

Limited Cover

No chance to dry. The air was too still. Too thick with the humid heat. Kaspar Künzli had taken a shower in the hope it would cool him down. But it just encouraged his sense of fever all the more. And fresh beads of sweat gathered almost instantly again in every cranny of his skin as he wiped the towel across his chest.

He poured himself a glass of cool sparkling water from the minibar. Then flicked the switch on the wall. He didn't expect it to do any good. And he was right. The blades of the ceiling fan were not going to move for anyone. They just hung there like the legs of a spider in suspended animation. Teasing him while he dressed.

Kaspar never enjoyed huge social gatherings at the best of times. And the prospect of 1500 neurologists and their hangers-on was the ultimate test of his devotion to science. In truth, if he hadn't been awarded a prize for his research, he probably wouldn't be going – probably wouldn't even be in Athens at that moment attending the congress.

'Why do you want to go to a place like that in the buckling heat of July?' his mother had said as he was leaving for the station a week ago. 'You'll fry.'

These words came to him again now like a freight train thundering through an airless tunnel.

He was just reaching for one of the bow ties he always wore on these big formal occasions – a red creation that lay on the dresser beside the minibar. Maybe it was the memory of his mother's words that distracted him. Maybe it was the sapping heat. Or maybe it was just destiny. Whatever the reason, he was blinded for the briefest fraction of a second to the half-finished glass of water that stood between him and the tie. And before the words 'You'll fry' were through the tunnel, his smart red tie was bathed in bubbling water and lay before him like a trickling stream of blood.

Kaspar was a cautious man by nature, and it was rare for him to be caught off guard by such a lapse of care. But like the air in the room, he was also not the type to be ruffled. And with quiet patience he used a tissue to mop what moisture he could from his distressed garment before treating it to a blast of hot air from the hair dryer in the bathroom.

But even patience can have its shady side, as Kaspar was soon to discover.

All that fussing over his tie consumed such a huge slice of his preparations for the big event, he felt compelled to save what time he could by travelling down in the lift. And was promptly reminded of why he had always made a point of never using the luxury of such things. It seemed a cruel kind of malice the way that steel box just stopped – and left Kaspar suspended between floors for almost fifteen minutes.

He was alone. Caught in a stuffy metal cabin that could have been a stove for all the heat that came off the walls. And as he dangled in that stovepipe, waiting, he played with the notion that someone somewhere was trying to tell him something.

By the time some invisible hand got the lift working again, and Kaspar got out of the hotel, the coach to the congress ceremony was already revving up to leave. It was on the point of moving off as Kaspar eased himself into the last remaining seat towards the back of the bus.

At least I have it to myself, he thought. But the relief was short-lived. While he was lowering himself into the seat, he failed to notice that one more passenger had squeezed himself onto the bus just as the door was closing.

'You don't say. Gee, it sure is a small world.'

Peabody began to fidget in the pockets of a tight-fitting tuxedo that became more distraught with every second of his search. It heaved. It rippled. It churned like the sea. But a look of satisfaction finally settled into the shapeless territory between a chin and nose that glistened faintly in the humid air. He lifted the programme of the meeting up to the light and leafed through its pages.

'You're right,' he said at last, 'your talk **was** yesterday.'

There was almost a hint of surprise in his voice, and the implicit distrust it betrayed irritated Kaspar all the more. But Peabody was not finished. He was still studying the programme. 'What's the other K for?'

'Kaspar.' He winced at his own indiscretion. But he could see no other way out. He was trapped.

'Like in Weinberger.' Peabody was not looking for a reply to this remark; it was more a statement of approval. And he kept the programme open with his thumb, trying to fan some of the heat out of his face. 'I sure will be glad to get back to New Jersey. Why in God's name do they always hold these functions in tin-pot Mid-East countries?'

His words had the depth of a fat man's voice. And with every sweep of the makeshift fan they carried a faint breeze of tooth decay in Kaspar's direction.

'Do you know I was caught in the elevator this morning for fifteen minutes, bouncing up and down like a yo-yo between the first floor and the seventh. Can you imagine that?'

Kaspar recalled his own experience with the lift and felt a reluctant twinge of sympathy. But he enjoyed with vivid relish the image of Jerome Peabody yo-yoing up and down the lift shaft, and kept the sympathy to himself. And while he also agreed silently with him on the choice of venue for the meeting – recalled his mother's warnings about the buckling summer heat, how people just dropped dead like flies – Kaspar's dislike for Peabody compelled him to contradict the man.

'You know, Greece is actually a full member of Europe and is not considered a Mid-East country. In fact, many people see this city is the cradle of Western civilisation.' He was aware of his slow Bernese accent becoming rougher with every word, like he was scraping his defence of Europe manfully over the vicious little blades of a cheese grater.

'Well, it sure as hell feels like a Mid-East city to me. I guess that's why your people don't want to be a part of it all.'

Kaspar was used to defending what others saw as his country's aloofness on the world's political stage. But still he felt the prickles rise.

'If you mean our position on Europe, this is not the irrational isolationist mentality you suggest, but simply a sense of caution. A healthy regard for risk.'

'That's what I mean. You did the right thing.' He paused for reflection. 'But you gotta face it, Kaspar – whichever way you go, you can't avoid some kinda risk. Can't cover every twist and turn.' He brought his fat hand down on Kaspar's knee with a smug conviviality that made him wince. The man of caution regretted his brief excursion into discourse. And he let the one-sided conversation flatten out to a sporadic hesitant silence.

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His clothes were still sticking to him as he climbed down from the bus into the evening air that clung to the concrete around the Peace and Friendship stadium on the outskirts of Piraeus. The huge edifice curled into the sky at both ends like a gigantic dust-covered frisbee buckled by the daytime sun. For Kaspar it had been the scene of prosaic scientific debate these last few days. But when he stepped off the bus that Friday evening, it had the feel of a temple opening its doors to him in sanctuary. He could not wait to be received into its arms.

‘See you in there, Kaspar.’ The announcement came with a slap on the shoulder, and Peabody disappeared into the crowd that gathered between the buses in the coach park. It was bad enough that this man should make so free with his first name, but to hold out the prospect of a reunion was almost too much for Kaspar to bear.

Kaspar’s coach had been one of the last to arrive. And the reception hall was already ringing with animated chatter as he entered. He savoured the anonymity of the crowd like a dog sniffing the air. They gave him just the cover he was looking for.

He positioned himself as far away from the entrance as possible, behind a group of excitable Japanese doctors, and let a babble of incomprehensible bonhomie wash over him. But through the teeming mass of talking heads, Kaspar caught a glimpse of Professor Moutsopoulos, the president of the congress. An unmistakable figure he cut, towering over the guests with his mop of thick white hair. Every inch a president.

Kaspar felt the least he could do was to pay this man the courtesy of a few words for the prize he had been awarded. And he gently eased his way through the chattering crowds towards his white-haired host.

By the time Kaspar had drawn close enough to him, Professor Moutsopoulos was already deep in conversation with members of the scientific committee. So he took a plate of feta cheese and olives with a glass of red wine while he waited for a chance to catch the professor’s attention.

It could have been an airport lounge for all the different tongues that crowded in on him from every side. He strained to catch the sound of his native Swiss German. Or at least a word of English. But he was drowned in an impossible torrent of Greek and Japanese, as everyone seemed to be gabbling at once. Everyone except for a solitary graceful figure.

She put him in mind of the kore statues he had seen in the Acropolis museum. Only the dark warmth of her hair made a mockery of this romantic notion – tresses of jet-black curly hair that framed her face and made such a captivating contrast with the delicate white marble of her skin. An ancient beauty brought to life. She looked as lost as Kaspar felt. Their eyes met. And almost involuntarily his lips began to quiver, as if rehearsing the lines they had not yet been given.

“Kaspar my old friend.”

It was a cruel force that brought the hand of Jerome Peabody down on Kaspar’s shoulder. Peabody was nothing if not a man of his word. Among the hundreds of guests it had taken him no time to find his prey. And as the hand came down on that unsuspecting shoulder, Kaspar lurched towards the woman who had so captured his imagination. He sensed a cold dampness spread from his crotch all the way down past his right knee. His new suit ran the same deep dark claret that had been in his glass just a second earlier. Kaspar ran mentally through the clauses of his elaborate travel insurance in the hope of coming across some special cover for such accidents. And as he did so, the young beauty reeled back from his assault on her, sent an arm flailing out in a desperate attempt to keep her balance, and in the process launched an open bottle of retsina from the table just beside her straight into the path of the oncoming Kaspar. A new dampness spread down his left leg.

“Gee that’s too bad,” Peabody muttered, pulling a large white handkerchief from his pocket.

Alarm and bemusement filled the eyes of Kaspar’s kore beauty. “Oh dear, I really am terribly sorry,” she muttered, with a blush in her marble-white cheeks. “It said in my stars that I would bring disaster on someone this weekend. I should have heeded the warning and stayed at home.”

“And deprive the menfolk of your charm?” Peabody’s mock horror carried with it a lascivious gleam that Kaspar found faintly distasteful.

“Do you know this man, Dr Künzli?”

For an instant Kaspar was stunned into silence. He was hugely gratified of course that her question implicitly dissociated him from Jerome Peabody. *But how does she know my name?* he wondered, taking the handkerchief without really knowing what he was doing. He had strayed briefly into a garden of intriguing thoughts.

But everywhere he went that evening, trouble was not far behind.

“Peabody’s the name,” came the wheezy overweight voice, as unwelcome as the clammy hand that followed it. “Jerome Peabody. Kaspar and I got to be buddies on the bus out here.”

Kaspar winced. But he was encouraged to note the reluctance in her “How do you do?”, then the disinterested “And where are you from, Mr Peabody?”

“I’m a New Jersey man born and bred, ma’am,” he announced proudly, still clasping her hand in his. “Product manager with Galenix.”

“Oh, I didn’t know Galenix had any products in our field.”

“Well now, it’s an extremely attractive market for any company,” Peabody wheezed. “And we have one or two things in the pipeline that might surprise you.”

“One thing I have a problem to understand,” Kaspar chipped in, still quietly seething and mopping his trousers with Peabody’s handkerchief, “is how you can look at suffering like epilepsy and Alzheimer’s disease as just another attractive market.”

“Now don’t get me wrong, Kaspar...”

“I saw your presentation yesterday, Dr Künzli,” she interrupted smartly, depriving Peabody of the platform he was looking for. “On the role of neuronal proteins in signal transduction. I found it very interesting. I have also been working on the cAMP-dependent phosphorylation system and got some quite similar results.”

So that’s how she knows my name, he thought. And played with the discovery like a little boy as Peabody looked on, struck dumb by science and acting lost. An expression of kind-hearted astonishment swept across Kaspar’s face.

“You surprise me. You’re a scientist, and yet you talk about stars and astrological signs.”

“Blame my father. He insisted I brought great fortune on the family from the day I was born. He even called me Delphine after the oracle at Delphi.” She smiled wistfully over her memories. “I’m happy to say he also gave me another name which I much prefer.”

“May I ask what it is?”

“Alexandra.” She looked into the warm shallows of his expression and saw at once that this was not enough. “Alexandra Moutsopoulos.”

“Any relation to Professor Moutsopoulos, the congress president?”

“He’s my father.”

"Gee, you don't say." A new gleam had returned to Peabody's eyes, and it lit his way back onto stage. "It sure would be a privilege to meet Professor Moutsopoulos, Alexandra. Could you introduce me to him?"

"He's just over there. I'm sure he will be very glad to meet you," she said, pointing to the tall white-haired figure that Kaspar had been seeking out. And then she turned back to Kaspar.

"I was especially interested by your slides on the photoaffinity labelling, Dr Künzli. They confirm my own results to a very large degree."

"What I still don't quite understand, Miss Moutsopoulos, is how you can reconcile astrological superstition with science."

"Perhaps I just like to be prepared for the unexpected. And I find astrology helps." Her eyes sparkled with a faintly mysterious smile. "But you know, there's more to it than superstition."

Kaspar ignored this afterthought.

"It would interest me to read the work of Professor Moutsopoulos's daughter." He didn't mean to sound unkind. On the contrary, as a woman she excited him, he would have made an appointment with every fortune teller in Athens if he could be certain of winning her friendship. But she was still a woman – her penchant for the zodiac confirmed this – and so she was suspect as a scientist. The very fact that she excited him weakened her credentials. "Have you published your results yet?"

"I would have presented them here, but I missed the deadline for submissions." Her voice trailed off into a search through the leather bag that hung over her shoulder. And her words were submerged forever in the hubbub of gossip around them. Peabody by now had melted away into the crowd, and neither of them had noticed.

"The professor's daughter missed the deadline?" Kaspar said, raising his amused expression slightly as if afraid she might become submerged along with her words, and then "What's this?" a little perplexed as she handed him a folded document of some twenty or so pages.

"A copy of the final draft. Maybe as the winner of the Pharmacology Prize you'd like to give me your opinion?"

Sheepishly he took the papers. He was intrigued to know the value of her science, but was uncertain whether her gesture was sincere or driven by sarcasm. And the unpredictable path she was on left him no space to gather his thoughts. "Have you seen Delphi?"

Kaspar shook his head.

"If you have time, we could drive out there tomorrow. It's the least I can do after showering you with retsina. I'm sure you'll like it. It's one of the most magical places on earth – even more fascinating than neurotransmitters." She smiled. It was not so much the warmth of her eyes that captivated Kaspar as their clean emphatic ebony. He needed no further persuasion.

As he returned to his hotel later that evening, with the suspect manuscript tucked into his pocket, a quiet impatience for the next day burned inside him. He took the document into bed and let this impatience be soothed and cradled by the handwritten comments that filled the margins of every page. Many of them were in Greek and incomprehensible to him. But assuming them to have been written by Alexandra's hand he followed every curvature with a devotional appetite that might normally be reserved for the landscape of a woman's body. And he fell to sleep satisfied.

“This is really very good.” There was a freshness in the air next morning on Syntagma Square. For once it even beat the exhaust fumes into the gutter. Kaspar was brimming with life.

“I especially like the way you bring out the clinical relevance,” he added. He was thinking of the shortcomings of his own paper as he climbed into the front passenger seat of Alexandra Moutsopoulos’s convertible Golf and handed back her manuscript.

It was easy for her to ignore his mildly patronising tone as they drove into the hills over the Gulf of Corinth. The sunlight bathed her with confidence. And as they motored out of the city, Kaspar began to feel drunk on all the beauty that surrounded him. The pale metallic green of the olive trees. The occasional oleander. The blue sky. He found the journey was in such delightful contrast to the short bus ride with Jerome Peabody – the easy exchange of first names, the cooling breeze over the cabriolet, the sense of air – he could sense all caution being thrown to the wind. And this tugged at his conscience.

But Alexandra was right – as they walked together up the Parnassian slopes through the ruins of this ancient city, he had to confess that the setting was breathtakingly powerful. It held a rather special kind of magic. From the road below, the passing drone of a heavy vehicle wafted up the hillside, before it gave way to the bleating of a goat somewhere in the rocks behind him. Then silence. Not even the soft metallic rustle of the olive trees.

An impression of such mystic force caught his imagination he could quite appreciate why Delphi had become a centre of devotion and worship.

A warmth coursed through his veins. Not from the heat of the Attic sun. But from within. Like a vapour that perfused every cell of his body.

Alexandra stood a few paces above him overlooking the Temple of Apollo. The dark tresses of her hair washed by a deep blue sky that hung low over them like a cloud about to burst. Kaspar watched. Captured every inch of the scene. Absorbed every detail. And he caught in those ebony eyes a look he hadn’t seen before. Something between dismay and a smile as her lips parted. So invitingly full. So emphatic. So bewitching.

In the boundless thrill of that moment, Kaspar had failed to notice the coachload of tourists advancing up the path behind him. He only had eyes for Alexandra. So much greater was the shock when he felt the fat hand on his shoulder.

“Kaspar my old friend.”

It was a shock that instantly quenched the thrill in his heart, and was just enough to topple him over the edge.

He did not utter a sound as his head struck the vestigial stylobate of a temple, causing a thin stream of blood to trickle and promptly coagulate in the heat of the dust. Kaspar Künzli did not move, lay like an Attic shield buckled by the noonday sun.