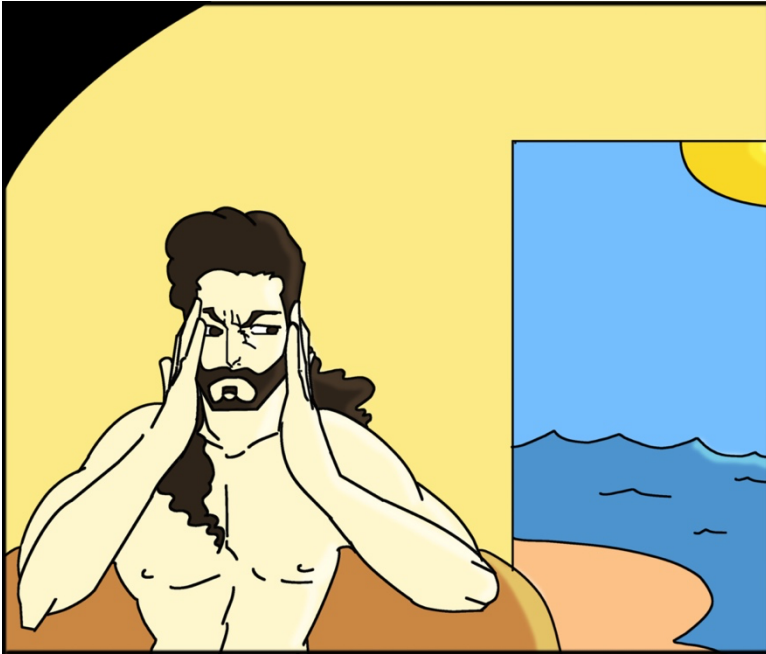


Chapter 3

“Τα δακρυα μου”



He awakened in a fit of panic. His palms were sweaty. Something felt wrong. His head thumped against his skull like a miniature bongo player lived inside and delighted in the torture he was inflicting.

The room was silent, too silent. He pushed through the waves of silence and his own impatience as the ground shifted beneath.

His faculties hadn't kicked in, and the room looked odd. The glint in the window smelled funny. Then he remembered he'd purchased a property, and they'd had a small party last night. He smiled. What a party it had been!

Cookie, the love of his life. Cookie? Where was she? He looked around frantically in bed. There was a residue of irritability to his search.

The light of the morning sun lifted the room into a picture-perfect blast of orange but exposed an empty bed to the left of him.

The salty flavor of the ocean lingered on the sheets, and he turned and buried his face into her pillow to recapture her essence. He pulled the purple pillow into his arms.

He focused. No water was running for a shower. The balcony doors were open, and the breeze slightly elevated the sheets.

This was heaven. Homes have a personality and this one fits him perfectly. He grabbed his robe excitedly and flew out onto the platform, hoping he would find Cookie out there.

The small tan table and two coffee-colored chairs were not alone. A cascading waterfall of pink flowers devoured the area, and the aroma was intoxicating. Several potted plants

stood like beacons to the left of the balcony, towering several feet over his head like infantry watchmen.

Sarantos scanned the beach to see if his goddess was taking a morning stroll, but the miles of warm sand held nothing but waves that beat against the grains, leaving behind small gifts for any drifters - tiny vegetation, colorful shells, and curious sea creatures.



The hairs on his neck tickled his shirt. He'd sensed something amiss when he woke up but blew it off, thinking the massive hangover from last night's events was the probable culprit. But the neck hairs were a genuine signal. They warned of danger and had never failed him before. The Professor should've listened. Hindsight continues to have an undefeated record. He tied his robe and went back inside.

The house was too quiet. He raced to the kitchen area. There was no coffee, no breakfast. The kitchen was just as deserted as the beach.

He examined his room once more, this time also checking for her clothing. Everything was gone. It was like she never existed. He lacked emotion and purpose as he stood there for what seemed like half an hour.

Finally, he burst out of the room like they shot him out of a cannon. Running down the hallway towards the kids' room made his heart race in anticipation of the worst-case scenario. The awakened walls seemed to cheer him on. He didn't bother to stop to pound on the door instead, barging inside like a starving lion that just found its meal.

The two young lovers were curled up in each other's arms and sleeping like innocent babies, oblivious to the real world.

“My God, get up.” He had a metallic, edgy tone to his voice as it crashed into the stillness of their room and caused both of them to jump naked out of bed.

He didn’t care. This was an emergency.

“She’s gone. Cookie is gone! Where’s The Lady??”

Charlie tried to muster some dignity, pulling the lilac sheets over her exposed body. The kid just stood there, trying to wrap his head around the situation.

Sarantos looked away. “Kid, get some clothes on.”

“Applesauce.”



The kid pulled on his pants that were parked on the marble floor as Charlie threw on her shirt and pants.

The Professor paced frantically as he lost control. His right hand was trembling.

“Bushwa, kid. Where’s The Lady?”

“Relax, Doc. She’s safe and sound. I put her back in my pack last night after I showed her to Cookie.”

His voice calmed somewhat. “Where’s your pack, kid?”

The kid’s head nodded, comprehension dawning slowly. “On the chair.”

The hairs on the Professor’s neck itched again. His heart sank down to his stomach. He knew what he would find before he got there.

The bag was empty. A wave of sadness washed over him. Rotting away on the compost heap of his imagination was an image of Cookie laughing at him. The Professor’s face turned blood red. “Get dressed. We need to find The Lady.”

Both kids gasped as he left the room. You don’t remember the simple days; you remember the difficult ones.

The three of them stood in front of the hotel where Cookie worked. Now it seemed different. It smelled musty and old, even though they could still smell the nauseating scent of

lemon cleaner that had been used to disinfect the hallways. Nursing homes have that same smell.

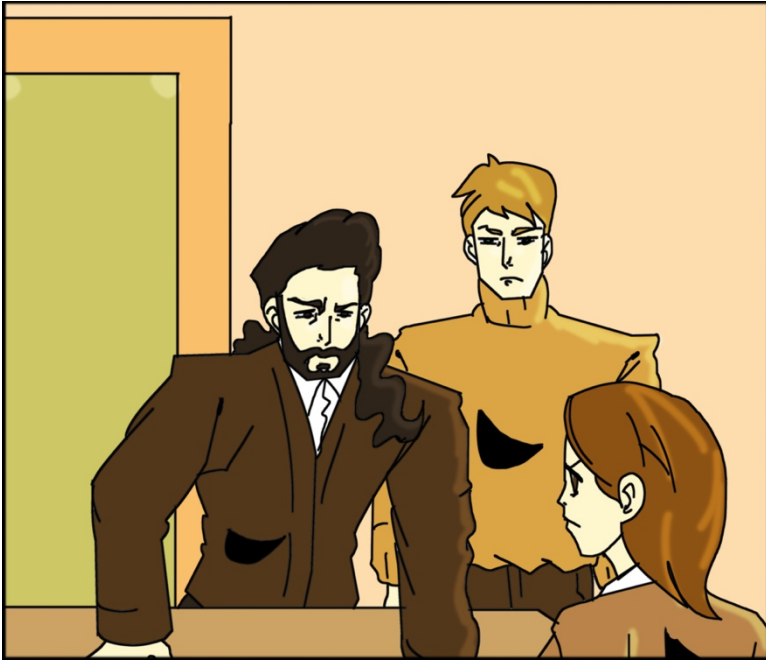
His broken heart hurt. Sarantos cried. He couldn't wall off a combination of disappointment, sadness, and sentimentality. It's ok to dip your toe but you can't get swept up in the current. He did, though. His tears fell for her, even after what she had done. The Professor tried to not be so angry at himself for getting involved with a woman he shouldn't have trusted. It didn't work.

Every day connects to the next. There was a different woman at the main reception this morning.

“Excuse me, can you tell me when Cookie will work again?”
He almost choked on the words.

The cordial woman looked up, smiling politely. “Oh, she quit this morning.”

His chest grew heavier and his heart exploded. His breathing quickened. “I'm going to need her address.”



“Sorry, sir, I can’t give that personal information out.”

“Listen lady, that woman opened wounds on me I can’t even describe. I’m losing my tears, and you’ll be the one to break my heart forever if you keep me from reaching my one true love. Will you truly stand in the way of love?”

Sarantos almost shed a tear. Of course, it was for The Lady, not Cookie, yes, for the statue. The pain was genuine enough.

Her attitude changed in a heartbeat. “Sorry, she told me you might come begging for her, but I heard what you did. You cheating scum.”

“What? Take your charming smile and shove it back into your face.”

The kid stepped in. “Hey, the Doc’s not scum, and she’s a liar. We just met her last night.”

The woman’s gaze pierced Gorillas, and she uttered, “So, do I believe you, or my friend? Hmm, let me think about that for a minute.”

“How well do you know her? Are you really friends? She stole something priceless from us. Now give us her location or let me speak to your manager. Maybe you’re an accomplice?”

She frowned. “Well, I’m sorry, but she just started here two days ago and already quit. I don’t know her location.”

“Well, then why the hell did you act like you two were best friends?”

“Because she is a woman and appeared sad. She said it was a pity you didn’t love her, and every night you forget her when you are far away from her, when you cheat on her and make her suffer. And then she cried and said her tears only wanted you, but she needed to leave the sinful man who made her cry. She said you were a dangerous man.”

“Baloney. You bought into that story?” The kid shook his head in a crazed manner and motioned towards the door. “Let’s get out of here. We’re wasting our time.”

“I’m with you, kid.”

Charlie chased the two of them out onto the paved street. If it hadn’t been for the blue ocean and the natural beauty of this place, he would’ve burst into tears again. He’d found love when he looked into The Lady’s eyes, and he wanted those lips to be his again. That lady would bring him fame. From now on, that’s the only love he would cherish, the kind that never died.



“Professor?” Charlie stood next to him, shaking his arm.

“Yeah?” He had a foggy head.

“Are you a-okay? I’ve been trying to get your attention for a few minutes.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

She pointed at the market. “Look at him. Gorilla is already trying to find out if someone’s seen that woman, and you’re standing here in la-la land.”

Gorilla was a splendid chap and surely felt bad about the statue, but the Professor brought the woman there to his home.

Sarantos and Charlie joined in the search for clues. It was easy to get caught up in the market’s lively banter. They all bought a few items. How could they not? As the afternoon sun peaked out and the sweat slid down into Sarantos eyes, he caught a glimpse of Charlie moving through the crowd towards Gorilla, smiling in an awkward position that exposed her teeth in a tundra.

The kid rambled towards her until she grabbed his arms. They danced around the square.

The Professor interrupted. “What’s going on? Did you find Cookie?”



“No, but I found who she is staying with and where. A man named Federico Valdez at the Diamond Inn. Nothing is ever lost for good.” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

They started dancing again.

“What’re we dancing about?” asked two strangers next to them.

“She found the location of Cookie.” The strangers frowned.

Gorilla urged. “We should hurry, Doc. Hopefully she’s still there and they both haven’t flown the coop yet.”

He smacked the kid on the back. “Right you are, my young lad, right you are.”

Charlie said she knew exactly where it was and started heading away from the coast, buzzing with life and towards the more secluded part of town.

The kid looked confused. “I don’t want to go in that direction, Charlie. Are you sure you got your facts straight? That’s a seedier part of town. I don’t like the vibe over there.”

She grinned and leaned into him. “All this time I thought you were some kind of big cheese, maybe even a big six, but look at you scared and sniffing like a goof. You can’t expect to hit the jackpot if you don’t put a few nickels in the machine. Let’s go, you big baby.”

The Professor smiled at the kid. “Let go of the life you’ve planned to live, the life that’s waiting for you.”

The kid grabbed Charlie's arm, stopping the group's momentum. "I'm not sniffing. I just don't like to go running into a hornet's nest unprepared, that's all."



"Oh, unprepared? We could never be prepared enough for you. The world doesn't work that way... kid."

Oh, boy, that was a low blow, even for Charlie. He was the only one that called him kid. Her words cut through him like a knife. Tears welled up in his dark eyes. That was not good.

"Fine, Charlie, have it your way, but when I'm murdered violently because of you, you'll find out that you needed my

hugs, my strong hands to hold on to yours, but it'll be too late for you too... kid."

She knew she'd gone too far when Gorilla jumped out in front of the group.

"Come on Gorilla, you don't know where you're going. Wait for us."

Gorilla turned and stopped. His sad eyes almost hung down to his elbows. "I'd miss your hugs a lot and believe me, I'd cry many tears over you, Charlie, if anything ever happened to you."

"Cut it out, Gorilla. You know I'd cry my eyes to sleep over you not being next to me, too. I adore you, but let's hurry before The Lady disappears off the island."

"She's right, kid. Let's put this argument on hold. Lead on, Charlie."

The kid nodded and let the anger go. He was a big wig after all.

They hurried through the streets and followed right on Charlie's heels.

Then there it was, the Diamond Inn. It was one of the island's sleazier places. It looked like a cheap hotel that rented rooms by the hour with dirty carpet, soiled linens, and worn rooms.

They walked straight in.

Gangster type goons flooded the lobby. They were chatting and whispering, but turned to eyeball them as they entered.

The Professor was terrified to ask about Cookie. Some were probably her friends.



The kid didn't hesitate. "Anyone know of a girl named Cookie?"

Three men sitting at a weathered table and playing cards to the left looked up simultaneously. They appeared to be in their forties. They looked nothing alike.

The man with a shiny bald head and dark thick eyebrows that looked like they were creatures attached to his forehead spoke up first. “Who wants to know?”

Sarantos moved in front of the kids.

“I do. The woman loved me and broke my heart.”

“Yeah, join the club,” the bald man replied.

Another man with a bushy head of dark brown hair grinned. “Well, we just want to know if she took you. Was she any good?”

They all started laughing. Charlie squirmed.

The Professor knew they’d get nowhere like this, so he upped the ante.

“Hell, no. It was like no bimbo had ever shown her how to make unselfish love, if you get me? In fact, after she left, I emptied another bottle of wine, toasting to her health, and to her being gone from my life forever. You want to know why?”

“If she were no good, why would you wish good health to her,” said the now annoyed bald guy.

“She stole my old lady statue, my true love, and how else could I hunt down the thieving little witch?”

Okay, he might’ve gone too far.

The three men pushed back their chairs and moved aggressively towards the three of them. The way the lights limped off the broken glass to the right gave Charlie a premonition of eminent disaster.



Charlie reached around him and grabbed an open bottle of booze off the counter and hit the first one over the head with it, but all that did was antagonize him further.

A bar brawl ensued.

The Professor thought the world was ending and that these goons would take it away from him, but he hadn't had so much fun in years. He picked up a chair and smashed it over the bald guy's head, knocking him unconscious to the floor. The kid was kicking another one in his manhood.

Charlie screamed. "Over there on the stairs."

He looked and there she was - Cookie, looking luscious but in shock. Composing herself for a split second, she rested her arms on her breasts as she stared straight at the Professor. Then she looked at the door and dashed for it.

Her eyes threw shade at him, but in his heart, he already knew it wasn't true love. She hadn't needed his companionship, just his treasure.

Sarantos might regret it, but he picked up a bottle, threw it across the room, and hit her in the back of the head. He still had it. Who says you ever lose the skills you work so hard to achieve in grammar school?

Somehow, in two blinks of an eye, Charlie was all over her before she could make it to the exit, pinning her to the dirty floor of the Diamond Inn.

The kid pulled out his gun.

Good lord, the Professor rationalized, this was all exciting. Two men were unconscious, and the one left standing was now backed up to the wall with nowhere to run. No one else in the room dared to move.

“Well, look what I have here, Professor,” Charlie announced as she was beaming. She pulled out The Lady and held her up for all to see. Strutting over to the Professor, she handed her back to him and bowed mockingly. The two men backed towards her, and Sarantos took The Lady and placed her on his person where she’d be safe again. With a sly smile, he pulled back his brown jacket a bit, just enough to expose his gun, letting everyone in the room know that this fight was now over.

“The moon alone looks down at me, Sarantos, and it sees my tears that I cry for you,” whimpered Cookie.

The Professor confessed. “Oh, baby, can’t you see that far away from you, I suffer. I only want you. My tears only want you!”

Like a misty smudge in the background, Cookie stood up slowly. “Oh, in my heart, I knew we would love each other again.” She started walking cautiously towards him.



“What? Cookie, my sweet love, I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to her.” He held up the statue, smirked, and then marched out of the hotel. When he got to the doorway, he turned so everyone could see him kiss The Lady warmly. The Professor had ears but choose not to hear and eyes but choose not to see. All he could see right now was the love of his life, The Lady, and she was his again...