt 2:

#### CHAPTER 4

"I met someone on the Internet and I'm going to Provence," Aino blurted out even before she was through the door of Liisa's apartment.

Staring at first, Liisa ended up laughing:

"Don't tell me you had chat room sex?"

Aino's thin lips – Liisa always said they were ladylike – stretched into a grin on her fair-complexioned round face with high cheekbones and almond-shaped light blue eyes:

"Mmm, if only, that way I could've also met him from that angle, but he never even asked about my cup size," she laughed, adding seriously: "You know very well I don't even want to think about sex anymore."

"Ha, you would've lied at least two cup sizes up!"

"And see him disappointed when we first meet? If he doesn't like me or I don't like him, I'll just go traipsing around France on my own and then ..." Aino spread her arms as though she were flying, "... get on the next plane back home."

"And you're sure he'll be there waiting for you?" Liisa asked as tad mockingly.

Aino felt a twinge of doubt:

"Are you saying I'm being naïve?"

"The net is also a lair of lies and deceit," her friend cautioned. Then, seeing Aino's vacillation, she quickly added, laughing:

"Don't worry. The Frenchman's sure to charm you, seeing as you've been on a diet for so long."

"He's Greek. A businessman from Corinth, five years older than me, and we're supposed to travel all over Europe together," Aino regained some of her composure.

Liisa roared with laughter:

"And I thought I was with it, but I see you've got one up on me. You find yourself an Onassis and fly off into the world! It goes to prove women do fall for smart, successful, famous, and creative men, and if a guy like that as much as looks at us, we go weak in the knees."

"Blah blah, Liisa, you're exaggerating," Aino protested laughing. "This Spiros is a nice guy, open, sometimes charmingly poetic, friendly and cultured. I really want to get to know him."

"Don't tell me my Aino has fallen in love on the net!"

"I admit I'm fond of him, and I think he feels the same about me," Aino grew serious.

"This calls for a drink," Liisa said placing a bottle of vodka on the table. "I'm so glad you've come alive again after so long."

"And what do younger women fall for?" Aino asked idly, lifting her glass, and they both knocked back their drinks. Men had always been their favorite topic.

A freelance journalist for the last twenty-three years, Liisa pondered the question, then delivered a short lecture, as always:

"Consider the phenomenon of pop and rock concerts. Teenagers indulge in mass hysteria over men who are famous and out of reach, living out their fantasies in this way. Mature women with our desires need serious, real idols, probably as a residue of some primordial memory of worshipping gods who were famous, powerful, and inscrutable."

"There might be something in that," Aino agreed with a chuckle. "Sometimes I also think, he's as gorgeous as Apollo, or maybe a Hercules. But such idols are long gone," she sighed theatrically.

"Ousted by Christianity," said Liisa angrily. "That's why we have different idols today. Movie stars, entertainers shaking their booty on stage, visionary scientists and professors. Yeah, yeah, I know, yours wasn't that kind. If popes were younger, you'd find Monicas falling for them too, secretaries idolize their bosses, and men are all egotistical and narcissistic down to the last one, missing no opportunity to take advantage of us," the words spewed from her.

"You're not saying there are no men left who worship women as if they were goddesses," Aino dissented.

"Of course there are, but as rare as four-leaf clovers."

Taking a good gulp of her vodka, Liisa arched her back and lacing her fingers behind her neck jiggled her breasts provocatively:

"This is what men fall for. After all my men, and you know there's been more than a few, I know for a fact that their philosophy begins and ends with our curves and that they don't want to feel problems underneath them during sex, that they actually flee in a panic at the first hint of trouble."

"So you think they're only after sex?"

“What else, they take their guidance from porn. When a man gets a hard-on he wants to have sex. Have you ever heard a guy complain about his wife being a bad cook or not ironing his shirts right? On the other hand, they go on and on about their wives being tired in the evening, or having headaches, or periods that last too long.”

“You’re exaggerating again. What about men coming home tired and turning their backs on their horny wives and falling asleep?”

“Those either have a mistress or a bar they go to for their daily dosage of beer and man talk. At home they never say a word, and in bed they’re like hibernating bears. The main problem men have is between their legs, too hard or too floppy.”

They both guffawed at this, and Liisa poured two more shots of vodka. Aino raised her glass:

“*Kippis*, cheers! And yet we can’t do without them.”

“Or they without us. That stuff about men being from Mars and women from Venus is just a load of bull. We all want sex, and good sex to boot.”

The vodka loosened Aino’s tongue:

“Like in porn movies? A long hard one and let’s go all the way,” she laughed uncertainly, then again sobered up: “Like it was the preferred school of eroticism with manuals detailing a thousand and one positions.”

“What else is there? Have you ever met a romantic Finn? When my man became as boring as a dick in cold water fifteen years ago, I relegated him to backup, and I played the field.”

“As far as I know you’ve been on a diet yourself for the past year,” Aino giggled.

Liisa was on her third drink:

“The tragedy of our age. I even went to one of those singles dances. I see a younger, well-preserved guy there and I choose him for a tango. He’s a good dancer, he holds me really tight, so I lure him home. I play the right music and all that, while he downs a whole bottle of vodka, indifferently watching me trying to seduce him. All I could do was get him into a taxi,” Liisa became voluble. “Or another story. I pick an ordinary gentleman to dance with, our age this time, and he immediately asks me to come over to his holiday cottage by a lake where it is, so he says, so wonderfully peaceful and quiet that he can spend days on end angling, catching some poor bass every once in a blue moon.”

“And?”

“Another backup. I wouldn’t be dragged into such dullness even for a young pope. *Perkele*, damn,” she cried out, heading for the kitchen. “I forgot I made *pulla* for you specially, and the coffee’s also ready.”

Aino took a sweet bread roll and tried to clear her head with coffee.

“There’s something I haven’t told you yet. Do you remember the time I took two years off during my studies and went to Oxford to learn English? An unassuming student from Pakistan there made me see that sex was only one part of eroticism. He claimed that only men who don’t know any better strive for sex and orgasm in the conviction that it brings quick release, without realizing that they lose precious energy when they come, thereby becoming incapable of a truly erotic life.”

Clearly doubtful, Liisa nodded and sipped her vodka:

“I’m all ears.”

“He kept telling me,” continued Aino, “to forget about western literature on sex and listen to what wise men from the East have to say. I’ve read quite a lot of that and I must admit I’ve learned some amazing things. Already my Pakistani had explained and showed me that eroticism was the essence of our life, and that we shouldn’t abuse it, or sex either, but that we should nurture it as one of the most precious things inside and between us. Sure, you’ll find impossible Easterners too, selling you countless recipes on how to live your life, just like Westerners. But there are quite a few who try to make you think about yourself. I came to the conclusion that my Pakistani had been right and also that you can truly experience your own eroticism only if you manage to achieve inner peace with as little doubt and anxiety as possible, without brooding over the past or grasping for the future, mixed with fear. The two years with him were wonderful,” she confided in one breath.

“That one definitely came from another planet. You’ll have to tell me more about it some day,” said Liisa thoughtfully. “Let’s go to the sauna. And ask that Greek of yours if he has a brother for me!”

Aino was cheerful on her train from Turku to Helsinki. Liisa may well be right that men are mostly after sex, but how much do women contribute to that in their erroneous expectation that orgasms will bring congenial togetherness? Look at you, she told herself, hasn’t every single passion petered out sooner or later because I followed and wanted to please a man’s urges, becoming a victim of my own short-lived pleasures in the process. Liisa is right about that, we all want sex, dreading at the same time the moment when it loses its charm, when it wears thin. Ali had put that very well, that sex seizes up like an engine if you push it to its maximum capacity without warming it up first and taking proper care of it, and you do that over and over. At first she found it funny to hear him explain how some people arrogantly want to get the most out of their new cars immediately, only to replace them after a year or two, while others take care of their cars with love, looking after every last bolt, and keep using them with love and pride and being friends with them for decades.

She remembered how he took her to London that time, to see a vintage car parade, and then pointed out a new Jaguar in the street, and she comprehended the difference between respect and admiration, on the one hand, and the desire for pleasure on the other. She still recalled his conclusion that those with old cars were unfortunately few and far between; most people just replaced them.

Her thoughts wandered off in a different direction. It was Liisa again who kept egging her on to stop with her diet when she managed, after a year and a half, to stop thinking about Juhani's meanness and could breathe freely again. Two years after Aino's divorce Liisa introduced her to a doctor who specialized in hemorrhoids. He was so terribly attractive and charming that she completely overlooked which part of the body he worked with and also forgot to ask him whether he enjoyed his work. She caught herself responding to him avidly; there was a lot of chemistry, with wild nights and equally wild hours during the day, which Lasse Lundén took off between operations with painful consequences for the patients, as he explained to her after a failed attempt to romanticize her rear end. As it turned out, the doctor had no sense of romance and tenderness, which she put down to his professional deformation. It's not that she minded his treating hemorrhoids; Dr. Lundén was simply not a man who could take her eroticism to love. Also the next few trials showed that Liisa was right and that sex was the only tune men could play.

When Kari the painter crossed her path he raised her hopes that perhaps Ali from Pakistan was not the only man who found the meaning of life in cherishing a woman. She imagined that she was indeed adored, cast in the role of a muse, but it soon transpired that the artist found the adoration of his paintings of utmost importance, that his tenderness was his way of buying her admiration of his work, which, if truth be told, she did not really find worthy of worship. When she first remarked that she didn't find the colors in a landscape of his quite on the mark – all she actually meant was that a little less green wouldn't have hurt – the muse was dethroned in the artist's self-sufficient wrath. And she had to admit to herself, woman, don't go meddling in everything and don't fall for anyone's cherishing if you're incapable of cherishing yourself.

It was about that time that Juhani's cousin came to Helsinki; she had always got on well with him although he led a solitary life in Lapland, only coming to the capital to do his shopping once a year. It was summertime, and Kullervo managed to convey in his spare words such a beautiful description of the northern landscape that she accepted his invitation for an extended stay; moreover, she felt she could chase away the bad aftertaste left behind by Kari's cubist vision of nature. Long walks over the marshes, hills, and forests of Lapland in light lasting all day and all night and chatting with witty Kullervo in the evenings outside his log cabin were a more than necessary respite after her failed flings. She stayed almost a month; they spent their days amicably, and in the evening Kullervo would briefly bid her good night, sometimes early and more often quite late, and go into a spare room with an army cot, leaving her to a comfortable bed in the living room.

Two days before she was due to leave he again curtly bade her good night and she went to bed too, thinking of him as she did most of the time, and understanding that he chose to live in Lappish wilderness because he was in tune with the pristine nature. And then he suddenly returned and asked her simply if he could lie down with her. She accepted him inside her with a nice, friendly feeling, and he was not in the least bit rough or greedy for a woman; she rather felt he wanted to underscore their friendship, so the next morning when life went on the same as all the days before that and they never said a word about their night together, she resolved Kullervo would be the last man she would feel inside her.

Excerpt 3:

## CHAPTER 7

Aino set off from her hotel near Café van Gogh around five pm on May 10. On the promenade above the Rhone she leaned on the stone parapet and watched the lazy wide river flowing beneath her, there one moment, gone the next, making room for something new and other, without leaving any trace or memory behind. The restlessness in her chest refused to slide into the placid water, thundering instead like a waterfall, whirling in a vortex between her hips and spraying outward in a tingle of excitement. Hope, fear, and yearning jostled in her thoughts, courage melted into paralysis and an anxiety of uncertain expectations. Little demons appeared out of nowhere, riddling her with doubts whether he would show up at all or leave her sitting there with her gullibility, and if he does come, whether he would like her, whether she would dare meet his eyes for fear of finding indifference in them, whether she would manage to pick the right words, to touch him, to make everything she had written about become real. I'm thinking like a teenager, she dispersed her doubts, making room for self-confidence. Above all, *she* had to like *him*, of course she would be able to look into his eyes and touch his fingers, and she would pay close attention to her body to see if it responded from the core, with every part and juice, in the same way her thoughts responded to his.

The evening was mild, but she put on a shawl in Finnish light blue and white anyway. Despite all the arrangements they had made, they forgot about some sign so as to recognize one another. Would she be the only one with a shawl like that there? It would be too stupid if Spiros had to guess and chose a wrong woman – she laughed out loud at the thought of that, chasing away her anxiety. She strolled leisurely up from the riverbank, buying a bar of lavender-scented soap on the way and following the narrow, winding streets to the now familiar Place du Forum with Mistral. Resolutely, she crossed the square to the sidewalk outside the café. A large truck was just pulling away in front of her, as though opening the curtain on a stage. The sidewalk tables under a large awning bearing the sign Café van Gogh were all taken. To the far left she saw a little flag with the colors of her shawl sticking out of a tall vase, a hand with a bandaged finger next to it, and only then a silver-haired man who rose to his feet, waved, and came over to meet her.

“You’re Aino,” he said softly and proffered both hands.

“Spiros!” she touched his fingers.

He looked into her eyes and took her in his arms.

When they were back to holding hands and she met his burning brown eyes circled with green, Aino again felt the tingling sensation, pleasurable and warm this time, spreading from her belly upwards, filling her with redeeming relief and confidence in the unmistakable feeling that she would have enjoyed his embrace even if it had gone on and on. She was sensitive to the language of embraces. In a falsely loving embrace she would have sagged unfeelingly; she hated superficial friendly hugs, and hugs out of habit she had always found insipid, like some cave with the stale smell of nothing. Spiros’ embrace had been short, but she understood he hadn’t wanted to be intrusive. Nonetheless, she got the message in those short warm moments that she was accepted.

They crossed the street to the table with the Greek flag. Spiros took her arm lightly, with his bandaged finger sticking out from beneath her elbow.

“Did someone rap your fingers because you were bad?” she was naughtily curious when they sat down.

“Yes indeed, a squid.”

When he saw her questioning look, he continued:

“A squid is a wonderful sea creature, its head and body look like an oblong bladder with a pair of large, dark, enchanting eyes. Hidden below it has a mouth with a black beak like a parrot. But that’s not all. The body continues into tentacles, like an octopus has, and the larger the squid, the longer the tentacles. Believe it or not, they can grow to be half a meter long or more. It uses them to hunt, and its favorite prey is white fish; it lies in wait for it, in ambush on the bottom of the sea, and when lunch swims by, it wraps its tentacles around it and devours it. Close to where I live there’s a good fishing spot for squid in a beautiful large bay near the ancient theater at Epidaurus, protected by a wooded peninsula that keeps the scum away when the east wind brings it over from the Bay of Piraeus.”

Aino listened to him mesmerized. She found it charmingly direct how he had launched into his tale about squid from some obscure bay on their first meeting. A real Mediterranean, breaking the Finnish ice with some sea monster unfamiliar to her.

“The magnificent squid only live in really clean seas,” he continued explaining vivaciously, “and the water in my bay is really beautiful, mysterious and dark blue because of its depth, and in those depths, I tell you, life is very varied. There are morays hiding in crevices.” Spiros spread his arms wide. “They’re predatory fish and can grow to two meters long, with beautiful intricate patterns only nature can come up with. I prefer the brown ones, with ornamentation as if from the Arabian Nights, real arabesque poetry.”

Aino tried to picture what arabesque poetry could be, but Spiros left her no time for speculation.

“Octopuses with tentacles sometimes more than a meter long lie buried in the sand, waiting for their prey, like lizards in the desert ... Am I boring you?” he asked as he imitated the waving of the tentacles with his hands.

“No, no,” Aino almost cried out, spellbound by his descriptions. “Go on, please.”

“Right, my finger,” he continued in a booming voice, carried away. “Well, you see, at mating time the squid usually form colonies on the bottom of the sea, and my squid was also at least some hundred meters deep. You can only catch them at night, using a lure that looks like a colorful tuft of feathers. The more colorful it is, the sooner the squid are bound to notice it. I find the squid to be like some underwater bee, drawn to colorful blossoms, but when they’re intent on breeding they’re blinded by love, like the capercaillie, a type of forest grouse.”

They both laughed at his turn of phrase.

“So, there I am, fishing for squid a few days ago, I turn on a strong light on my boat, which makes it come at least fifty meters higher up, and dangle a colorful plastic blossom with a hidden hook in front of its nose. It’s all attached to strong fishing line, of course, which I place over my index finger, which is not yet bandaged at that time,” he stressed, “and then I wait, and wait, and wait for the beauty below to screw up its guts and take the bait. About half an hour goes by when I feel on my finger with the fishing line that it has bitten, and then the real duel begins.”

Spiros was already standing up by the table, reenacting the event, pulling in an invisible line with both hands from under the table, and narrating the action: “I have to pull the line as fast as I can, I can feel there’s a pretty nice animal hanging on to it down below, and I can’t stop for even a moment. If I slack up even a little bit, the squid could change its mind, but if it feels that its prey wants to run away, it won’t let go no matter what. It’s a real duel, I tell you, meter by meter the fishing line lands in the boat, and after some thirty or forty meters this exercise becomes pretty exhausting. But Spiros won’t give in, I don’t even feel the fishing line cutting deep into my finger when I land this nice little animal, never mind animal, this beast, in my boat. A squid like that can be a real feast,” he wrapped up his story about his bandaged finger in a single breath, adding:

“At the thought of you, though, the beauty swam back into the depths.”

Charmed, Aino got up and opened her arms:

“Come here, gorgeous, let me have a taste of your Greek mustache.”

From a cautious kiss her lips opened and she felt with contentment that his lips responded in that first sensuous acceptance of a man and she joyously gave in to the feeling of being tasted herself. Café van Gogh disappeared, only reappearing to cheerful clapping and cries of bravo, olé.

Waving without embarrassment, they reseated themselves.

“Would you care for a glass of champagne?”

She nodded with a happy smile.

When they raised their glasses she asked:

“What shall we drink to?”

He gave it a little thought:

“To timelessness.”

Excerpt 4:

## CHAPTER 8

Spiros crossed the Place de la Republique with uncertain steps. He was in that silly state of mind of being unable to tell what feelings suffused or were supposed to suffuse him, of having mixed, or rather jumbled, emotions. Like a heap of fallen leaves whirled about by the wind in a park, insecurity crawling along the edge of an abyss, held back by only a thin line of hope from plummeting down the precipice of despair, happiness perched in the dark waiting for a beam of determination, fear of opportunity lost shrouded in restlessness, and courage writhing about helplessly on the very bottom. The scent of a woman forced its way into his consciousness, establishing a firm foothold there. It was not the same scent he used to unmistakably pick up on, like a male smelling a female in heat in a herd. The male hunter could discern the expectant sensuality of wanton tourists and locals even through the strong, rich perfumes the women used in the vain conviction they could mask their lust. But when he embraced Aino, she marked him with her scent devoid of any provocation, with a quiet, but unstoppable attractiveness, a gentle freshness of alluring tenderness and promising fondness.

She declined his invitation to dinner.

“I don’t want anything to spoil the taste of our first meeting,” she said and asked him to walk her back to her hotel.

“You’re still in the beautiful years of ripe wheat, while I’m silvered like an Orthodox icon,” he gazed at her corn-colored hair above her high forehead, wanting to prolong the moment.

Still under the influence of their kiss, Aino smiled and got up:

“I feel like we’ve known each other a long time.”

“Of course I’ll walk you,” he gave in and tried to conceal his fear she’d ask him up to her hotel room by making his voice polite.

“You don’t sound quite sure,” she saw through him.

“I’m still enough of a gentleman,” he wanted to be polite.

“Only that?” she laughed and grasped his hand.

Her hotel was close by and yet far enough for Spiro’s fear stemming from his retired manhood to deprive him of his loquacity. True, he had hinted at his situation a few months back, and her reply had been encouraging, but to lie by her side in shame the very first evening! Like a statue without lower parts. A torso! Even if she invited him up, he’d decline, we’re in no hurry, he’d say.

“Have a good rest, we have another day ahead of us tomorrow,” he tried to preempt her invitation in the lobby.

“You too. Oh, by the way, I brought you a little present, I’ll give it to you tomorrow.” She could feel his reserve, she did not want a perfunctory hug, nor did she want the inquisitive porter to see the spectacle of another long kiss.

“Sweet dreams! Is tomorrow around ten here fine by you?”

“Ten it is,” he agreed woodenly, adding: “Good night!”

He turned into a narrow alley from the square. It was lined with restaurants and bars and he was overcome by an irresistible desire to wash away all the fears of the evening with a drink. A bartender of his age in a red waistcoat and a greasy bowtie felt like the most suitable silent company. He squeezed himself onto a barstool and angrily muttered in Greek: “Hera bewitched it into a still life, and Zeus sends me a wonderful woman.”

“*Kalispera*, good evening, *monsieur*, you’re in need of something strong,” the red waistcoat reached for a bottle of metaxa.

“Pour me an ouzo, my friend, ouzo! Where did you pick up Greek?” Spiros came to terms with the fact the company would not be silent.

“Oh, Viktor here has heard a million languages. Patis will serve the purpose just as well.”

“A double one, then, and pour one for yourself,” he indicated with his white bandaged finger.

“I bet your name’s Kostas, every other Greek is called Kostas,” said the bartender.

A man with a thin black mustache slid his glass down the countertop from the right, rounding up the threesome to approximately two hundred years.

“You lose,” said Spiros.

“Like always,” the mustache next to him explained.

“But I’m still buying, Spiros Ketakis from Corinth,” the bandaged finger indicated also the glass to his right.

The owner of the pencil mustache, a retired bookstore owner – Jean-Pierre Voter, as he gallantly introduced himself, added that the next round was on him.

“If troubles arise at this early hour, they’ll all be gone by midnight,” Viktor passed his educated judgment. “What’s on your mind, *mon ami*? This countertop has drowned many a thing.”

“A woman, Viktor, what else,” stated Jean-Pierre, as though delivering a lesson. “A man is worried about money during the day, but at this hour it can only be about a woman.”

“So you, sir, are also here because of a woman,” Viktor taunted him.

“You have it right this time, it’s just that my mistress has her days, and I have time off,” grinned the thin mustache. “Let me confide in you, Mister Ketakis, every real Frenchman has a mistress, and I hope every Greek does too. So what’s up with yours?”

Spiros was about to snub him. He had so far only talked about women to his three closest friends, albeit with slight difficulty to Manojlo the undertaker, because he usually smelled of formaldehyde. Oh well, it can’t hurt, he thought.

“Gentlemen, I’m worried my mistress, who is not really that, won’t be happy with me,” he explained under his breath more to himself than the other two.

“What’s a mistress who’s not a mistress like?” Jean-Pierre asked, chuckling.

“A woman, a wonderful woman I just met and whom I wouldn’t want to have for a mistress,” Spiros continued to mutter into his drink.

“Now you’ve completely lost me, sir.”

“The woman of his life, what else,” Viktor butted in, realizing he could pour himself another patis without anyone noticing.

“A woman full of life,” Spiros corrected him, “while my friend and I are in deep repose,” he bent his bandaged finger downward in a meaningful gesture.

“Olalá,” the bartender immediately cottoned on. “That’s a tough one.”

“Are you there too, my friend Viktor?” Spiros almost cheered up.

“If it’s any consolation to you, dear friend, I must admit I’m almost there already.”

Now it also finally dawned on the bookstore owner.

“You don’t say,” he called out. “But don’t you know, the only thing you mustn’t do is stop! How long have you been in this state of repose?”

Knocking back a double pastis Spiros quietly confessed:

“Five years, gentlemen, almost five years. A hopeless case.”

“Have you tried Viagra?” Jean-Pierre tried to be helpful.

“I know a lot of natural aphrodisiacs.”

“But nothing?”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing.”

“Horror of horrors, to think that lies ahead of me,” Jean-Pierre hunched over.

“A nightmare, I tell you,” Spiros added morosely.

“A nightmare,” repeated Mister Voter after him, “a man’s worst nightmare. Why on earth did you stop?”

“Like an old leaking boat. It just went down.”

“Out of the blue,” Jean-Pierre was terrified.

“The scourge of god,” Spiros said contritely.

“And now you’re afraid of this wonderful woman you don’t want for a mistress?”

“I’m ashamed at the thought of disappointing her.”

“Disaster,” Jean-Pierre almost stuttered.

Viktor the bartender had had enough. No way were those two crybabies going to undermine the healing powers of his bar counter:

“Spiros, let me impart of piece of old wisdom: the best aphrodisiac in the world is the right woman at the right time at the right place. Period.”

Mister Voter’s jaw dropped in astonishment, Spiros stared at the red waistcoat, and then suddenly saw the light:

“Viktor, you’re an Aristotle!”

Taking out his cell phone, he called Aino:

“Forgive me, I hope I haven’t woken you. I would love to see your present tonight, and I have one for you too. Why are we each in our respective hotels? Let’s go to another one together!”

“I’ll be ready in an hour. Come pick me up,” came her cheerful and gentle reply.

*Translated from the Slovenian by Tamara M. Soban*