

Loty Petrovits-Andrutsopulou

The Red Wrath

(Original title: *O kókkinos thymós*)

Summary and translation of two chapters

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Summary

Seventeen-year old Apellis is a senior in high school. His mother, his stepfather and his five-year old half-sister, all comprise of a close-knit family that lives just below Strefi hill in Athens.

Apellis systematically works on his paintings, the same art his young mother, Cleo Kariti, also successfully serves. Yet he is highly concerned about his future. His inherited talent in painting is a given, but following his mother's and stepfather's advice he has decided that the best for him would be to follow a career in architecture.

All seemed to be going according to plan until a famous art critic, visiting Greece to organize gallery exhibitions and art events, unexpectedly contacted Apellis. This celebrity was the Greek-Canadian, Mike Gician, the "magician", as everybody in the international art world called him.

The meeting with Mike Gician proves to be a catalyst, not only for Apellis's future in art, but for his life as well. The "magician" offers him a scholarship for the Concordia Art School in Montreal.

Apellis is enthused at the unexpected opportunity, but is simultaneously anxious about his mother's reaction to this change of plan. Their relationship is very special and sentimentally weighty due to certain tragic events of their life.

Gradually, Apellis reaches the point where he reluctantly confides in his sixteen-year old girlfriend, Niovi, to explain the tragedies that he and his mother had faced: Cleo gave birth to Apellis when she was sixteen-years old. As she believed, his father had abandoned her upon learning about her pregnancy. When born, Apellis was adopted by Cleo's brother and his wife. Up to the age of seven he was happily brought up by his new parents, along with their two older daughters, and thus considered Cleo as his aunt.

However, his life suddenly turned upside down. A car accident caused the death of his entire family. As Cleo was a student in Paris at the time, she was unable to care for him. So, Apellis was put into an orphanage until the age of eleven. Then Cleo came back and being in a position to take care of him at last, she took him to stay with her and Telis, her then fiancé and later her husband. One day Apellis heard that Cleo and Telis, after their marriage, might go abroad for a long time and leave him under the protection of his stepfather's family. Upset about this possible new change in his life, he had run away from home. He had taken refuge inside a cave on Strefi hill, where full of terror he met a man looking like a dreadful savage.

Two days later, and while Apellis was still strolling around, he had found the “savage” in a coma. Distressed at the sight of the dying man, he had managed to find a way to call for medical care. This act of salvation finally led the “savage” to detoxification and to a complete recovery.

Upon returning home, Apellis had learned the truth about his real parents and his adoption. From that moment, he began feeling a horrible hatred towards his natural father. And he never stopped accusing him for all the misery that had struck him and his loved ones.

All those past sufferings and his fear that his mother would now be upset by the news of his moving far away if accepting the scholarship, both create controversial feelings and an explosive rage within Apellis. He subconsciously depicts this wrath in his painting. It is a painting of abstract shapes in which he excessively uses an intense shade of red.

Niovi and his stepfather interpret the painting similarly, stating that it conveys a feeling of disturbance and rage. Yet, Apellis does not admit it. He claims that he only feels anticipation in meeting the “magician”, anxiety and doubt about the developments which would follow, and eagerness to finish his painting.

The events which follow during the Christmas holidays, lead to an abrupt turn of events: Cleo, who had not met the “magician” up to that moment, discovers his real identity by chance. Mike Gician is none other than Apellis’s father, who she and Apellis believed had abandoned her. The shock and the distress that she feels cause the reappearance of a serious illness she had suffered from in the past. Leaving urgently for Paris with her husband, to be treated there by a famous doctor, she leaves a letter for Apellis, where she unveils the secret and proposes to him to decide freely whether it will be better for his future and his life to follow his father. Apellis, shocked and full of anger with the “magician”, rejects his offer and denies ever seeing him again. Yet, finally, the explanations given by Mike Gician confirm a misunderstanding which tormented Cleo for seventeen years and armed Apellis with wrath against a father he had never met.

An important role in the ultimate phase of the story is played by the former drug-addict, Lazarus, whom Apellis had saved as an eleven-year old boy, and who has reappeared in his life, being now an old and wise man. Lazarus’s intervention proves precious to Apellis in redefining his relationship with his mother, but most importantly, his relationship with himself. In the end, the lull will return to his life and the “red wrath” will become nothing more than an incredible painting he creates.

(The attached translation of the largest part of chapter 1 and chapter 11 is representative and portrays the essence of the story).

Chapter 1

The doorknob on the old wooden door creaked in the midst of the winter night breaking the silence that had wrapped around the basement studio. Apellis jumped up like a small child from the unexpected sound, despite his seventeen years of age. His paintbrush fell out of his hand, hit the easel and fell to the floor, leaving a wrong brushstroke on his unfinished painting and a little red paint on the pale tiles.

Alarmed, he turned his head... As the door opened no ghost appeared, no thief, no alien. It was only his studio partner, his precious teacher and advisor on the secrets of design and color, the painter Cleo Kariti. His mother.

Apellis sighed with relief.

"You scared me," he said and bent down to see where his paintbrush had fallen. "I didn't hear you come down..."

"Just because it's Christmas break doesn't mean you should take a break from sleeping, as well" - she looked at him as if trying to scold him but could never really manage to. "Do you realize that it's three a.m.?"

She had her dark robe clumsily wrapped around her back; her long dark brown hair was off-handedly brushed back with a little comb and her eyes shown that she had just risen from a short and disturbed sleep.

"It's the second night in a row that you've been up," she approached him as if that would convince him to abandon his work and go to bed. "Don't you understand that you don't need to work constantly without any rest?"

"You act as if I'm a baby," he raised his head annoyed and forgot about his brush on the floor. "I'm at an age where I can adjust my own work schedule."

"But I don't see you adjusting any type of schedule," she continued in the same tone. "A schedule presumes some sort of programming in order to define when you should work, when you should rest, so that you don't exhaust yourself. Not something that leaves you breathless. Do you need to show so much work to this Mr. Gician? What's gotten into you that you won't stop? Whatever you add now is

probably too late to send. When will it have a chance to dry? How will you transfer it? If you keep putting off sleep you'll paint completely different things than you've intended. It's also cold in here. Didn't you realize that the heat's turned off? You'll freeze to death and..."

"Oh, stop it, please, Cleo!" he interrupted annoyed and it was the first time he wanted to trample on their agreement and call her "mother", as if that would make her turn around and go back to bed.

He immediately regretted that thought. He adored Cleo and no petty advice of hers or intervention in his personal life would drive him to the point to purposely upset her. He would never allow anybody or anything, including himself, to ever hurt her, even just a little bit.

"Please," he said more calmly. "Just understand that I'm seventeen now and I'm in a position where I can have full responsibility for my actions. Others my age..."

He suddenly broke off his sentence. Wrong. He shouldn't have said that.

Too late. Cleo's expression had already changed. Her grayish-blue eyes had the sadness that Apellis knew well. "The sadness of bitter memories" he had knowingly named this expression before. A shadow spread over his mother's beautiful face whenever something tended to remind her of past sorrows. He had never actually voiced it, but kept the name of this expression to himself.

"Nevertheless, I know what I'm doing. That's all I wanted to say," he clumsily tried to make up for his previous sentence.

Cleo Kariti slightly nodded her head. She brushed back a few strands of hair that had escaped her comb and left the studio without speaking while silently closing the door behind her.

Apellis kicked the easel, angry at himself, his words and his carelessness. The unfinished painting rocked but remained on the easel, not falling to the floor beside the paintbrush.

There goes his concentration! There goes his utter enthusiasm over his painting which had resulted from his agitation over his awaited meeting the following Wednesday, December 26, the day after Christmas with the famous Mike Gician – the so-called "magician" of the art world. This man had dominated the art world by organizing unbelievably original international exhibitions. And now he was showing particular interest in Greek artists.

He got up and grabbed his hot cup that he had left a left on the low, round wooden table a while ago. He discovered it amidst the various bottles, tubes, thinners, spatulas, brushes, and colors such as burnt sienna, emerald, bronze, ultra marine and ochre, which he had situated between five or six tones of red: scarlet, crimson, vermilion, cadmium red, carmine, magenta...

He grabbed the cup with delight, drank a gulp of tea (his favorite beverage) that was rather cold now. He set it down in the same place and finally picked up his paintbrush from the floor. He sat on the stool again, in front of his easel, took a deep breath and dunk his brush in the carmine...

Nothing! His enthusiasm had escaped through the door with Cleo, who he had unintentionally upset in one careless moment.

“Why do you call your mother by her name?” his friend Niovi had asked him once.

It was in the beginning of their relationship, last September, on an evening when Niovi had decided to come to his house. She had curiously entered Apellis’s and Cleo’s famous basement studio.

“It’s a long story, I’ll tell you some other time,” Apellis had answered. “The most important thing is that my mother and I understand each other and we’re very close. That’s all for today.”

He didn’t want to explain why he called his mother Cleo this early on in their friendship. It was only the second time they had the opportunity to speak to each other by themselves. The first was in the schoolyard two days before. It was on the morning that the new school year had begun.

He had seen her sitting on a distant curb by herself. He assumed she was his age. “I thought you were a new senior and you hadn’t met anyone yet,” he explained when picking up a conversation with her. But that wasn’t the truth at all. He would have approached her no matter what, even if she was in junior high. What really had intrigued him was the large sketch pad on her knees. She drew quick, faint lines, completely absorbed with what she was doing as if she couldn’t hear the shouts, laughter and bustle of the school yard. It was as if she was in her own world, sketching a large rusty anchor on the shore with its chain wrapped around it, and a boat in the background, also pulled onto the shore.

“It reminds me of the themes and images of Sorogas,”* he commented while gazing uninvited above her head.

“That’s not unlikely,” she replied without looking up at him. “I love his work. I really admire him.”

“I’m also fascinated by his simplicity and uniqueness,” Apellis agreed. “But I also admire other artists.”

“Such as?” Niovi asked still sketching.

“Cleo Kariti, for example,” he said as if by chance. “Have you heard of her?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course I have. I’ve seen her works in three different exhibitions and in a lot of art books. She’s amazing! I adore her too!”

“Would you like to meet her?” he said abruptly.

Startled, she raised her eyes with disbelief, yet vibrant and warm and her eyes were the color of chestnut.

“What do you mean? You...you know her?” she whispered.

“I know her,” Apellis laughed with her reaction. “I know her very well. As well as one can know his mother.”

She stared at him.

“I don’t believe you,” she said sharply and her vibrant gaze grew dark. “Kariti, from what I know, is very young.”

She turned back to her drawing somewhat irritated.

“Do you have the impression that I’m lying to you?” Apellis understood her doubt. “You think I’m trying to impress you. I dare you to see for yourself.”

“In what way?” she asked sarcastically.

“In the simplest of ways: come to my house one evening. I live with her and her husband and their daughter, my little sister – my half-sister, that is. Our house is on Kallidromiou Street and my name is Apellis Karitis. Every one in the senior class knows that, you can ask them if you want. We’re going to be classmates, I guess....”

“You guessed wrong,” she interrupted. “I’m a sophomore.”

“Oh!” he didn’t hide his surprise. “You look older. I thought you were a new senior and you hadn’t met anyone yet. That’s why I came over to talk to you.”

“And now I’m not. Does that matter?”

“Why should it matter? It doesn’t matter at all,” he rushed to reassure her. “The invitation stands. Whenever you feel like it, come over and meet the artist you

* Transl. note: Famous contemporary Greek painter

admire in person. She'll verify that the strange guy that struck up a conversation with you is her son, her trouble-maker and her studio partner. You'll figure it out for yourself – they say we look terribly alike.”

He then took out a little piece of paper from his pocket, grabbed her drawing pencil from her hand and jot down quickly...

“Here's my phone number!” He threw it on her sketch pad. “I'll wait for you to call.”

He was about to leave but stood still for a moment. He turned and looked at her.

“You didn't tell me your name!” - his voice sounded surprised at her mishap.

“Niovi Veniri,” she smiled faintly, or that's what he thought.

She then closed her sketch pad, picked up her pencil and eraser and hurried up. The bell had begun to ring insistently, as if the kids would forget or regret and not go up to their first class of the new school year.

“I've also written down the address,” shouted Apellis as he walked away. (...)

That's how, on a Wednesday evening in mid-September of 2001, Niovi, while holding a large binder with some of her own works, entered his house, his studio and his life for good.

Nefeli, his five-year old sister, rushed to the door. Behind her barked Kevis the Second, but her father smiled and hurriedly put a leash on him. Before taking the dog and his daughter for a walk up the hill he jokingly introduced himself to her,

“Telis Iakovou, the father of the family, Cypriot by heritage. It's very nice to meet you, Niovi!”

Apellis motioned for her to move into the living room. She laid her binder somewhere, glanced first at the old, large clock on the wall, probably to make sure she wasn't late, and then made a point to look at the works of art that covered the walls. Her glance fell on a portrait of Apellis wearing a straw hat, much younger than now since the light beard and hint of a mustache did not exist in the painting.

Apellis followed her eyes.

“That's the one and only, when I was eleven,” he explained. “It's always been in one of Cleo's exhibitions, but always with the indication that it's not for sale. So

that's why it's always returned back here, to the living room, to that infamous spot that's she's chosen."

"I think it's the best spot for it." Cleo Kariti's voice was heard coming from the stairwell.

She descended with a heart-warming smile and welcomed Niovi.

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Afterwards, the both of them descended to the studio. They pushed the half-open door and Apellis rushed to turn on the lights.

"A wonderful space," Niovi whispered and he suddenly felt that everything in the studio changed with her presence there. His basement felt more relaxed but also somewhat different, a little smaller but bigger simultaneously. Warmer but also more refreshed.

He walked closer to her to breathe in the jasmine scent of her freshly washed hair, but she slipped away to look at the paintings.

That's when she asked why he calls his mother by her name and he seemed willing to explain. However, Niovi, despite her expectations, spoke little about herself in contrast to the interest she showed in learning more about Apellis.

"And what does Mrs. Cleo say about you not calling her mom?" she insisted.

"She doesn't say anything. We agreed on it."

"That's good. Mutual agreements show the right kind of communication."

She made a quick round of the studio, looked intently at the paintings on the walls (the aquarelles, oil paintings, temperas), the sketches on the floor, the frames placed on the few chairs, and then went back to the same conversation.

"It's expected that you would have a good relationship with Mrs. Kariti. She's so young. The way you look like her, both with dark hair, bluish-gray eyes, you look more like siblings. It's also because you look older being that tall and with that beard of yours..."

"Are you implying something?" Apellis acted bothered.

"I'm not implying anything. I'm just saying that you look terribly alike. Just your height is different. You had mentioned it but I hadn't imagined that you would look like brother and sister."

“Everybody says that,” he shook his head. “You see, Cleo is very young. We’re only sixteen years apart.”

“How many?” she asked surprised.

“Exactly what you heard: sixteen!”

Niovi looked at him dumbfounded.

“You mean, when you were born she was your age now? She wasn’t even out of school?”

“Enough questions for today, little one!” Apellis cut her short. “Look at the paintings you want to down here, make your comments as a future art critic or a famous future artist and then run home to study. If you think that tenth grade classes are the same as ninth, then you’re mistaken.”

She didn’t argue with him. She went up to the ground floor with him, took a last look at the portrait of Apellis and left to do her homework.

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“And what exactly does this man want from you?” Niovi asked last night, the first Saturday of Christmas vacation. To her this vacation meant working at the bookstore all day till closing time; the long work hours of the holiday season.

“Something very important that may overturn all my prospects for the future,” he replied. “He may turn my life upside-down and lead me exactly to what I want. That’s the reason why today I’m paying for a movie and pizza.”

They entered a movie theater to see *Great Expectations* with Ethan Hawk, Gwyneth Paltrow and Robert de Niro. Niovi was seeing it for the first time, Apellis for the second.

“But why see it again?” she objected.

“Because I found it amazing,” he said not telling her the whole truth.

The whole truth would be, “for you to see a great movie about art.” They walked in without further discussion.

“If you fall asleep during amazing movies, I can imagine how deep you sleep during boring ones,” Niovi whispered in Apellis’s ear, when his eyes had shut.

He shot up embarrassed.

“I was painting all night last night,” he explained in a whisper. “I couldn’t sleep at all.”

“All night? What is it that this Mr. Gician has offered you that you couldn’t even sleep?”

“Shhh...” he said, because they were bothering the people beside them. “Watch the movie and I’ll explain later.”

His eyes didn’t close again despite the relaxing warmth of the movie theater.

The pizza place was next to the movie theater. The smell of baked cheese and tomato welcomed them at the entrance and inside there were red checkered table cloths, napkins in triangular holders, salts and peppers and toothpicks on the tables. They sat in a discreet corner to avoid the noise as much as possible. The place was packed with young people talking loudly and laughing even louder.

“So tell me!” she eagerly leaned her long neck towards him as soon as they gave their order to the young waiter with spiked hair, electronic pad in his hand and a banana-bag around his waist.

He blurted out the news in one breath: About the sudden phone call the previous day, the way he was in shock to hear that it was Gician on the line, how he was tongue-tied when he heard the “magician’s” proposals, how he managed to snap out of it, answer him calmly and to arrange a meeting in his suite at the Ledra Marriot hotel the day after Christmas to talk it over face to face...

She listened to him thoughtfully, folding and unfolding her napkin over and over again.

“Obviously, I haven’t told Cleo everything,” he added in the end.

“What do you mean?” Niovi asked.

“I mean, she only knows the basics: that I’m one of the ten young artists that Gician has chosen from last year’s Teenage Artists Exhibition, that he’s planning a show abroad with works of the ten artists and that he’s also publishing a book with their works. I didn’t mention anything about the possibility of me being the one to be awarded the full scholarship to the Fine Arts program at Concordia College in Montreal. I didn’t want to set off premature reactions around the house. Let’s see how the meeting goes first, the “magician” can see more of my works and confirm his unbelievable proposals... My mom is somewhat sensitive, you know. She’s convinced that the best thing for my future is to prepare for a degree in architecture. The same goes for my step-father. He’s ecstatic at the thought that I might one day work

alongside him and eventually take over his business. Imagine me ruining their plans!”

Niovi nodded her head sympathetically. At one point her vibrant eyes seemed to cloud, as if they had tears – or was it his imagination? In any case, she then looked up at him with a smile.

“This Gician reminds me of the mysterious benefactor that supported the young artist in tonight’s film. I just hope he’s not a former convict like the one in *Great Expectations*,” she teased.

“You think so?” Apellis laughed.

“No, really, this is a unique opportunity,” Niovi said gravely. “If I was in your shoes, I’d be losing my sleep too.”

That’s exactly how she put it, “I’d be losing my sleep too”. Therefore, it was not at all unnatural that for the second night in a row, after the movie and pizza, Apellis stayed up all night to paint manically – painting strange shapes, using all the shades of red in excess, without knowing why. Cleo was right. He didn’t apply any sort of schedule, he didn’t program any of his days, and he didn’t know what he was doing in the least bit no matter how much he tried to convince himself the opposite. Only disturbance, anger and impatience came out of his brushstrokes on his canvas. And there were three whole days till the meeting.

It was early morning on Sunday, December 23 when he felt his eyes closing. He put the palette on the table, wiped his brush with a small, wet rag soaked in turpentine, he screwed the tubes shut, gathered and covered the paints tossed about... He then took off his white work shirt that had been covered in a multitude of colors, turned off the light and went up to his room. He fell in his bed dressed the way he was, only taking off his shoes, and he fell fast asleep.

Mr. Gician came to disturb his sleep as well. He saw him in his dream dressed as a real magician. He was leading him to a fairy-tale castle, opened a huge iron gate and pushed him inside a large hall with thousands of paintings. All of them were signed by *Apellis Karitis*.

“Come on now!” he called with an enigmatic smile. “Come; let me take you with me!” But he couldn’t discern his face, standing undecidedly until Cleo appeared

suddenly by his side. She was upset, whispering to him, “It’s too late, it’s much too late”...

His mother was actually speaking to him. She had anxiously bent over his bed.

“It’s late,” she stroked his forehead. “It’s almost afternoon. You need to get up. Your sister is waiting for you to put the lights on the tree. She said you promised her.”

The lights...yes, he remembered. He had told Nefeli the previous night, just before he left for the movies. And when someone promises his little sister something, there’s no getting out of it!

“Gician called again,” Cleo added.

Apellis sprung from the bed.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” he shouted.

“I tried but you couldn’t hear me. I did everything but pour a bucket of water over you. Telis answered and told him you were out and that you would be back shortly. What were we supposed to say to the man? He said he would call back. He didn’t leave a number. Get up then!”

Apellis quickly got ready and went down to keep his promise to Nefeli. Oh, how much he loved that little girl. Oh, what she reminded him of! Besides, fixing the lights would help distract him from his anger until Gician called back.

What did he want? Maybe to postpone their meeting in two days? To cancel it perhaps? He didn’t even want to think about that. He had believed, without understanding why, that the “magician” would make a critical change in his life. A peculiar intuition told him that his present plans (which only partially satisfied him, but fully satisfied Cleo and Telis) would topple over and new, exciting ones would open his future.

Nefeli was anxiously waiting for him, as so was the dog. He rumbled her hair, tickled her a bit and patted Kevis II who was wagging his tail ceaselessly. He started working on the Christmas tree while keeping an ear on the phone.

Chapter 11

He opened his eyes at eight o'clock after a short but deep sleep. His sleep was unsteady and full of nightmares that had won him over around twilight, when *Great Expectations* was almost over. He poured hot water on his body to relax him as much as possible. He would then start to get ready. He would calmly wait for Michalis Gicianiades - that was Mike Gician's real name - to pick him up at ten.

His shiny Porsche was on time, waiting outside the house. Apellis got in the passenger seat and coldly said, "good morning". He put on his seatbelt with trembling hands. Gician didn't seem to notice. He appeared very good-natured and began talking about a thousand different things – about the sunny weather, Athens' traffic, the children playing carols with their triangles for New Year's, his teenage memories of his life near Strefi hill... Afterwards, he spoke of something more serious – the condition in which the museums are in, the many new galleries opening in the capital, which were good, which weren't...

Apellis nodded his head every once in a while to show he was listening, but he didn't say a word.

"You don't seem very cheerful this morning," he finally took notice. "Is there something wrong?"

"I have a bit of a headache," Apellis said as an excuse.

Not on the road. Not while Gician was driving. He wouldn't say a word now. When they would arrive, when they'd get out of the car, that's when he would say what was on his mind. He wanted to face him and speak to him man to man.

Gician continued talking as carefree as before. As they reached the coast, he quieted down and put on some music.

“For your headache, and to enjoy the rest of our drive to Sounion,” he said.

They made a turn on the road beside the shore and faced the temple of Poseidon washed in the light of the winter sun. They reached the top of the hill, parked the car and walked up to the temple by foot...

“What a wonderful view!” Gician breathed enthusiastically. “Only I see a few clouds in the sky. I hope the weather doesn’t spoil our day. Next year, my boy...” - he reached over and grabbed Apellis’s shoulders.

Apellis jerked as if he were being wrapped by a snake.

The “magician” looked at him surprised. He then saw his eyes in flames and took a step back.

Apellis was about to speak but his voice had disappeared. His breath was fast and heavy, he shook with rage...

He didn’t have a voice but quickly found a solution.

He stood opposite Gician; he struck him with his enraged glance, took the letter from Cleo out of his pocket, unfolded it and daringly handed it to him.

Gician took it with surprise. He hesitantly began reading it.

Now his hands were trembling.

Apellis waited for him to finish the entire letter. And then, without saying a word he grabbed it from him.

“Don’t you dare come near me again, Mr. Giceniades” he said with rage.

And leaving him dumbfounded, Apellis began to run downhill as fast as he could. He wanted to reach the road as soon as possible, to get as far away as possible from the man he hated.

When he was far enough, he glanced back at the hill for the last time. The clouds had thickened, the sun had disappeared and Giceniades stood like a marble statue beside the columns of the temple. Only he hardly looked like Poseidon now. He looked nothing like the god of the sea, like the first day he

met him. He looked more like the mythical Aegeus when he saw from Sounion cape the black sails, a sign that he had lost his son Theseus forever. (...)

He didn't go straight home. His tired legs led him to "Lazarus's Place" by their own accord. It was two in the afternoon and inside the café two little refugee children pounded on their triangles singing "Santa Claus is coming to town" in broken-Greek.

"What's wrong?" Lazarus asked as soon as he saw the state Apellis was in.

The customers were few and had all been served. They sat in a corner and Apellis told him in short, painful sentences what had happened last night and today...

Lazarus silently listened, just like he had done the previous time.

"Listen, son," he said when Apellis was finished. "You have every right to be angry with him. But you should have stayed to hear what he had to say. He probably wouldn't have serious excuses, but you should have stayed. Just so that you'd feel good about having given him a fair chance to explain."

Apellis was about to object...

"Calm down!" he held him by the arm. "Relax and listen to me. I'm positive that this man wants to find you and speak to you now. There is no way he'll leave without trying. So be prepared and listen to him this time. That's my advice. If you want, you can follow it."

Apellis didn't agree or disagree. "I'm going home," he muttered and got up to leave and let Lazarus go back to work. (...)

The doorbell woke him. It was insistent – two, three, four times... He leaped up. Maybe Telis and Cleo had found an earlier flight to come back. He turned on the light, it was dark now, the old clock on the wall showed ten!

He opened the door with delight...

In front of him was the "magician"!

And there was that glow around him, the atmosphere around him was bright...

He stood there frozen. Gician faintly smiled.

“Didn’t you say for me to come by?” he said softly. “I won’t stay long. I only wish to speak to you a few minutes.”

He didn’t resist, not knowing exactly why. They entered the living room.

Kevis went to sit beside Gician’s legs, unusually tame. He hadn’t barked at all or reacted in any way.

“Tonight I’ll gladly drink the glass of whiskey I declined last night,” the unexpected visitor said hesitantly.

Apellis hypnotically brought the whiskey bottle from the bar, a glass and ice in a bowl from the kitchen. Gician poured himself a glass and drank it in one gulp. He then poured another.

“I needed that so I can speak to you calmly,” he said. “I’d like to tell you the entire truth to a story you’ve never heard.”

Unmoving and unable to speak, Apellis stared from across the room and again felt like he was losing the sense of reality, of time, and of his very existence. He listened, though. He listened to the sound of the ice as Gician moved his glass, to the tick-tock of the clock and to Kevis breathing beside them.

Michalis Giceniadis began his story around the time he met Cleo. Their first meeting was in the spring, during the evening classes of the Iliadi School. Fifteen year old Cleo was the teacher’s pet. He considered her a child-prodigy even though she looked more like a woman. Michalis, also talented, was five years older. It was love at first-sight. Their love was passionate and wild.

They lived in paradise for the months that followed. And they were both sure that they would never break up. Everything bound them even beyond their love: their adoration for art, their aesthetic preferences, their views of the world, even similar family-related problems. Both their fathers were especially strict.

The next January, Michalis went into the army. He was closed from the world for forty days, like all new soldiers, without any means of communication - there were no mobile phones or card phones back then. It was then that Cleo realized she was expecting a baby. In her despair, she would confide in his cousin. She told him to go find Michalis and to somehow tell him - through the barbed wire, if necessary - what was going on.

From that point on - as Michalis learned years later - drastic measures were taken by third parties, people who shattered their dreams and drove their relationship to an inevitable end.

Michalis asked for a few days leave, but his commander-in-chief denied him. Then he was forced to tell him the reason for wanting his leave. But instead of accomplishing what he wanted, the worst possible thing happened. The commander was a close friend of his father's. Instead of giving him time off, he "confidentially" spoke to his father. With the girl being underage, he could be facing charges, and so decided that this would best save him. The result was that his father had been cast to play a role which Michalis only found out last year, sixteen years later.

He only had contact with his cousin those difficult days in the army. He gave him a letter to give to Cleo in order to give her patience and courage. He told her to hide her pregnancy as much as possible at school. And once he could get out they would elope. He would make sure to find them a house so she could leave her parents' home, for her father would be enraged as the months passed and he'd realize she was pregnant.

The letter never reached Cleo. Contrarily, his cousin was told by Michalis's father to tell him that Cleo had decided to have an abortion immediately and that it was best they didn't see each other ever again. He said that she "couldn't bear to see him again and didn't want anything to remind her of this horrible experience." That, supposedly, was her final message.

Michalis didn't believe his cousin. With the help of another soldier, he decided to sneak out of the camp. He would be gone for just one night, just to find her and speak to her. He didn't make it. He was caught and charged

with imprisonment. When he got out, his father's acquaintances and connections had accomplished their little "miracle". He was ordered to go straight to Washington, especially chosen as general's ordinate at the Pentagon.

He then started sending Cleo tons of letters through his "traitor" cousin, so that the letters wouldn't fall in the hands of her father. He begged her to give birth to their baby and he would do everything for the three of them. He would work night and day doing any sort of job, so they could live comfortably.

No letter ever reached its destination. The mediator did the exact opposite. At some point his cousin wrote him that she had the abortion and it was no use to insist. Cleo's decision assured him that it was final. She didn't want anything to do with him.

His despair was great. That's when he decided to stay in the New World after being discharged from the army. They had family in Canada, his father's two unwed brothers, who were willing to take him "under their wing", to help him find a job and to get his degree in the history of art.

His uncles were well informed by his father about the situation with Cleo and therefore made sure to build a thick wall around him to avoid any sort of contact from her. And when she somehow managed to find out that he had settled in Canada, she began calling and asking to speak to him. They would harshly reply that their nephew did not want to speak to her, that he had nothing to do with her child and the best thing she could do was to leave him alone.

"The phrase 'I have nothing to do with your child, leave me alone', that's written in Cleo's letter was never said by me," said Gician. "I give you my word, my boy. She heard it from them and my mediator cousin, who assured her that they spoke through me. Now you probably wonder how I know all of this, how I learned all these details."

He refilled his glass, drank his third whiskey and continued with a more vigorous voice, as if the most weight had now been lifted from inside of him.

“As you can see, erasing Cleo from my mind was impossible. I suffered. I tormented myself to believe that she was so different from what I had thought. Eventually, I justified her actions and forgave her. I realized she was only just a child. I lifted up the pieces and tried to survive...”

He gently touched his back to the armchair and continued speaking in the voice that hardly sounded like the famous “magician”.

He threw himself into work and college, he continued on. The deep pain within him transformed into unlimited strength. He acquired two doctorate degrees in the history of art and simultaneously worked hard – first in odd jobs then in the field he was interested in. He was very lucky but also the hard work, his inexhaustible abilities and the realization of his special talents helped him achieve his position in life today. His professional success allowed him to acquire a considerable fortune. However, he never painted again. His life goal had altered: to serve art with all of his strength by portraying the art of others.

He once decided to marry, however he soon realized that he’d be fooling himself and the woman he had agreed to spend the rest of his life with. It was obvious that he didn’t love her. His mind was always, permanently haunted by Cleo. It was better to be a bachelor and alone than a part of a marriage that was more like a bad comedy.

Two years ago, when his career was at its peak, he decided to come to Greece for the first time since he had left. He was invited as a guest in Crete, to see an exhibition at the Rethymno Modern Art Center, and to see if the show could travel to other countries as well. The title of the exhibition was *Me, myself*. It contained self-portraits of Greek artists, mainly modern, but also of turn-of-the-century artists. (...) Among the first, Cleo Kariti, who, as Gician assumed, portrayed herself as a young boy in a straw hat.

That portrait struck him. His Cleo! Drawn by her own hand as a boy. Just like the one (would it have been a boy?) they would've had if she had given birth.

He tried to buy the painting through a third party. Cleo was adamant, even though he had offered a large sum for the portrait. He never acquired the portrait, but it permanently remained in his mind.

Until last March while he was in Madrid for the final touches on the *Byzantium in Spain* exhibition, when he heard that one of his uncles had fallen very ill in Montreal. He immediately returned to Canada and that's when his uncle had decided to clear his soul, perhaps to see the light of heaven. He told him whatever he could before his eyes closed. His brother added the rest. His other uncle was also very old and felt the critical time of his life where a person views his life from a distance and wants to leave this world with fewer burdens on his conscience. He later confessed his horrible role in all of this, as well as that of his traitor cousin. How did he explain himself? He had found out that Cleo's brother would protect her and adopt the baby. Thus, the problem had found a solution. There was no reason why Michalis had to ruin his life by marrying so young.

Shaken and angry, but with a merciful feeling of bliss and justice, Gician immediately began gathering information about Cleo, about the child, about their situation. The portrait confirmed the three relatives' confessions.

The most famous agency for private investigators gathered all the information he needed in full detail. And from that point on, his goal in life would be to meet his son, to see him up close, and to discreetly help him in any way he could.

As for the truth, he would only tell him in the case that it wouldn't upset his life or Cleo's - and never without her approval. That's why he wanted to find the appropriate time to speak with her, to explain his intentions. To assure her that he was in no way trying to claim Apellis. He only wanted to help him. And if she thought that he shouldn't find out about his real father, so as not to upset his inner world, then he wouldn't expose himself. However, he hadn't found the time or the way to approach her.

No, he didn't have any need for a "trophy-child", like Cleo unjustly accused him of in her letter. However, if he claimed not to have the need to have a child love him and to love the child back, then he would be lying.

"The world calls me invincible in my field," he looked Apellis in the eyes straight into his soul. "But real strength is to know that you are loved, not to hold power - Goethe was right. Only love, when it exists around you, makes you feel invulnerable. And I never acquired such a gift. In essence, I'm completely alone despite my successes, my wealthy life-style, my frivolous relationships... True love does not exist around me."

His voice broke but he gathered himself again and continued.

"But even if you had never found out who I was, the fact that you exist is already a gift from God for me. The main thing I wanted was your well-being and your prosperity. That was enough for me. It's wonderful, my boy, to just know and to just feel like you have a child."

Lazarus had told him the same thing that afternoon, "It's a grand thing to feel like you have children. It's the grandest thing!"

"I didn't come here tonight to apologize," he continued. "I don't feel as if I did wrong. The only thing that I can be accused of is that when I was full of youth I sowed a child out of carelessness, even though I was in no way prepared for one. But today, that mistake became the greatest joy. I don't know what you would do, if you were in my position. That's my conviction."

Honestly, what would he have done in his position? Apellis thought about that. What would he do if Niovi suddenly appeared in Cleo's situation? What would he say to her? How would he react?

He was ashamed at the thought that he wouldn't have the courage to say "don't worry, I'm here for you. I'll do whatever it takes for the three of us to live together. I'll work anywhere to make ends meet, even if it means never painting again". He was ashamed. Because he was not so sure that he would be that brave. He shivered at the thought of what he would contrarily have suggested to her.

"I should go," said Gician. "I have nothing else to say to you. From here on the decision is yours - and your mother's, of course. Talk to her

about it, if you wish. Tell her in a few words the story I told you – perhaps that would be best so she’s not at all affected by my personal presence. She may not even want me around. Think about it in peace and tell me whatever you decide. I’ll be right beside you no matter what that is.”

Apellis felt so strange! What was all of this that had suddenly drowned him? What was it that inflated his lungs and rose to his neck?

He rose and stood before Gician... They were the same height, their hands shook alike, the same wetness in their eyes...

He only saw a blur of him now. The man before him resembled nothing of the “monster” he hated and despised since he was a child. He was not at fault about anything he had blamed him for all these years. The “crimes” he had blamed him for were never committed. He was innocent. Apellis had jumped to conclusions without having heard the whole story, once again.

No, he did not resemble an ancient god. He looked like a sad angel now, who someone or some people had unjustly tortured. An angel that had upset the waters of his life, during this Christmas holiday, and had now come to nurse the enormous wound inside of him in just a short while - a wound that had remained open for many years, without any hope of healing.

The clock on the wall struck midnight. The fresh New Year had arrived. It entered their life and demanded to begin everything from the start.

Apellis saw two tears streaming down his father’s face. The attraction he felt was enormous.

It’s as if his father understood. He opened his arms wide...

And Apellis fell into them, a hug that wrapped him with unbelievable warmth and steamed with love, certainty, trust.