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# Aphrodite's War

Andrea Busfield

## About the Book

THE ISLAND IS DIVIDED, BUT ONE MAN'S LOVE WILL NEVER BE COMPROMISED...

Cyprus, 1955 - a guerilla war is raging and four Greek brothers are growing up to the familiar sounds of exploding bombs and sniper fire.

Determined to avenge the death of his elder brother and to win the heart of his beloved Praxi, young Loukis joins a cell of schoolboy terrorists operating in the mountains. But when his cohorts blow themselves up in a freak accident, he returns home in shock, yearning for the warm embrace of his family - and of his sweetheart.

But his adored Praxi is now married to someone else, and playing at her feet is a young toddler...

**Utterly compelling, infinitely absorbing, *Aphrodite's War* is an epic tale of an island at war with itself. Its warm-hearted, compassionate picture of the Economidou family shows how, even with your people's future at stake, there is nothing so indomitable as the human heart.**

# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Map

Cyprus 1955

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10

Part Two

Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Part Three

Pissouri, 2007

Acknowledgements

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Also by Andrea Busfield

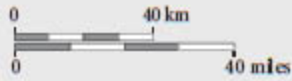
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# Aphrodite's War

Andrea Busfield

*Dedicated to 'Mamma' Erato Hajisavva  
and the loving memory of 'Papa'  
Varnavas Hajisavva*

# Aphrodite's War



CYPRUS  
1955



*The General Assembly,*

*Considering that, for the time being, it does not seem appropriate to adopt a resolution on the question of Cyprus, decides not to consider further the item entitled 'Application, under the auspices of the United Nations, of the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples in the case of the population of the Island of Cyprus'.*

United Nations Assembly Resolution 814 (IX),  
17 December 1954

# 1

DHESPINA WAS PREPARING the ointment for Mr Televantos's piles when the old man came running, holding his stick in one hand and the seat of his pants with the other.

'It's Loukis!' he wheezed, coming to an uneasy halt in the garden room, his face flushed with discomfort.

'What about him?'

'He came bursting through the door with a mad crazy look in his eyes and he collapsed right in front of me. Like a rock. Bang! Fell to the floor harder than a dead man!'

Dhespina dropped the jar she was holding, grabbed two metal buckets from under the table and ran to the house. She found the wooden door open and her son sprawled on the floor, whimpering. His face burned red and his black hair was curled wet with perspiration.

'Mamma ...'

'Don't worry, Loukis. Mamma's here. Mamma's here, son.'

Gently, Dhespina picked up her youngest child and carried him to his bedroom, where she closed the shutters to protect his frightened eyes from the light.

It had been a long time since Loukis had suffered an attack of the terrors, the first coming eight years earlier after their dog Apollo died. Dhespina's father had been the same way, plagued throughout his life by something stronger than his mind could cope with, and she now used the same tricks her mother once taught her to soothe Loukis's pain: a cloth, cold as ice, another warm as

summer. The cold calmed the child's fever and the warmth eased the pressure building inside his head.

Despite everything her own mamma and the island's plants had taught her, Dhespina knew there was no cure for the terror; it was an illness that came from the soul, not from the body. From past experience she also knew that once the cloths had weaved their spell her son would drift into sleep and dreams would take up his care, leading him away from the darkness that had rendered him half-conscious.

Carefully, so as not to disturb him, Dhespina moved from the bed to return the warm cloth to the bucket wafting rosemary. Thankful for the plant's narrow leaves and pale-blue flowers that were available all year round, she kissed the cloth before dropping it back into the water. She then reached for the fabric soaking in the cold bucket and placed it upon her son's forehead. At the sudden change of temperature, Loukis's lashes flickered. He was as pale as a ghost and shadows danced upon his slim, shirtless body from the light of the candle sitting next to the statue of Apollo which his brother had carved so many years ago.

With a mother's love, Dhespina worked into the evening wiping the red from her youngest son's cheeks. Soon the terror would loosen its hold completely and by morning his creamy brown complexion would return.

*Mikros Lykos*. Little Wolf. That's what Georgios had called him when he first set eyes on their fifth and final child. For Loukis had come into the world with dark down covering his back, and four tiny teeth stabbed through his gums. He also arrived with a head of the fiercest black hair, and eyes glinting like coal. '*Mikros Lykos*,' Georgios had whispered, and Loukis had cocked his head. He seemed to take hold of his father's words and decide to keep them.

In that moment, with the blood of birth still shrouding their son, Georgios and Dhespina recognized there was something not only hairy about their fifth child, but also

peculiar. Not in the same way as Nicos's twin Marios, whose gentle nature made up for his slow learning, but rather an extraordinariness they would later struggle to cope with.

'Artemis must have been passing on her way to the hunt when he was conceived,' Georgios joked as he stroked Loukis's soft little cheeks. 'The breath of her wolves lives on in our son.'

At the time, Dhespina smiled at the image of the wild goddess having blessed their child, but the fun of her husband's words gradually lost their magic as the years drifted by and Loukis moved from baby to toddler and from cot to floor without showing the faintest inclination to stand on his feet. Until the age of three, their youngest son refused to do anything but crawl, and Dhespina found it alarming. Inevitably, her older boys thought it hilarious, and they noisily encouraged their brother to nip at their ankles. But outside their home, the child's oddness brought pitying looks from their neighbours, who assumed, not without some justification, that Dhespina had given birth to another idiot. However, Marios - afflicted as he was - had been upright by fourteen months, and Dhespina sensed that it wasn't that her new son was unable to do the same; it was simply that he was unwilling. From the moment his black eyes stopped rolling in his head, Loukis showed scant interest in anything his family urged him to do, preferring instead to ignore them completely and chase after the dog, Apollo, on his hands and knees.

'He'll stand when he's ready,' Georgios assured his wife when she brought up the subject once again during dinner.

'It's not just the standing, Georgios. Loukis doesn't try to speak much either. It's not normal at his age. Really, it isn't.'

'You worry too much, Dhespo. All our sons are healthy and strong and *Mikros Lykos* is of the same blood. One day he will stand up, just like the rest of them did, and he will

race around the house, get into your precious pots and pans, break your crockery and ruin the clothes you sew for him, and you'll be wishing he was back on the floor messing with the dog again!'

'His name is Loukis, Georgios! He is not a little wolf, he is a little boy, and the more you call him Little Wolf the more chance there is that he'll grow into a big one. Now stop it. I beg you.'

Georgios sighed in husbandly defeat. His wife was a creature of chaos; a conflation of inner strength and emotional imbalance, and right now she was teetering on the edge of an episode. He rose from the table to return to the workshop he'd built, next to the oleander-covered den where his wife made her mixtures. He knew he shouldn't, given Dhespina's current vulnerability, but he couldn't help himself, so before he reached the door he bent down to Loukis, who was resting on the warm belly of Apollo, and he growled. The toddler looked up and smiled at his father. To Dhespina's mind, it looked nothing short of conspiratorial. She shook her head and offered a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

As Georgios headed out of the house, Apollo got up, arched his back in a stretch, and followed his master. With his pillow taken away, Loukis lazily roused himself and padded after them both.

'Oh, Mother Mary,' Dhespina moaned. Her son hadn't just crawled out of the house; he had swung his little hands out before him in a definite padding motion. Her flesh and blood was imitating the family dog.

'He'll be peeing up a tree next,' she muttered.

Although she tried to deny it, Dhespina realized she only had herself to blame. After all, she had been the one to insist that Apollo be brought into the house rather than kept chained to the tree like every other hunting dog in Cyprus. She had been the one to override the protests of her husband in order to indulge the peculiar whims of her

son, the one to permit the softness of her heart to dismiss the reason in her head. But when she woke every morning to find her boy already up and waiting by the door, what else could she do? Yes, she had picked him up, kissed him on both cheeks and tried to distract him with breakfast, but the attentions he returned were tolerant rather than affectionate, and as soon as she turned the door handle to allow the sun into their home, he struggled to be released from her arms. Back on the floor, he was off; crawling down the pathway to sit with Apollo. Even when it rained, and the wind and the wet demanded the door be locked shut, Loukis would sit before it, willing its hinges to snap open. He never once complained; it wasn't in his nature. He just sat there; saying nothing. In the end, Dhespina lost patience and convinced herself that she had no option but to bring the dog into the house. Naturally, the twins, Nicos and Marios, then demanded their goat be given the same privileges.

'As soon as Athena allows you to sleep on her stomach and pull on her tail, as soon as she chases the flies from your face with her tongue, then you can bring her in - and not before,' replied Dhespina, who was subsequently forced to watch her boys wrestle the poor animal to the ground until Athena, who was never the easiest of goats, kicked one of them in the head. She forgot which one now.

'That goat's as dumb as a Turk!' Nicos had shouted in fury, and his father flew at him.

'Leave that talk for the schoolyard!' he ordered, before grumbling about the 'damn Church' and walking back to his workroom to mould leather into shoes.

As the months dragged by and Loukis continued to deny his species, it was, finally, her friend Elena's child Praxi who took control of the situation, in a way none of the adults had so far managed to do. Born fourteen months before Loukis, she had always found the boy intriguing, and one day, after watching him slide along the floor, going

nowhere in particular, she eased herself from her mother's lap and walked over. Crouching in front of him, she wiped the long fringe from her eyes before taking his cheeks in her tiny hands and looking at him sternly.

'Walk now, Loukis,' she ordered. 'Walk!'

Loukis looked to Apollo for guidance, but the dog was preoccupied with an ant running through the hairs circling his anus.

'OK,' he sighed, in a very definite, very breathy groan, like a stubborn old man bowing to the inevitable.

As the adults looked on with amusement, followed by gasps of astonishment, Loukis grabbed hold of a table leg and pulled himself to his feet. He wobbled a little before finding his balance, but his legs proved surprisingly strong and ready for the challenge. Praxi then took him by the hand, and together they went to play in the garden, closely followed by Apollo.

For the next two years, boy, girl and dog were inseparable, and it was only when a snake bite took Apollo away that the three of them became two.

As they buried the dog, beneath the orange tree that cried blossom upon his tiny grave, Loukis didn't say a word. His four older brothers all shed a tear, and Praxi was inconsolable. In fact, so terrible was her grief that her mother had to take her home, where she spent the next two days in bed, refusing all food. But Loukis, he never wept. He simply stood by the grave and stayed there long after the rest of the family had returned to the house. Later that evening, when he was called for his supper of cheese and warm milk, he declined to come inside, and Dhespina left him to handle his grief in the way he found natural.

By the time the sun had set and the moon had taken command of the sky, the twins were finished with crying and were busy flicking marbles at each other. As Dhespina washed the evening's dishes, she watched her eldest son, Christakis, work on his tribute to Apollo. Her second boy,

Michalakis, was in his room studying, and her husband was snoring loudly in a chair by the stove. Suddenly, from outside, there came the most unholy noise, and Dhespina smashed a plate in alarm. Remembering her youngest remained outside, she ran into the garden. There, she found Loukis crouched on the dog's grave; his neck was stretched to the sky and he was howling to the moon above him. A terrible anguish contorted his beautiful face, and every pain in the world seemed to pour from his throat in a desperate, animal cry that all but broke his mother's heart. He howled like the wolf they had made of him - and his mother could do nothing but stand and watch as she waited for the moment to pass.

The next day, fearing more talk from their neighbours, who had already found Loukis a source of gossip due to his slow walking and sullen refusal to play with their sons, Dhespina told her child that, in Cyprus, it wasn't considered appropriate to howl at the moon, especially now he was five years old. He was a boy, after all, and not a wolf. She asked him to agree to her words, but though Loukis looked at her carefully, he said nothing. Two days later, he suffered his first attack of the terrors.

Watching him now, some eight years later and paralysed by a different pain, Dhespina felt ashamed of having been the one to turn him into a human being who locked in his tears until they built up and pounded at his skull to escape. And yet, her shame was placated by a certain pleasure; it was the satisfaction of knowing her son needed her. Although the demons that paled his sweet face and tortured his chest in great gasps of breath stabbed at the very core of her, she cherished the opportunity to reach out and be the one to save him. Loukis had been such a distant creature all his young life, and moments like these, when he physically searched for her touch, were as rare and as beautiful as a rose in winter. And may God strike her down for saying it, but she loved the boy's helplessness and the



feeling that, if only for the shortest time, she was his world. Loukis was her son and she loved him – God knows how she loved him – but she had never owned him. It was a truth she had recognized almost from the beginning, when her belly stood huge and hard, and Praxi reached out with her baby arms and laid claim to her son. Demanding to be pulled on to Dhespina's lap, the child wrapped herself around the bump hiding Loukis and she couldn't be moved until sleep came to take her. While Praxi was near him, her baby lay still, and Dhespina sensed his happiness.

All the women taking coffee – Dhespina's sister, Lenya; Praxi's mother, Elena; and their neighbour Mrs Germanos – had giggled at the time, and Elena had joked that, if Dhespina's child turned out to be another boy, his marriage was all but arranged.

'If it's not painted in our coffee cups, it's written in the stars,' she predicted, and the rest of them agreed she was most probably right.

Of course, in Cyprus, even the brightest star can lose its way in the dark.

As Loukis fell into sleep, Dhespina took hold of the buckets and quietly closed the door behind her, leaving the boy's dreams to continue her work.

Now that her first son, Christakis, was living with his wife, and Michalakis was in the capital, Lefkosia, working for the newspaper, the twins had moved into their own room, and for the first time Dhespina was grateful for the space her older sons had left behind them. Boys were territorial and became increasingly irrational the taller they grew. There would have been hell to pay if the twins had been forced from their beds to make way for 'Mamma's favourite' and, right now, Dhespina's bones felt old and her head was sore from thinking. A fight with petulant teenagers was the last thing she needed.

'Don't worry, Mamma, Loukis will be fine,' Marios assured her when she finally joined the rest of her family in

the front room. He reached out his hand, and she took it with a smile before placing a kiss on his forehead.

'You should have let him howl when he wanted to,' accused Nicos, but he was joking and his brilliant smile took the sting from his words.

'Yes, and maybe I should have let him grow into a real wolf and eat you!' Dhespina retorted. Her twins, identical to look at in every way, were worlds apart in their manners: one soft and considerate; the other harder and mischievous.

'By the way,' Georgios interrupted, 'old Televantos is still in the garden room cushioning his arse on our pillows.'

Dhespina threw her hands to her hair. 'Mr Televantos! Why didn't you tell him to go home?'

'He wouldn't budge. He insisted he had to wait for his cream.'

'Mother of Mary,' Dhespina laughed, and disappeared out of the door.

Coming to the den, with its shelves burdened by jars of dried herbs, bottles of vinegar, pickled pig's ears, plant roots and pans, she found Mr Televantos snoring loudly, his back resting against the wall and his bottom relieved by two large pillows Georgios had obviously taken from their bed. Dhespina took the jar she had hurriedly left on the counter and finished filling it with the ointment of marigolds and butcher's broom she had prepared.

Gently, she shook the old man awake.

'Mr Televantos. Your medicine.'

Startled, her neighbour looked around, bewildered and blinking, until he remembered where he was and his reason for being there.

'Really, you should tell Mrs Televantos to cook you more vegetables.' Dhespina smiled at him.

'It doesn't matter what she cooks. It always tastes like hell,' he grumbled, wincing with pain as he manoeuvred himself from the floor.

‘That may be so, but it might ease your condition.’

‘Little Dhespo, my condition, as you put it, is both a curse and a blessing. If it wasn’t for these troublesome veins, my wife would have me dead in a week. The woman is insatiable.’

Dhospina raised her eyebrows. Mr Televantos was quickly sailing through his seventies; it was hard to believe his wife of the same age possessed the stamina – let alone the inclination – to pursue her age-mottled husband in such a way.

‘Here, let me help you.’ Dhospina took the old man by the arm as he struggled to regain his feet. She passed him his stick and the jar of ointment, which he put in his pocket.

‘Let’s hope the British don’t arrest me on the way home.’ He laughed. ‘They probably think haemorrhoids are the latest explosives brought in from the motherland.’

‘I think you’ll be safe enough, Mr Televantos. The troops will be drunk in their barracks by now.’

‘Yes, of course, you are right.’ The old man chuckled. ‘When they’re not stealing other people’s countries, they’re usually pickling their *poulloues* with warm beer.’

With that, the old man tapped his stick to the front of his head in farewell and hobbled awkwardly down the path he had run up some five hours earlier.

After watching him go, Dhospina put away her pots and utensils then lightly kissed the photo of her mother that hung on the back of the door before returning to the house. As she neared, she noticed the shadow of a girl crouched at the front gate.

‘Praxi?’

The shadow got to its feet and moved into the moonlight. With her large eyes and fragile legs, the girl looked pretty as a fawn.

‘Mrs Economidou. Is Loukis all right?’

‘Yes, child, he’s asleep. Have you been here all this time? Why didn’t you come into the house?’

Praxi’s lips quivered, and huge tears welled in her eyes, quickly rolling down her cheeks. ‘I couldn’t come in. I feel so guilty,’ she cried. ‘It’s all my fault, you see. My death is killing us both.’

Dhospina instinctively moved forward to take the girl’s hands. ‘What on earth are you saying, Praxi? Your death is killing you both?’

‘Oh, Mrs Economidou, it’s too sad, both of us so young. We could hardly believe it either, but it’s true. I’m dying, Mrs Economidou, there’s no use in denying it. That’s why, for the past two days, me and Loukis have been hunting for the perfect place where I can be buried and rest in eternal peace. Today, we decided on a patch of ground under St Hilarion’s Castle that’s sheltered by a pistachio tree. We both love the place so much, and the spirit of the mad monk will always protect it, and Loukis agreed it would be the perfect spot for my grave. And though I knew he was sad, he didn’t say anything, and so I guessed he had come to terms with my passing. But I must have been wrong, Mrs Economidou, because now it seems my illness is going to claim your son too, and I can’t bear it. I’m so sorry ... really I am ... I never meant to take away your Loukis. Not yet, anyway. It’s all too terrible, really it is. And I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to take my life now, while you still can.’

The girl collapsed in Dhospina’s arms, her strength broken by great, heaving sobs.

‘Praxi, stop it! Come on, child, enough of this nonsense. Why in God’s name do you think you’re dying?’

Praxi gulped for air and tried to calm herself. It was difficult, but Mrs Economidou deserved an explanation.

‘It’s ... well ... it’s been two days ... and still the blood keeps on coming. It won’t stop and I’ve done everything I can think of; I’ve put cloths inside to heal the wound, and

Loukis brought me medicines from your workroom, but still it comes down and now I've also got the most terrible diarrhoea. It's quite clear, Mrs Economidou, that my insides are being eaten by cancer.'

Dhospina saw the terror in the girl's face and it killed the laughter rising inside her.

'*Mikri mou*, you're not dying! I promise you that. You're growing, that's all. You're becoming a woman, Praxi. And you've no doubt got diarrhoea from the medicines Loukis shouldn't have given you. Here, come with me. It's time you had a talk with your mother.'

Dhospina took the girl's hand and dragged her down the pathway to Elena's house, further inside the village.

Christakis was big and he was blond - both unusual traits for a Greek - and though his mother had continually shaved his head when he was a child, in order to banish the bad luck that superstition insisted would find him, his hair grew back no darker than before and he continued to be charmed. He had a beautiful wife, a lovely new son and he was happy. He didn't have an important job in the city, not like his brother Michalakis, but he was slowly making his name with a talent that had reached even the ears of the British commander-in-chief of Middle East Land Forces. Four months earlier and to his great surprise, an army Land Rover had pulled up outside his shop and a soldier dressed in khaki shorts revealed that his boss wanted a table and eight chairs.

'Make it as grand as you like,' the soldier beamed, and Christakis nodded. As he had never paid much attention to English lessons while at school, he had no idea what the freckle-faced private was saying, other than it involved tables and chairs. Still, he shook the soldier's hand and thanked him for the work. He figured a British commander in charge of so many troops would expect something sturdy and grand, and he wouldn't disappoint him.

As soon as the soldier drove away, Christakis took hold of his pencil to sketch designs of delicately carved aprons hanging above boldly proportioned legs fashioned from the finest walnut wood. He would provide the kind of craftsmanship a big military man and his wife could be proud of. And he would have done as well, if EOKA hadn't blown up the good commander's house the very next day. Hours later, the soldier returned to Christakis telling him to forget the furniture and knock up some door frames instead. Although it wasn't the most challenging of commissions, the carpenter agreed to take the job, even though he knew there would be mutters of collaboration. The truth was he needed the money - if only to pay the taxes the British had brought with them.

Christakis entered the coffee house and joined his father in the corner where he could be found most mornings before lunch, putting the world to rights with his friend Stavros.

'The paper, Papa.' Christakis slapped *The Voice* down in front of him. It had arrived in the morning post from Lefkosia and Michalakis had a small article on page six, something about pottery. As supportive as Christakis was of his younger brother's efforts, he didn't think it was destined to become the major topic of conversation among the men of the village. Since the British governor, in all his wisdom, had stamped his iron fist on the heads of the people, Lefkosia had erupted in fire and fury, and that's all anyone could find the energy to talk about these days.

Bar the clashes in 1931, when rioters set fire to Government House, the British had ruled the island in relative peace since 1878, but now church bells were rallying hundreds to the streets in protest against laws which brought detention without trial, stop-and-search insults and six months in jail for possession of firearms. When the new laws were passed, the capital raged at the news; buildings burned and British troops answered with

tear gas and bullets. Now, it seemed there was a riot taking place every other week; fifty-seven Greeks had been arrested so far. In a few short months, the governor had managed to transform Lefkosia into a war zone.

'The occupiers haven't a hope of quelling the uprising with these measures,' Georgios stated flatly as the hysterical commentary of Radio Athens echoed around the café, spitting furious indignation.

'What other option do they have?' Stavros asked, leaning forward in his chair, his large belly straining above the belt of his pants. 'You Greeks form a terrorist organization ...'

'It's not a terrorist organization,' corrected Christakis as he took his seat to join the two men. 'EOKA fights for our freedom; for the freedom of Cyprus and our union with Greece.'

'OK,' Stavros conceded. 'Your "freedom fighters" then, they say they will fight for the "liberation of Cyprus from the British yoke", they smuggle in dynamite from Greece, bomb government offices, police stations, power plants, hotels - and even attempt to kill the governor himself while he's watching a film at the cinema in Ammochostos - and you expect the British to capitulate and give everything up? Has history not shown you what they are capable of? You are but boys, and you are boys playing with fire.'

'No one's playing with anything, Stavros. This isn't a game, it's serious. This is about our rights as a nation.'

Christakis waved to the *kafetzi*. 'Coffee, medium,' he ordered, and continued. 'We are tired of the occupiers and, though I may not agree with all of their ways, EOKA fights for us. Cyprus rightfully belongs to Greece, everyone knows that, and our hearts beat to her rhythm.'

'And those of us who aren't Greek?' demanded Stavros. 'What about our hearts, that don't, won't and never will dance to the Greek drum? This EOKA leader of yours - Grivas - he said they would take Cyprus with blood if they have to. Well, the blood is pouring, Christakis, and I tell

you, it will keep pouring until this country of ours drowns in a red sea of her own making.'

'Hush now, old friend.' Georgios placed a soothing hand on Stavros's knee. 'It won't come to that. We won't let that happen. The world won't let that happen.'

'You say that, Georgios, and God knows I want to believe you, but I see disaster hurtling towards us with the speed of a bullet. The world has already washed its hands of this problem; the United Nations won't even discuss it. And I tell you, this war against the British will spread like a cancer through our island and it will eat away at our two communities. Look at us! Look at my people. See how the Greeks already think of us! In a matter of years we have gone from being Muslims to being Turks. This is just the start, you mark my words.'

Georgios looked at the old man, who had been as much a part of his life as his son sat next to him. He didn't want to give credence to his prophesy, but he was uneasy. Stavros had been his father's friend, and he was the only Turk Georgios had ever sat at a table and shared coffee with. The others - well, they kept to their own shops and their own side of the village. In fact, hadn't it been his own father who had originally given Stavros his Greek name, to fool the priest into allowing him to take his place as best man at his wedding? It was a name that had followed him through the last four decades of his life to where he was now: a Muslim Turk in all but name, drinking Greek coffee in a Greek coffee house. If he looked around him, Georgios could count on two fingers those who would remember Stavros's birth name - and that would be Stavros and himself. This friendship they shared was one born of coincidence, and it was an anomaly. The island, whether they chose to accept it or not, *was* divided. It had always been divided: by history, by religion and, ultimately, by differing dreams. Even the towns had multiple personalities: Greek, Turkish and now British. Where else



in the world could you find three names for one place? Lefkosia or Lefkoşa or Nicosia; Lemesos, Leymosun or Limassol; Ammochostos, Gazimağusa or Famagusta. The list went on and on.

‘You know, Georgios,’ the old man continued, as if reading his thoughts. ‘We have a crisis of identity on this island. We, the Muslims, think of ourselves as Cypriots and *then* Turks. But your people, they will always be Greek first and Cypriot second, and that is why Cyprus will suffer in the end: because your eyes are locked on the past while the rest of us are looking to the future.’

Loukis sat on the ground and waited. It didn’t take long for the window to open.

‘Mamma says you’re not dying after all and that you’re actually having something called a period.’

‘Apparently so,’ confirmed Praxi, leaning over the sill to get a better look at her friend. He was sat with his back to the wall, and his hands picked at small blades of green pushing through the gravel. ‘The bleeding’s supposed to stop tomorrow, but it might be the day after, and you know what?’

‘What?’

‘It will come back next month and the one after that and the one after that for the rest of my damned life – well, until my teeth fall out and I grow hair on my chin. That’s what Mamma tells me. Really, it’s pretty disgusting, if you ask me. I’m going to hate being a woman.’

Praxi sighed and rested her head on the window frame. The summer sun had turned the wood warm and it felt good on her skin.

‘Will your mamma let you out again when this period finishes, or are you a prisoner now as well as a woman?’ asked Loukis. He was feeling restless and uncomfortable for reasons he couldn’t understand.

'Who knows? But she says that from now on I have to start playing with girls my own age because of the danger I'm in. She's even invited Maria Germanos for lunch, which will be scintillating ...'

'What danger are you supposed to be in?' Loukis looked up, but Praxi's face was hidden from him and he could only see her long hair hanging from the window.

'From men,' she replied. 'Now I'm a woman I'm in constant danger of being attacked. Men are like animals, Mamma says. They sniff you and pull you, and given half the chance they will throw you to the ground and stick their tongues in your mouth as well as their *poullou* in your *poulli*. If that happens I'll have a baby and I'll be shamed for ever and I'll never find a husband.'

'That's bullshit. And, anyway, what husband are you hoping to find?'

'I don't know.' Praxi laughed. 'Whatever husband Saint Anthony has planned for me!'

Loukis got to his feet.

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know - maybe to find myself a wife. It's boring here. And you're boring me.'

'Hey! That's not nice, Loukis! I can't help being a woman. It's not that I want to be one. Take that back!'

Loukis looked up and straight into Praxi's chocolate-brown eyes.

'No,' he said finally and turned away.

'Take it back, Loukis, you pig!' But Loukis was already at the garden gate, and he had no intention of taking anything back. If she was a woman she could learn to handle him the way his mother did.

As Loukis turned the corner, Maria passed him, obviously on her way to Praxi's for lunch. She was considered to be the prettiest girl in the village and, though Loukis saw the truth of it in her face, he found her spoilt and difficult, like a child with too many toys.

'*Yassou*, Loukis,' she greeted, holding her hair in her hands to stop the wind from tugging it.

'*Yassou*,' he returned.

'Where are you going?' she asked, forcing him to a halt.

'As far away from women as I can possibly get,' he told her, and carried on his way. If he'd bothered to look back, he would have seen Maria watching him all the way to the junction until he turned right, and out of her sight.

With no particular place to go, nothing to do and no one to do it with now that Praxi's virginity was in mortal danger, Loukis wandered towards the Turks' side of the village. He found it much like the Greek side but with more Turks in it. Unnoticed, he slipped into the fields belonging to his father's friend Stavros. It was said they had shrunk in size over the years since the Greeks clawed back the gifts of the Ottomans, but they were impressive nonetheless and the old man was generous with the wealth he had left, allowing Loukis to hunt snakes on his land - an act of vengeance he had taken up in memory of Apollo as soon as his father had permitted him to pick up a gun.

Slowly, because it was hot and he was bothered by change, Loukis wandered through the orange trees, which were starting to show the fruit his mamma said the ancients called 'golden apples'. He moved onwards, deeper into the farmer's property, stooping under carob branches that dripped flat pods filled with the shining brown seeds that Stavros fed to his animals and his wife made into *pekmez* syrup. Then further ahead, beyond the huge olive grove, its fruit about to change from green to black, he noticed a large truck dropping off four British soldiers. They were setting up a checkpoint, and Loukis walked in their direction, curious and in need of distraction.

'*Yassou*,' greeted one of the soldiers as he came near.

'*Yassou*,' replied Loukis. 'What are you doing?'

'Looking for Black Mak's bad guys,' another soldier informed him. 'You're not one of them, are you?' The others

started chuckling.

Loukis shrugged and walked off.

Half an hour later, though he hadn't been intending to go there, he wound up at Keryneia harbour. For some reason, the place was crawling with British soldiers, marching in and out of carob warehouses, turning over crates and kicking at boxes. Loukis saw Yiannis Christofi leaning against a wall, drinking cola and smoking a cigarette. Though Yiannis was five years older than him, Loukis went over, because there was no one else around and he had gone to school with his brother Michalakis.

'What's going on?'

Yiannis started laughing. 'You haven't heard yet?'

Loukis shook his head.

'Last night, sixteen EOKA escaped from the prison.' Yiannis nodded his head towards the castle dominating the far corner of the harbour. Hundreds of years ago, it had defended the island from Arabs. Now the British used it to defend themselves from Cypriots. 'The boys jumped from the wall using knotted bed sheets. The British are furious, useless buggers.'

Yiannis offered him a cigarette. Loukis had never smoked before and he didn't even like the man, but he took it anyway.

'Where's your girlfriend today?' asked Yiannis. 'You two are usually joined at the hip, aren't you?'

'She's ill,' replied Loukis, refusing to rise to the bait.

'Too bad. She's a nice-looking girl. How old is she now? Fifteen?'

'Fourteen.'

'But coming on fifteen, eh?'

'That tends to be the natural order of things.' Loukis stubbed the cigarette out under the heel of his shoe and moved away. His brother Michalakis had once thumped Yiannis. He couldn't remember why, but he guessed he had probably deserved it.

THERE WERE FEW things in life that made Loukis genuinely laugh, but Aphrodite was one of them. Unlike the rest of the island's donkeys, which clopped through rocky fields on four hooves, this one picked her way along the landscape in leather shoes - fashioned and fitted by his own father. When Aphrodite was much younger, Stavros called on Papa's skills when he realized his donkey's refusal to come out of the barn had less to do with obstinacy and more to do with weather. Despite his initial amusement, Georgios took the request seriously and took out his tape to measure the animal. In his workshop, amidst the teasing of his sons, who placed orders for goat saddles, dog sandals, cat gloves and fish jerkins, he created two pairs of bowl-like boots, made from the strongest tanned leather, with a small buckle at the back to keep them in place. His work finished, he helped Stavros shoe his donkey, and after some reluctance she left the barn without being pulled, her grey head held high and her ears facing forwards.

'They call it mysophobia,' Stavros explained as he loaded Aphrodite's back with baskets of oranges. 'She has a fear of the dirt. It started in the autumn, when the rain turns the ground to mud, lasted through the winter, grew into spring and, eventually, into summer. She's a typical woman - she won't go anywhere if she's not properly dressed.'

Stavros patted the old girl's neck and reached for the melon juice his wife Pembe had brought him. Even though

she had tried to cajole Loukis into taking a glass, saying it was good for his kidneys, the boy insisted on Coca-Cola.

Loukis had been helping Stavros on his farm for the past three months, ever since his brothers accidentally closed down the school. In a moment of mischief, no doubt instigated by Nicos, the twins had daubed blue paint on a white wall. Their words read, 'We want to join with Greece even if we have to eat stones!' The British, who were already convinced that every Greek school was a breeding ground for terrorists, shut the place down the very next day, along with 418 others that had been rendered useless by demonstrating students and Greek flags that refused to be lowered.

Georgios, who valued education even above a skilled trade like his own, was furious. And his temper wasn't improved by the slaps of solidarity he received whenever he visited the coffee shop. To the men of the village, Nicos and Marios were nothing less than patriotic heroes. The priest even congratulated them in his Sunday sermon, saluting resistance against the oppressors by the 'glorious sons of Georgios, of Cyprus and of Greece'. Practically apoplectic with rage, Georgios had ordered the last of his school-age sons to learn the error of their ways through hard labour. Until the British relented and reopened their classroom, all three of them would have to find jobs. Loukis was livid, not only because it was grossly unfair that he should be punished for the sins of his brothers, but also because it was at school that he saw most of Praxi. Following the arrival of her period, she was forced to spend her evenings in womanly contemplations with Maria, or any other girl with budding breasts that her mother dragged back to the house. For this reason, and no other, Loukis looked to Stavros for work rather than following his brothers to Keryneia, where they found jobs in the warehouses hugging the harbour. At least in the village he would be closer to Praxi.