

Macropolis

"You do understand?" the agent asked. "The procedures?"

"Yes, yes. Of course." Alex replied. "Quite understandable, in the circumstances."

"We have to be quite clear. You won't be able to take anything with you at all. On to the plane. Not even your own clothes."

"Yes, I get it" he wanted to snap, but remained silent. The agent thrilled to her subject and seemed set on going through it all one more time.

"We have had complaints of course. Quite frankly these measures were rushed into place. Not that they weren't necessary after everything that happened, but a little more consideration! I mean, the word *bizarre* keeps cropping up! Well it's none of our doing, we just sell the tickets!"

"So I'm all set to go?" asked Alex.

"Yes, yes. Your biometrics are all done. You wouldn't even get in the airport without those these days. Which of course is how it should be. So that's that. Right, well, you have a good trip Mr Kolovos. And thank you for doing business with us. We do appreciate that you have other choices."

The journey had been a gradual return to a life he'd almost forgotten. It had started with the sunrise as he drank his usual Greek breakfast of a cigarette and a tiny cup of strong coffee, as he watched the placid sheep grazing outside his croft.

Many hours later after a long journey by ferry and train, he was in the Gown Shop at Heathrow airport, buying a travelling gown and slippers. Available in a range of colours and sizes in one hundred per cent cotton. This, he had been reliably informed by the sales assistant, because cotton would not melt against the skin in the event of fire, and would

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considerably reduce the severity of any burns sustained during a crash. He chose a gown and slip-ons in Forest Green, paid rather a large sum for them and made his way to the security zone. Here, in the presence of a guard, he removed all of his clothing and stepped naked through a series of scanners.

Later, waiting in the almost deserted passenger lounge, he stared at himself in the glass window opposite. With his shadowed eyes and loose shapeless gown, he thought he resembled nothing so much as a crazed surgeon after a particularly difficult night shift.

The view from here was over one of the disused runways. Decaying hulks of aircraft, seemingly just abandoned. The airlines out of business, no solution had yet been found for these giant pieces of trash that lurked in the twilight like resting monsters.

At last, he was called along with several other passengers, and was accompanied on board by a guard. Once Alex was in his window seat, the guard locked his left wrist into the restraint. He knew that the restraints would only be released in the event of an emergency. It was recommended that intake of liquids be avoided. That is to say, no refreshments would be offered.

So far the practicalities of the journey had occupied his mind. Now sitting on the plane as other passengers were slowly brought in, the apprehension returned. Was it the right thing to go back? To return to the country, knowing it was changed beyond recognition. Knowing that he had left instead of staying to fight. His mind went back to his summer at the University of Athens. His early morning walks around the Acropolis. The day the employees of the Ministry of Culture were on strike, protesting at the working conditions and lack of funding to complete the restoration projects on the Parthenon and other ancient sites of the country. There were several thousand unfilled job vacancies at the Ministry and short-term contracts of experienced staff were not being renewed. Some of the workers had not been

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paid for more than eighteen months. The protest on top of the Acropolis by workers styling themselves the guardians of Greek culture was peaceful.

He remembered the news, almost word for word. "We are not going to go through a fire sale, let's be clear about that, but the Greek state has an enormous number of real estate assets totalling over hundreds of billions, and the proper exploitation, in the good sense of the word, of this, will allow us to be able to raise funds."

Alex awoke as the plane came in smoothly to land at Athens. Like Heathrow, Eleftherios Venizelos airport was now much less used than in the heyday of air travel. Rubbing his wrist, a little stiff from the restraint, Alex shuffled along through the echoing halls in the wake of his fellow passengers, who were a colourful sight in their vibrant gowns. When it came to his turn, he placed his index fingers on the plate and his left eye up to the iris scanner. Luggage collected, he found his way to a changing booth, dressed again in his own clothes and shoes and disposed of the green gown and slip-ons. They could not be re-used. He felt like smoking, but it wasn't allowed here, not in the airport or in any public place. A nation vastly changed indeed, he thought, picturing his early days in the country, when smoking was the national pastime.

Once outside the airport, there were a few taxis in an orderly line, waiting for fares. Alex decided to take the train into the city. In the station, he looked at a map of a vastly expanded metro network. Not like the old days, when it would take years to build the smallest piece of line and work would be halted instantly on the discovery of even the smallest artefact.

The trains were running on time. The journey from the airport to his destination was smooth, efficient and smoke-free. He emerged from the train, noting with a grimace the name change of the station. In a few minutes he would emerge into his old neighbourhood. He felt a strange reluctance to proceed.

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The Acropolis was more or less as he remembered it. A little tidier, the trees and plants more cultivated. The skyline however had changed. The Parthenon was not the same. And there it was - the sign at the entrance - "Macropolis". Entrance was free. He followed the well known path to the top, past the theatre of Herod Atticus, where a children's party was in full swing. Arriving at the top, he contemplated the Parthenon. It had been restored to something resembling its original condition. Missing blocks had been filled in with replica pieces, and the building had been painted in vivid colours, as indeed it would have been originally, although not necessarily with so much red and yellow. Alex remembered from his studies that traces had been found on some of the friezes of three colours: red from hematite, Egyptian blue and the green/blue of malachite-azurite. It was also known that gold was used in the painting of statues. Ancient writings indicated that the columns themselves were highly coloured. Certainly the Parthenon was not originally the idealised, pristine white temple of our 21st century imagination. After all, when it was new, it was no museum piece, but a building in daily use. As it was again now.

Alex walked once around the outside of the temple, noticing as he did so the queue at what was once the museum, and the people streaming out, hands thrust into red paper bags. For the first time in his many visits here, he was able to enter the Parthenon building. The interior had also been restored to a semblance of the original condition. He had to admit, the reconstruction was fairly accurate and obviously carried out with the knowledge of experts, except for one extraordinary difference. Where in ancient times would have stood the colossal ivory and gold statue of the goddess Athena Parthenos, to whom the temple was then dedicated, now stood the new God - a huge statue of a clown with a white face, red and yellow striped arms and legs, wearing a fuzzy red wig and a yellow tunic.