The Shores of Troy

Synopsis: Ancient History weaves together the fate of a Turkish foot surgeon and an American olympic fighter. Their meeting will affect the fate of their homelands and each other forever.

Dr. Cem Ski Erturk stepped out of the car that had brought him to Hisarlik, looked behind him at the coast of the Aegean Sea, and thought about Western Civilization. The Aegean was red and gold from a sun two hours away from setting in the west: Blood and Money; Time running out. He’d never imagined he would visit the ruins of Troy, though they were only four hours by car from his home in Bursa. Tourism was not what brought him now, but under the circumstances, he couldn’t help but look at the sun and think about that golden apple tossed by Eris.

Turning away from the sea, Cem took in the sand-colored bungalow before him. Two armed, brolic American men with bulletproof vests and earpieces were approaching him. Cem extended his hand to them, but it was ignored as they started searching him without asking. One of them barked, “Speak English?”

“Yes,” Cem responded tightly. They asked him to open his briefcase, which contained only standard paperwork, medical tools, and vials of anesthetics. The Americans nodded to each other and ushered Cem through the front door to meet the famous athlete whose career would be in his hands.

Konstantin Michalakis sat upright in a stretch lounge chair and faced War, as he had always done. At that moment, he faced it on two fronts: On the Inner Front, the Achilles Tendon in his right leg had curled into a ball halfway up his calf since it’d snapped just an hour ago during training; On the Outer Front, his trainer, Michael, and his manager, Joey, debated the fate of his athletic career for him:

“He only gets one chance to make history like this,” Joey muttered, pacing around the small and shadowy room, sucking on a juul. “I can’t believe the Feds are trusting a fucking Turk to fix him.”

“This guy’s got a global reputation,” Michael grunted, his large arms crossed. “If anything, we should consider ourselves lucky this happened in Turkey, ironic as it is.”

“Fucking unbelievable.”

“If he’s gonna have any chance of being healed in time to go up against Berk Catagay this summer, this guy is it.”

“We should be flying the fuck out of here, and fuck what America wants, they’ll get us all killed.”

“Careful. Truth is, I don’t actually think we have a choice in this. If this is what the Feds want, then that’s what’s going to happen.”

The debate came to an end when Michael and Joey noticed the most-respected podiatrist in Turkey walk into the room, flanked by the Feds.

Konstantin watched the slight, olive-skinned doctor with his long, silver pony-tail and neat beard come trembling into his presence. The doctor bowed for some reason.

“Mr. Michalakis, Dr. Cem Ski Erturk, pleased to meet you.” The man offered quick handshakes to the three Americans before him. “I was briefed by someone named Michael on the situation.”

“That was me,” Michael raised his hand before folding his arms again. “How soon before we get him into surgery?”

“I spoke to my staff just five minutes ago. They should be arriving within twenty minutes with all the equipment we need. Keep in mind, being asked to perform surgery under these unique circumstances will require us to take a little more time than normal.”

Konstantin spoke, and his words cut through the air like a spear.

“I want to speak to Dr. Erturk alone.” He looked over to the Feds. “That means you two as well.”

The four Americans looked to each other. It seemed to Cem they were all caught off guard by this, but none dared question or challenge it. They left the room and waited outside the bungalow. Konstantin looked at Cem. “Apologies for them. Many people depend on me, but ‘depend’ is a nicer way of putting it.”

Cem nodded, smiled. “Yes. Well, it seems you depend on *me* now.”

“Yes.” Konstantin smiled. It felt as if the room had been suddenly cleared of a swarm of flies, and in its place was a sense of stillness that emanated undeniably from the fighter. Konstantin looked to be hewn out of rock, rugged and defined, infinitely heavy, a center of gravity that everyone around him depended on for a sense of security.

Cem took a seat in a chair next to Konstantin and organized the tools, papers and vials in his briefcase. “Quite ominous to have such an injury in such a place.”

Konstantin nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

“What brought you here, so early before the games in Athens?”

“Vacation.” The men laughed together. “My parents are from Mykonos. With the games in Athens, it felt right to spend the year training around here. It feels like coming home.”

“Lovely.”

“Are your people from Turkey originally?”

Cem kept his eyes to the paperwork as he answered.

“My great grandparents were gypsies. From India, long ago. I’m no nationalist, if that’s what you mean. I studied in London. I like to think I belong to the world, it to me.”

“A nice thought. Me, I feel like this place is where I belong.”

“Among the ruins of Troy. Maybe you are Achilles reborn?” Cem met Konstantin’s eyes and saw that Konstantin did not think this was a joke.

“You study history?” Konstantin asked.

“Yes, it’s a hobby.” Cem refocused on filling out the forms.

“Me too. Everyone around me thinks I’ll be a big part of it.”

“I’m sure you might be. But I warn you, history can be cruel. Try as you might, it still might forget you, or worse, remember you in a way other than you intended.”

“True.”

Cem checked that his anaesthetics and sedatives were all present, and asked Konstantin to flip over so he could examine the damage. The fighter did so without any complaint or signs of distress, though Cem could tell by the way the bulb looked on the back of his calf that he must be in tremendous pain.

“I understand it is a very important match you’re to be fighting.”

“That’s what they all keep saying.”

“Do you not feel the same?”

“A fight’s a fight. Everything going on around it is just theater and gambling.”

Cem had Konstantin flip back over, then he shuffled some papers onto a clipboard and handed them over to the fighter, along with a pen. “These are liability waivers. I imagine not the first you’ve signed.”

“Far from it.” Konstantin did not take the papers, but kept his eyes, cool and heavy as glaciers, fixed on the doctor. Cem placed the clipboard across his lap and addressed the reek of recent history in the room.

“I understand these are very difficult circumstances for trust. Our nations are not on good terms.”

Konstantin shrugged. “I don’t care about that.”

“Still, I want to assure you of my intentions here. Are you familiar with the Hippocratic oath?”

“‘First, do no harm.’”

“Yes, indeed. Another legacy of Ancient Greece. I’m sure your colleagues were eager to get an American doctor for you, but things being as they are, it requires some work on my part, to prove myself. My oath as a doctor means more to me than anything.”

“Don’t worry, I see you for what you are.” Konstantin took the papers, eyes still fixed on Cem, who squirmed beneath the gaze. “I could’ve chosen to go back to America today. I chose to be here, to do things in this way. We’re both men with a calling, who belong to a tradition. I respect that.” He signed the papers and handed the clipboard back over to Cem. Packing the forms away in his briefcase, Cem put down his pen and looked out the window. The setting sun bleached the pale rock in red.

Cem said, “Do you believe in all those old stories from Greece? The myths, the tragedies? Why else would they linger, if we didn’t keep finding something true in them? And what are those stories all about? Doom. A fate that can’t be changed. Mortals, no more than chess pieces in the hands of greater powers, greater powers with no higher motives than jealousy, most often. Primal, ruthless forces, innocents sacrificed for nothing. You know, that Trojan war was fought for 10 years, all to glorify a cuckold. How many men, women and children died in all that? And the real reason it matters is that as a completely unforeseeable consequence, western civilization was born. Aeneas escaped Troy and became the founder of Rome, and from Rome, we get Europe, from Europe, America, and from America, we get the whole world today, like it or not. It’s as if we’re all living out the next chapter of that terrible old story.”

Cem snapped from his reverie and found himself caught in the unwavering gaze of the reincarnate Achilles. Cem saw himself frozen in Konstantin’s icy-blue eyes, and finally spoke his true mind.

“I think you should not go through with this fight. I’m sure you’ll be fully healed by then, no doubt. The point is, I think you should not let yourself be a chess piece. It seems we both understand what history is asking of us right now, and what a useless tragedy it would be if we just gave in and played along. Please, Mr. Michalakis. I urge you, consider that you could be *bigger* than history, rather than just a part of it.”

Cem could feel Konstantin reading his every movement, though the fighter himself remained inscrutable to the doctor. Cem did everything he could to draw back within himself, reveal no more than he had.

Konstantin spoke after a silence, and only he himself knew why that was the precise interval he waited to strike with his words.

“You’re a doctor, so you can’t understand. Neither can any of them, out there. No one who isn’t a warrior can understand it. A warrior isn’t someone who fights and kills people, that’s the big misconception. For a true warrior, no one else really exists. There’s only you, facing yourself. Every moment, you’re looking in the mirror, seeing what you’re made of, and deciding what you’re made of. That’s all fate is.

“Achilles didn’t care about Aganemnon, or the fate of his country, or any of that. He fought in order to be Achilles. He died in order to be Achilles. You’re right. I don’t care about being a part of history, or even bigger than it, like you said. I only care about becoming myself.”

With a deeply controlled breath, Konstantin called his entourage back into the Bungalow, and it was as if a veil came down between the fighter and the doctor. Cem watched himself snap into a 30-year-old persona of professional bedside manner, rehearsed into unconsciousness, and despite the stench of History in the room, the men got on well enough as the equipment and other staff arrived.

Cem performed the surgery under eight watchful American eyes, but ultimately ignorant ones. His assistants were two of his own trusted students. Neither of them gave the slightest hint that Cem was doing anything wrong, even as they watched him make a bad stitch on the tendon.

Only a minute after he’d received that first call from Konstantin’s trainer, another call had come in from the Minister of Intelligence in Ankara. Since everyone expected the American to win, there was much money to be made in an upset; a boon for the national coffers *and* the national pride. The consequences of failure never needed to be said.

In the days and weeks leading to the Summer Olympics, Cem wondered if Konstantin would strain and snap the tendon before the match--then if it wasn’t the Turkish government coming for Cem, it’d be the Americans, arguably far worse, and he could only hope his government would take care of him in return for his service. The more he thought about it, the more he thought Konstantin must know something was off within his own body, and if the fighter *did* know… Cem heard nothing in the news, and prayed that he’d gotten away with murder.

Cem’s heart felt like it was exploding as he watched Konstantin’s tendon snap in the middle of the big fight. He continued fighting for another 3 minutes, and finally knocked out Berk Catagay. Before hobbling off the stage, Konstantin looked straight into the nearest camera and smiled at Cem from across the Aegean Sea. Cem started packing his bags immediately.

He was caught just 10 minutes out of Bursa, and no matter how he pleaded that he’d done exactly as they’d asked, it made no difference to the thugs of his homeland’s intelligence bureau. It was an unfortunate time for something actually unbelievable to happen.

After undergoing another emergency surgery and then receiving the gold medal on crutches, Konstantin was shot at point blank range while celebrating with Michael, Joey and his family at a restaurant in Athens. The assassin, who committed suicide before being caught, was one of Cem’s students who’d been present for the surgery. The American Government accused the Turkish government of an act of war, and it didn’t matter that the Turkish government insisted this man acted alone and represented no intention of the nation. America announced a tactical retaliation, and everyone knew the fake incredulity over the death of an American Hero was reason enough to “liberate the Turkish people from dictatorship” by placing their own dictator in charge. No one wanted this, and everyone wanted this. It was chance, and it was fate. It couldn’t have been otherwise.

It became something of a myth that when Konstantin Michalakis was dying, with a smile, he’d said: “Burn me on the shores of Troy with coins in my eyes.”