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ARCADIA,
MY ARCADIA

A NOVEL

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS AN EARLY August morning in 1953. A little color had come into the eastern sky over the barren Virgin Mountain, and almost immediately the faint dawn light crept over the land. The sparrows which always announced the coming of day chirped shrilly. Angelos Vlahos said his prayer before the family altar, dressed himself and began the seven-kilometer walk to Polis, the provincial capital, to sit for the entrance exams to high school. His father had gone with his donkey to sell his produce in town. His mother and two older sisters, Sopho and Lemonitsa, had left for the hills to gather oregano and lupins for the farmers' market.

As he started on his way, Angelos was relieved to leave the smells of mountain goats and pigs in his sleepy Arcadian village. Stunted holm oaks and wild almond trees were scattered along the narrow, winding and rock-littered road. The crops had been harvested and the fields lay bare. Tepid mist rose from the empty furrows and hovered over the naked red-

clay fields. Since the Germans had fled the country a number of years before and the Civil War of the late 1940s had ended, Angelos was no longer afraid to walk there.

The road wrapped itself like a serpent around gaunt hillsides and knolls. Then it ran through open fields before it stretched along the border of the stinking swampy stream that functioned as the town's sewers. The stink from it was so strong that Angelos thought it could twist the nostrils of Hercules. Though the villagers called it the "Brown River," it was a wide ditch, no more, and mosquito-ridden. Year after year, the people had asked Papa Euthymios, the village priest, to speak to his politician friends in town and have them cover it or treat it with chemicals. He took their votes every election year and promised to talk to them, but somehow he kept forgetting his promise.

About half way between the village and the town, the road ran uphill and then came into a curving top, the Twin Hills of the Black Birds, where the garbage of Polis was dumped and burned. It looked like the humps of a camel Angelos had seen in a photograph in the school encyclopedia. As he passed, he tried not to breathe in the nauseating odor that emanated from it. A pack of stray dogs roamed about, scavenging in the huge heaps of refuse. Black ravens and magpies screeched their ornery, heavy cries as Angelos passed by.

Though he did not know anybody who had gone to high school, Angelos felt excited to have the chance to break fresh ground. He remembered how his grade school teacher, Nikos Theoharis, had persuaded his parents a few months earlier to let him study further and not keep him in the village tending goats. "He's a smart boy," he had told them, placing his warm hand on Angelos' shoulder. "He was my prize student with promise of fine attributes. He's a boy who will go far but right now he's like a croaking frog stuck in a dry well. Let him go to high

school. With education a person grows wings so he can fly. A boy's got to be what he's born to be, even if it's difficult."

By the time he started second grade, Angelos had become a devoted scholar, consumed by a desire to attain *arete*, excellence and virtue. He took his books home every afternoon and did his homework diligently with his sister Lemonitsa. The legends of saints his mother had encouraged him to read in six-page pamphlets she bought from a peddler over the years and the tales of ancient gods he had studied in school had helped him to develop discipline that often bordered on self-denial. It took very little to make him happy. A new shirt on Easter or a pair of leather shoes every other year pleased him enough.

The road leveled for a few hundred meters at the Twin Hills before it ran downhill, sloping through knolls and hillocks. *The road is a door to civilization*, Angelos thought, recalling something he had read in school. He marched briskly, trying to avoid the rocks and the dry, thorny acorns that littered the ground. Now only three kilometers remained. All around him stood the ring of the sun-baked gray Arcadian mountains. Barren and forbidding, the mountains had worked on his psyche over the years. At times, they made him feel so isolated from the rest of the world, so caged in, that he daydreamed of being Icarus and flying over them on wax-held wings.

Nikos Theoharis, who seemed to have an intimate knowledge of ancient history, had talked a lot about these mountains, which he called "eternal monuments." He said that it was much easier to hear God up there than down in the towns. Long ago the Arcadians, who lived simple lives untouched by the progress that marked the rest of Greece, had built Doric temples on these mountains for their gods: Zeus, the father of all gods, his daughter Artemis, the virgin patroness of hunters, and Apollo the Rescuer, who saved the Arcadian people from a plague.

Poseidon and Hera were born on these mountains. Amalthea, the sacred goat that nursed baby Zeus, grazed here, too. Here Hermes, Pan's father, invented the harp using the shell of a tortoise and the guts of a sheep.

A gust of wind soughed through the branches of the few trees scattered near the road as Angelos passed. It was a breeze that seemed filled with promise. Between him and the mountains, the weeds of the red-clay hillsides undulated in the breeze. He felt the hardness of human struggle when he gazed at the hillsides. Their air was still filled with the ample breath of Zeus. On them his sisters gathered chicory and snails every spring, and bulrush and oregano in the summer. Some days the county agricultural guard confiscated their gatherings and they returned home empty-handed and crying.

Careful not to tread on horse and donkey droppings, Angelos continued on his way to Polis. Thinking of the town boys, he suddenly felt self-conscious about his narrow chest, flaring ears and old clothes. He had nothing but a dry piece of *bobota*, similar to cornbread, and a few cloves of garlic stuffed in his pocket, but with his graduation certificate and sixth grade textbook in his hand his confidence returned. He could feel the excitement of his new adventure thrumming within him. He knew, without reason, that this day was going to be different than any other in his life.

Through his village school teacher's influence, he had come to understand that, regardless of how he would do in high school, he had a purpose in life, a destiny. His maternal grandmother, Calliope, who had the name of the muse of epic poetry and a sweet voice to match it, had told him that people who wrote as well as he did found good-paying jobs and helped their families. While these musings played in his mind, he turned to look back at the bell tower of the village church that rose against the eastern sky. The light of the dawn, glimmering across the

hills, was a little sharper now. For a brief moment he stood to take in the color of the sky, think about his parents' redemptive daily toil and cross himself as he prayed silently: *Good God, help me*. He loved his village. It was a special place for him: He was born there. It was his life. There lay all the happiness he had experienced in the world. But he was to leave it now.

Tucked in a remote corner of Arcadia, a country placed by God and geography on the outskirts of the world, his village was an out-of-the-way peasant community of thirty-five low houses and as many age-old mulberry trees. Angelos knew every house and tree. The mountain-ringed village had no ancient ruins, no claim to Homer's birthplace or other distinction aside from bearing a saint's name. It was prey to the winds that blew across the valley, lifting whole shacks in the air and dropping them a kilometer away. Angelos' house was a weather-beaten, small mud-brick hovel at the very edge of the village that his great grandfather had built. The door of the house, narrow and wooden, was scarred by bullet holes from the Civil War. A white-painted sign, "DDT 1947," sprawled across the panel of the door as evidence that the house had been disinfected against the terrible fleas of the period. A rusty horseshoe was nailed as a talisman at the top of the door frame to protect the house against bad luck. By the entrance to the house stood a big limestone block. It protruded from the earth and looked as if it had been waiting there ever since the Creation. Around that stone, worn smooth from generations of use, his family and neighbors had gathered after sunset to study the night, discuss the future and hear each other's stories of Arcadia's woeful past till midnight and beyond.

The house had two sleeping rooms, one for Angelos' parents and one for him and his two sisters. On a shelf in the corner of the children's room, covered with a newspaper sheet, was the family altar. It consisted

of several cardboard icons and a small oil lamp hanging from a rusty nail on the ceiling. The largest icon showed Christ's head, with the crown of thorns and blood dripping from his left forehead to His cheeks. Angelos changed the lupin in the lamp and knelt before that altar to pray before going to bed every night and after getting out of bed in the morning. The small kitchen had a rough, unpainted wooden table and five old rush-bottomed chairs. A ragged blue curtain separated the kitchen from the stable that housed a pig, a stud-goat, a nanny-goat and two ewes. Occasionally, a few rabbits and chickens moved about in the yard, provided that no fox had come by from the hills. Angelos' house was known as "the house with the odor" because his family kept a virile stud-goat for extra income.

The outskirts of Polis appeared in the distance ahead of him now. He broke into a run, his single desire to arrive on time for his exams. When he reached the town, the sun had risen two yards over Virgin Mountain. He stopped in front of a dilapidated two-story building whose stone walls were tattooed by bullets. A tin sign by the big iron gate read, "First High School for Boys, Erected 1901." He scraped the old mud off his broken shoes on the crooked scraper by the entrance, careful not to undo the hob-nails and half-circles that protected the heels and soles from premature wear, and walked in.

His left sole was loose and the right shoe was so worn in the front that it had a hole through which he could insert two fingers. He had tried to block the hole by placing a mulberry leaf inside the toe of his shoe and now hid it by turning it inwardly. A thorn embedded in his cracked shoe was poking him. He had tried to remove it but it broke and most of it remained in the shoe. Now he put more pressure on the other foot to avoid the pain as he climbed the worn wooden stairs to the upper floor, where the exams had been scheduled. The clack-clack of his hob-nailed

shoes echoed in the empty hall.

Tired and panting, he stepped into a large room crowded with other boys. Most of them wore socks, clean clothes and fresh haircuts. Angelos had made every effort to make himself presentable. Using his pocket mirror, he had combed his short hair carefully in the morning after oiling it a bit for shine. Yet he felt self-conscious being among so many town boys. He glanced around for a familiar face in the crowd, but he didn't know anyone outside his village. Feeling insignificant and small, he walked to a corner of the room and stood quietly on the edge of the crowd.

One nearby boy, speaking confidently, said that the exams would be oral and written and would cover religion, basic science, general knowledge and mathematics.

“What are mathematics?” Angelos asked, moving closer.

“Arithmetic,” the boy responded with a haughty air and turned away.

Humbled by his apparent ignorance, Angelos noticed that the town boys spoke with a different accent and self-assurance. Apprehensively, with his grade school textbook and graduation certificate still in hand, he moved back to his corner of the room. To comfort himself, he thought of the last time he'd seen his kind teacher.

Two weeks before, Nikos Theoharis had stopped by his house. He was a gentle man with a wooden leg in place of the one he had lost at the Albanian Front during World War II. He loved children but had none of his own. On the day of his visit, his face looked ashen, bleached to a chalky gray, and his mustache needed trimming. He breathed hard as if he had been running.

“Angelos, I brought you the encyclopedia set from the office,” he said. “Nobody is going to use these volumes for a while. Keep them till

the examinations are over. Thumb through the pages. You may want to know about important men and women, like Homer, Hippocrates, Socrates, Cleopatra, Alexander the Great. You will find the answers in these books." A loose cough, which he tried to smother, suddenly shook his body. "Stock your mind, Angelos," he added as he took out of his old silver-plated watch, a reminder of time running out.

Angelos asked his teacher if he had a chance to get into high school.

"I think you are smart enough to do anything you want," Theoharis replied. He carefully wound his watch, checked the time and put the watch back in his pocket. As he turned to leave, he said, "I will be thinking about you."

Watching Theoharis walk away, Angelos realized that this probably would be the last time that he would see his mentor for quite some time. Though worried about his teacher's health, his gesture of bringing the books and his words of encouragement had moved him. Surely, he thought, this was his great chance to become the lettered man Grandma Calliope had foretold.

He kept the big volumes in a corner of the house, reading as much as he could. In those volumes, he came across the biggest rivers and tallest mountains of the world. Pictures and biographies of famous men of letters, like Mark Twain, Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens, fascinated him. His secret wish became to someday be educated like them, wear clothes like them, and write books like them.

The crowd jostled Angelos out of his memories. He watched as, one by one, the boys' names were called and they entered a big door that led to something called the Board of Three. The door was heavy and fitted with iron bars. Each time it closed, it sounded as if someone had secured it

with a boulder from behind.

Angelos' turn came shortly before noon. The door groaned as it opened to admit him. Three examiners sat behind a long table by an open window. Angelos' mind reeled with a jumble of encyclopedic facts. He hoped that God would not, in His infinite goodness, willfully deny the future of a boy who prayed on his knees every morning and every night, and thanked Him for every slice of bread. What he expected was not a miracle, or a manifestation of the divine powers, but simply justice.

The first examiner was a wizened man dressed in a dark suit. He moved so slowly it seemed he wasn't capable of doing anything in a hurry. Angelos imagined the man's house burning down and him moving as slow as grass growing. The man crooked his finger at Angelos, beckoning him to approach. Angelos advanced to the front of the table and stood under the man's owlish gaze. In a grave, considered voice, the man asked him to open his textbook, read a paragraph and tell him what it meant. Angelos read about Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his own son Isaac, because God said so. The man asked him why God made the world, and Angelos recalled the answer from his Bible studying classes with Nikos Theoharis. The man then asked him to recite the Creed and add two fractions with different denominators. Angelos answered all these questions with no difficulty. He began to relax.

The second examiner was a tall and lanky man with a stubborn chin, bushy eyebrows and a deep voice. Before he examined Angelos, this teacher asked him questions that surprised him. "What village are you from?" "How big is your family?" "What plans do you have for your future?"

Angelos was glad to tell the man about his home and his parents and sisters and his burning desire to become an educated person. The examiner gave him a little smile before proceeding with more questions. "Why

do you think most of Hercules' twelve labors took place in Arcadia?" "What do you know about the world's Seven Wonders?" "If you were a Spartan, how would you explain the causes of the Peloponnesian Wars?"

Angelos did the best he could, then turned to the final examiner. This man was Xenophon Zouzoulas. He reminded Angelos of a huge insect, a wasp perhaps. His lean, high-cheeked face seemed blank while his dark eyes squinted quizzically. Seated next to him was a boy with carrot-colored hair whose face resembled the examiner's enough to be his son. With a red pencil wedged in his bony hand, Zouzoulas motioned for Angelos to come closer.

Angelos crept up to the edge of the table.

"What's your name?"

"Angelos Vlahos, sir."

"Huh, *vlahos*! Like name, like thing," Zouzoulas muttered in a raspy voice, accenting the Greek word for villager. "Can you tell me who was Nebuchadnezzar?"

"Who?" Angelos quivered inside him. The name sounded completely unfamiliar to him. He felt as though he'd been hit by a sledge-hammer. Zouzoulas surveyed him from beneath his gray eyebrows with a sneer. He seemed to have the uncontrollable habit of winking.

"Never mind. Let's talk about science."

Angelos didn't know what science was any more than he knew about Nebuchadnezzar. He was certain, though, that he had studied hard all those six grade school years, reading stories in his parents' *Kazamias*, a farmer's almanac. The pupils in Polis must have progressed while he and the other village children grew up like untrimmed weeds, studying old editions of textbooks in a one-room school in the depths of gray Arcadia.

"What is the scientific process that allows the siphon to work?" Zouzoulas asked.

Angelos stood irresolute for a moment. Then, in a voice broken from the tension, he mumbled: "I couldn't exactly tell you, sir, but I've siphoned must with a hose from one barrel to another for my father." He fidgeted in embarrassment because of his bleak ignorance. He noticed that the skinny boy with the carrot-colored hair smirked.

"What are stalagmites?"

Angelos could no longer think. All the facts he had collected from his school books, from stray fragments of overheard conversations in the village kafenion and from his teacher's encyclopedia, had gotten jumbled in his head. Others were completely gone, like water poured through a strainer. He felt a sick feeling building in the pit of his stomach. He ran his tongue over his dry lips and choked out his answer, "I think they are rocks hanging from ceilings of caves."

"Hanging! God above, don't you know anything?"

"I've seen pictures of them in the encyclopedia, sir."

"I don't care where you've seen them, but stalagmites are not hanging. Well, I could be lenient and pass you, but you deserve more. I'm going to give you a zero for science."

"Please, sir."

"Next question." Zouzoulas opened a book and read: "A farmer bought a cart-load of hay. His cart can carry one thousand five hundred and fifty kilos. How long will the hay last if each group of five goats eats twenty-five kilos a day and the farmer has three hundred and ten goats?"

Angelos' thoughts clotted and he couldn't answer. He told the examiner that he had solved similar problems in his village school and that he might be able to answer if he could use paper and pencil. The man replied that it was not permitted and fixed Angelos with a terrifying scowl. Angelos' graduation certificate slipped through his trembling hand and fell on the floor. He picked it up and unrolled it to show the

examiner his grades and his deportment. "I was a good student in my village, sir," he said. "My teacher said I was smart enough for high school. I work hard, sir. When I set my mind on something, I can get it."

With another eye-wink, Zouzoulas made a gesture of dismissal. Mortified, Angelos pleaded with him for more time to think.

"I don't have all day. I'm not convinced that education is suitable for your kind anyway. It's no use sending someone like you to high school. Don't worry. Your parents can use you in the fields, can't they?"

At that moment, Angelos heard the voices of peddlers outside. He thought that one of those voices was his father peddling his produce from his donkey, "Turnip, oregano, lupins, and chicory of the mountain!" He rocked back on his heels. Feeling keenly aware of how poor he and his family were, he walked across the room and stepped out without answering the examiner.