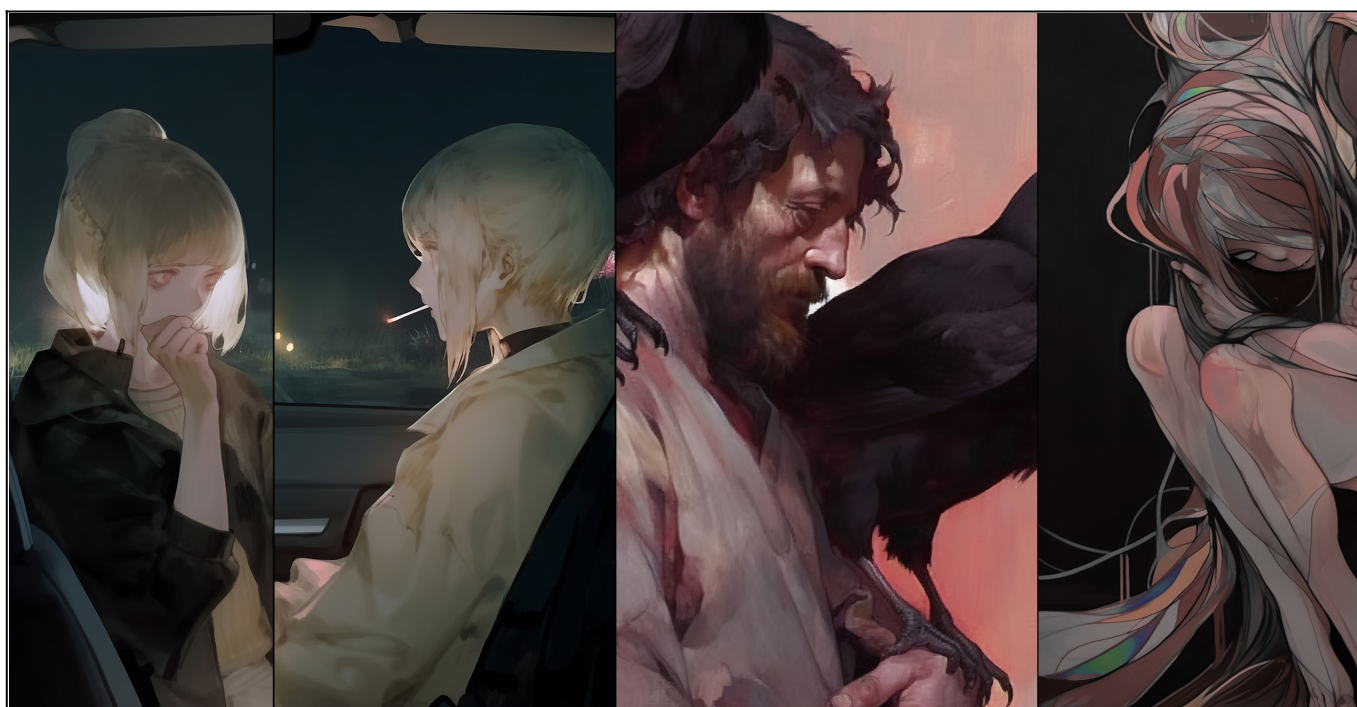


Derelict Hearts

by Achanes Outis

Chapter IV Tragedies of Time



Here we are, sitting in a car in the midst of a glowing night, moon still shining outside and inside next to me. Oudis and Paragoria are gone to deal with matters of their own, and Nekrichta wanted to spend time with me. We cooked something and went on the road, stopping by a grocery store before its closing time, got some sweets and alcohol, then went on to drive some more, finally stopping by an empty parking lot, by request of my co-pilot.

She hasn't been as abstract lately, sometimes clearly stating things, which is unusual for her, but it's a nice change of pace: not having to decipher whatever meaning there is behind her sentences and on-the-fly poetry, it all makes her easier to live with on the regular. Although, she's still as drunk as ever. High functioning hyper alcoholic, if that's possible. Guess it is considering what she is. Where does she get the money for it all anyway? Is her companion paying for it all? Ancient questions...

We stopped the car somewhere in a parking lot's corner. Here we have view on a road that has very few cars passing by, with fields and forests appearing behind the asphalt line; all with a bright moon, lighting it all in a precious visual memorandum.

We are hiding under the shade of a seemingly old and run-over commercial area. I think I recognize it somewhat. What was once a vibrant place where people would come to shop and dine, slowly but surely crawled to a halt. Perhaps it was due to unforeseen economical consequences of a world changing, or of laws regarding savings and deposits, or of the industrial area not caring to meet ecological laws and being forced to close down after failing to plead their case in court – most likely all at the same time.

A children's clothing shop, I remember it somewhat because it always seemed out of place in-between a gardening shop and a power-tool lending company; i think it was for lending anyway. Though, mainly for this latter one, I only really remember yellow and black signs, with old cardboard cutouts soaking right outside in mid autumn rain.

A business fails, and a shop closes down, and a restaurant runs out of money. People leave for bigger cities, and deaths of community leaders happen. Then another business closes down, and people stop caring about where they live, and the cycle keeps going, though I'm not sure where it ends.

New so-called democratically appointed mayor arrives, things change bit by bit, trying to rekindle what once was; failing to do so, of course, as is customary these days mostly everywhere it seems – and, even in what they succeed in, they ignore some parts willingly. Like here.

You can make out thorns, vines and bushes growing through cracks that were made over time under summer heat-waves and the following flooding winters. The old social buildings have been torn down and the lower income populations were displaced to major cities; not their problem here anymore: as such, the police

presence was reduced, and you can often see a singular officer patrolling in a car. Didn't stop the drug trafficking, of course, but there's certainly a lot less of it.

So much so that this place now only is a spot for people like Nekri and I: void tourists – or most often for the romantics and those that crave for a fake post-apocalyptic setting to immerse themselves in. Whatever, we all have things we gravitate towards, and we end up falling through the same waterfall anyway.

Nekri takes a sip from one of her recently-purchased bottles. Don't really care to check what she bought, but probably something strong yet fruity, knowing her taste. Getting used to it, I guess; been a few weeks since we all met at her and Pariah's house. But now it's my first night out with just her, and I hope it's not going to play like a babysitting thing, but I don't know; probably just underestimating her. Her unpredictability can be bothersome, so let's just hope the slots have rolled on favorable outcome tonight, if one were willing to leave this sort of thing to be given meaning through chance.

Nekrichta – “Thanks for bringing me here.”

Lixi – “Hm? Don't mention it, anywhere would have been fine. But why this place?”

Nekrichta – “I like. The simple disagreement of the world of nature and that of Man's.”

Lixi – “You almost sound like Oudis, right now.”

Nekrichta – “Suppose so, 'suppose so... you know, Oudis has a giant soul, but there's many souls in his soul too. Like a soul eating at itself, yes.”

Lixi – “And...”

Nekrichta – “I follow his wish. He will always keep on looking for a way out, and it's hard to look at friends when they hide their pain like this. But he can't hide his from me.”

Lixi – “Friends? Wouldn't you be more like brother and sister, since you guys are more or less the same... 'thing' that isn't a thing?”

Nekrichta – “Friend is friend, no matter where they're from. You'd know that. Love is love in all forms, and hate is love, too. Oudis hates to love, but he can't help himself. I mean, look at you. He loves you dearly like a dear friend loves his fellows.”

Lixi – “That is kind of you to say. He’s been very goal-driven since he brought me to meet you. He wasn’t really like it back when I met him at the funeral home.”

Nekrichta – “Phases. Oudis is Oudis, and Lixi is Lixi. You’re still confused so I don’t know who you are really, but that’s fine, your spirit is shining and strong, like that of Pariah’s. You’re to be a memory and a hope, both.”

Lixi – “You sound ominous when you say that. Almost scary, if you weren’t yourself.”

Nekrichta – “I am what I am and that is that. I am not here to fill buckets of pain.”

Lixi – “Right. Manifestation of Hope.”

Nekrichta – “So they say. But what hope did you see in my soul back then?”

Lixi – “A tempest.”

Nekrichta – “Raging turmoil. Mine as much as it was yours; but yours is also everyone else’s. But it’s been... I think... it’s been getting strange lately.”

Lixi – “How so?”

Nekrichta – “Always were waves, but they were grand waves, pretty to look at, safe to swim in; Now they are violent, and the sky is dimming.”

Lixi – “Hm... I guess... it makes sense.”

Nekrichta – “Hm.”

Time passing by, silence falls yet one more time, for a minute or two. I try to reflect on what she says, but my attention regarding what we just discussed is a bit everywhere, and this lack of focus brings nothing. Not to mention I keep glancing at Nekri, trying to see what she feels. I can almost make out a smile and a look of contentment, but I’m not sure.

Nekrichta – “Do you want to hear a story?”

Lixi – “Sure. Does it have a title?”

Nekrichta – “Guess you could title it... The Man with a Scar for a Face.”

Lixi – “It’s not going to be a fun story, is it?”

Nekrichta – “Not up to me to decide for what the listener wants to take it as.”

Lixi – “Alright, sure.”

Nekri finishes to drink her alcoholic sustenance – which is what it is for her, I realize – and grabs a mint candy from our shared mixed bag.

The car is off to the side of a lamppost, right at the edge of being illuminated by it. A spot chosen by her, actually: she wanted “the best of both”, as she put it. Without artificial light right on our eyes, we get to see across the night a bit more clearly. And then the light from the lamppost is sidelining our lower halves, and we get to see what we have in the car. Also, I get to see that we’ve been leaving crumbs over our seats. Really don’t want to clean... whatever.

I relax my body a little, and listen in intently in what Nekri is about to tell. Now that I think about it, she never really spoke for long. It may get to be interesting, hopefully she doesn’t babble about, although I’d be more surprised if she did.

Nekrichta – “There existed an individual. He grew up sheltered, but did not like the warmth of his nest, so he flew into the cold weather while carrying a necklace to bring him safety in case things got dire. Of course, things would get rough every now and then. But always there was this net for him to land safely in. A privilege, awarded to him for merely existing somewhere where souls can be lucky, where his mistakes were never death sentences.

He wanted to see what the world was like, to see what things looked like outside of what he was told they were. Traveling, he saw more and more over time, jumping from place to place, flying left and right, trapping himself and unshackling periodically. Clarity was always followed by blindness, and blindness was always followed by clarity. He saw things for what they looked like, and eventually, he saw things for what they were.

Not everything, because he didn’t want to look at everything, even though he said he wanted to. He knew that, were he to look at the skeleton of the world, he would not return, so he gouged one of his eyes out, to make sure he would always have access to his inner world. ‘No world like mine’, he used to say. All the suffering he encountered, his and others’; all the joys he experienced, the extremes and the mellow days: He did as much as he deemed was enough. But it seemingly never was really enough, either to him or to a malcontent outsider.

He kept walking and sleeping, running and falling, standing and sitting. To find understanding, he chased after death dreams, extremes that would bring him beyond exhaustion, near his own grave and others', never really finding what he wanted after all.

He was an observer; a voyeur, some might have said.

But he was there nonetheless, existing without ill intent. He found life to be strange, and his especially – since he was mostly himself, and due to the path he took, knew himself more than anything else. Obviously, I suppose, but usually people chase things so that they don't have to reflect much on what would have given them grace in the first place. Or do they? Their hopes fade and me with them, so I do not know anymore.

Still, what of this man's reflection? He could see it less and less, day after day running into one another. Scars of life accumulating on his body; funnily enough, most of them were not even his. He chose to carry them for the sake of those he once loved, never betraying their trust, even if they never asked, even if they forgot about him; even if they died somewhere along the line: he knotted and threaded with them – He had a duty, he was beholding to them, as once their joy was his too. But he was picky; extremely so. He wanted naught to do with most things, alive and not. What would happen is something any could have seen coming: His willing dissociation from his peers, growing ever apart from the humanity he wanted to understand and love, retaining with those he knew only the memories of what once was, that now weren't, and that never would be again.

He would eventually open the window to let flies out, and let his garden become an unkempt forest, vines and thorns amassing moss. All he did was pave a way so that he could walk there. Sometimes a bird, usually a crow, would come perch on his shoulder. Their claws would slightly pierce the skin, but he never winced in pain. Instead, he welcomed the bleedings, laughing at the bruises whenever he noticed them.

He looked at growing flowers through spring and summer, without seeing their colors. He smelled their death before the day they would return to the dirt.

He wanted to see less and less things that were alive, eventually hiding from the world, and he wondered in his glass dome: why was nature? Why was life? Why was time?

He hated and loved in the same breath. Still however, would he seldom send letters to the life-long friends he kept. He wanted to be with them, to spend afternoons and evenings on wooden balconies, looking at the sun set over hills, creating memories he would foolishly wish to keep for an eternity blooming further than mortality.

Yet, hypocritically perhaps, his sun never really rose; he was kept at bay by the waves he wanted to observe, and always was washed ashore on the rocks of the cliff he jumped from. Climbing back always, until ages later his back hurt, when his bones were too brittle to jump as often as he used to.

That was a man. A man that wasn't a man, but was also more than a man. Maybe he didn't deserve to exist, maybe he didn't want to exist, but the world and himself kept on spilling this blood; always warm, with hands cold like a corpse. Why was he, and why was anything?

One day he looked in a mirror, and didn't recognize who or what he was looking at. He remembered that he never really asked himself the question of what he looked like. He just was, and that was that. And people were, and they were there. But, now only, it is a reflective memory of humanity that broke the mirror. The shards were already lodged somewhere in his thorax, and he drank to the health of it all: Two fingers for the living, two fingers for the dead, two fingers for the world that we all live in."

The following momentary silence indicates the end of this story.

A light gust of wind flows through the window opening, slowly weaving in-between our hair strands, slowing down our heartbeat, bringing us back to a forlorn reality.

Lixi – "That was something. I'm not really sure what to take from this, though. Is it... knowing you, these were all mostly metaphors. But is that about someone real?"

My night consort of now, wonders for a brief moment, then answers:

Nekrichta – "Real and sometimes not; mostly so, hidden away, forgotten as they live, remembered as they die, forever to dust after their passage through time. Like anything, and everything, remembering the eventuality of things."

Her hopefulness is as much her hopelessness. I would wager a guess that this is about Pariah, or maybe someone she used to know way back whenever 'way back' means for her.

But I can only here now sit with her in this car, as she grabs another bottle, and as I light up a smoke for myself, car windows rolled down. The heat of spring nights is cold enough for us to be comfortable, and with no one but us and the leaves, things seem proper and fine, I would think.

Lixi – "Thank you for the story, Nekri."

Nekrichta – “Thank you for listening. You’re pretty.”

Lixi – “Huh?”

Nekrichta – “Bright soul.”

Lixi – “Oh, right. Sorry.”

Nekrichta – “You had a funny reaction.”

Lixi – “Don’t act like Oudis...”

Nekrichta – “He’s always with us anyway, is he not?”

Lixi – “Suppose so. Makes sense though.”

Nekrichta – “Somewhat, yes. How did he meet you, anyway? He hasn’t told me.”

Lixi – “Was working in, filling a day – I think it was a Tuesday – at the funeral home, as a receptionist for that morning... or afternoon? Whatever. He entered with his white cape, looking around and approached after he noticed me staring while we were the only ones there.”

Nekrichta – “Did he ask you if you could join him for a walk in the yard?” She smiles at me.

Lixi – “Does he do that often?” I start to talk with a smile in response to what might be an old trick being played on me, and falling for it.

Nekrichta – “How often is three generations for you?”

Lixi – “Well I guess you don’t change a strategy that works. But yeah, he did say that. You can guess my surprise, I thought he was like the Grim Reaper or something.”

Nekrichta – “The myth does come from him somewhat. He’s always found it funny. One day he has a scythe, the next a colorful flowery hat. But the people he met, never meant ill when describing him; it’s just those that aren’t kind in their depictions are not of him, you know. Because he isn’t death. They all have these abstract ideas of a thing that is, but Oudis is people and their fellows; just that they don’t know Oudis – as Oudis then would not know them at that moment, up

until they are him, eventually.”

Lixi – “Makes me wonder how can he keep his identity through the ages.”

Nekrichta – “We wonder much the same, then.”

I sigh softly, before replying:

Lixi – “Anyway, will you drink to something or someone tonight?”

Nekrichta – “I think... I’d want to drink to the life of dear Paragoria.”

Although I expected her arm to move, she instead turns her head and looks out the window, staring at nothing. I leave a silence to take hold before breaking it:

Lixi – “Then I’ll smoke to his health.” As I end my sentence, she turns back to look in front of her, through the windshield.

We smile at each other without really looking in each other’s direction. But we don’t need to; why would we? Things are as they are, as Nekri puts it. No matter what, they always will be the way they are meant to be, and nothing else can change that but the passage of time; all up until anything isn’t. And maybe that’s what my friends here want. They just want to exist, with scars that are not blooming with rose petals. No more suffering for them. I suppose I cannot blame them, they must have seen more than entire eternities combined, at this point. Who would I be to go against their wish? And are they wrong to want it all to stop, especially when it will anyway? Make it happen faster, grace the world with the stillness it always had before life corrupted this peace.

Maybe I’ve spent long enough with Oudis and Nekri. Pariah seem to have a stronger resilience to these influences, but I would bet that there’s more turmoil in his head than he lets on about. And, it is clear to me that Nekri does not want to impede on his secrets, and divulge any of them to me. So I will not pry. He is kind and strong, and I don’t believe it to be my right to ask for what he doesn’t want to share. I would hope that, eventually, he will. But... that sounds like a silly thing to hope for. The way things are now, in our intermittent pursuit of an end to life, it is nice. I like it. I wonder if these memories we make will be kept?

Lixi – “What a beautiful night.” I smile.

Nekrichta – “Yes. I’d want them to be more often like this.” She smiles.

Lixi – “They could be.”

Nekrichta – “But will they?”

Lixi – “We can only wish.”

Nekri laughs, bittersweetly. I look at her, and realize that my look must be one of a sweet nostalgic melancholy. But I cannot shed it.

It feels as if this is a moment that is supposed to only happen when one is alone, yet here we are, together crossing the same lane. The grass is not greener here, but the moon shines brighter where we sit.

I guess things are alright even when colors appear grey; that never anything could be anything despite the drive to go forward – that, despite it all, we still exist, and we still get to feel at peace sometimes up until we die. And maybe that’s enough. Maybe we feel alright.

As we bath in the glow of a night, my body relaxes as nicotine flows in. It feels as if we are looking to flowers taking in the sun, curious and entranced to the fact that they exist, dyed in red, blue, purple or whatever pretty thing they have to appear as. I do wonder if flowers would find themselves to be pretty. I am reminded then, in the shade of the reflection of a dimmed sun, of a story.

Lixi – “Say. Would you be interested in hearing a story?”

Nekrichta – “Of course. Give and receive. Would love to hear. Does yours have a name?”

Lixi – “Hm... let me think for a second... you could call it: ‘The Woman who Gave her Hope Away’ ”

Nekrichta – “Hope it’s not about me.”

Lixi – “No no, but you do that too, do you not?”

Nekrichta – “Perhaps...” She lifts a bottle up to her mouth and drinks while exaggeratedly looking to the side, trying to be comical. I suppose it works, as I catch myself softly laughing at her playfulness.

Lixi – “There once was an individual, who was left to be used as a tool expressly for monetary purposes, as soon as she was birthed into this world. She had many siblings back when she was a kid: one after the other, dismissed to adoption centers, labeled as bothersome sacks of annoying needs. That is what their mother thought of her children. They were had from numerous unknown

fathers, so that she could cash in social financial help to raise the children, without the lash of responsibility from anyone or anything; all until a neighbor called social workers to take away the remaining kids.

Lies after lies, the mother would eventually lie herself on the ground in a puddle of her drool, while still being able to somehow get money for creating life she never wanted to cradle in the first place – culminating in her with veins open, drowning in vomit.

But this isn't a story about the mother, as she had no stories to be told of her, even during her unceremonious funeral, less you consider that being buried and thrown in a half-empty pauper's grave is a story on its own. And perhaps you're right, a life is a life, and all have their stories, but what is interesting pertains to the individual hearing or counting it."

Nekrichta – "Sorry to interrupt, but now *you* very much sound like Oudis."

Lixi – "Damn... you're right. I'll try to keep away from the gas pedal."

Nekrichta – "It's alright, say what you want, I like to hear you say things."

Lixi – "You have a strange way of complimenting people."

Nekrichta – "Does it bother you?"

Lixi – "No, not really. Just unusual and somewhat funny, I guess."

Nekrichta – "Then that's nice. Please, keep going."

Lixi – "Alright. So, the story is about one of the daughter of this person. I suppose you know what can happen to dejected and lonesome people, when they are left to find something warm in a world that birthed them cold and bloodless?"

Nekrichta – "How hopeful was she? What did you say the title of the story was already? The Girl who Left her Hope... or something?"

Lixi – "I think it was something like... "the One that Gave Away her Hope"? Can't remember either now. Maybe you can tell by the title... possibly. I'm getting confused by it now."

We both laugh in unison at our flawed short-term memory. I take a drag, she takes a sip, and without a sound my listener postures herself as a deeply curious auditor, urging me to keep telling the story.

Lixi – “So then, this person, an adult in her early thirties now, sought after a perceived warmth of family. If she could not have one in her childhood, then she would make one of her own.

A father for four children, then the grown man left. She found another, married him, and born another two children from her now-husband. They were a happy family, or so she thought, living in a middle-class housing neighborhood without the money to pay for it, cockroaches and dust growing, leaving a house to be derelict before they were forced to move out in a cheaper, rougher neighborhood.

And, as they moved, a social worker moved to spy on them, and declared that the family was not happy. Her family then was no more, and her instruments to love now were merely instruments to the failure that became her life; that is, not by anyone except by her own standards.”

Nekrichta – “Hm...” She contemplates for an instant. “You can’t really hide the fiction of it well. I understand this is a real story. So I ask you, about the husband: I expect something happened to him?”

Lixi – “A memory is a memory. The father was able to retrieve his two kids, and raised them with someone else.”

Nekrichta – “What of the other kids?”

Lixi – “Who knows. I’ve yet to meet one of them again, I moved away long ago from all this. Do you think they could remember someone who once went to drink tea at their childhood house that was being progressively left in a derelict state? I would wager they’d rather forget some parts of living.”

Nekrichta – “Hm. Maybe the title of your story should be ‘Suffering’, or something.”

Lixi – “Volume 27.”

Nekrichta – “Chapter four.”

We laugh at the absurdity of tragedy, and in a way, of us being able to tell such stories in a place where stories once were. I suppose there’s a lot of irony, to speak about things that once were, in places that now aren’t.

I would be glad if we never were to be made as stories in the same way we told of them, but I suppose in some form or fashion, we will become stories no matter what, even were we to hide. For them to be of hope or despair, I don’t

really know who writes them, but I suppose it is of no matter all the same.

Nekrichta – “Guess it’s my turn to say thank you for the story. But I will be honest with you, I think I preferred mine. Not ego flaunting, just that yours is overly too sad for me.”

Lixi – “I understand. But don’t worry, I didn’t finish the story on purpose.”

Nekrichta – “It gets hopeless?”

Lixi – “Do you really want to hear it?”

Nekrichta – “I don’t know. Am I as curious as you?”

Lixi – “Well, I don’t know if it counts as morbid curiosity, but you’re not the one working in a funeral home.”

Nekrichta – “Perhaps for the better.”

Lixi – “Perhaps. I hope you keep on caring for your well-being, even if you have to go through intoxication. I know you’re one to give compliments, so I want to give one as well: You’re a kind person, Nekri.”

Nekrichta – “You’re too sweet. Do you not want a drink?”

Lixi – “No sweeter than what you’re drinking. Also, I’m driving you back home, remember?”

Nekrichta – “Not even a sip?” She slightly nods her head, repeatedly.

Lixi – “Not even a sip.” I slightly shake my head left and right.

Nekrichta – “Hm. I’ll offer you a bottle next time you stay at our home then.”

Lixi – “I’m not one to drink, but I guess I can make an exception for you; just this once, though.” As I finish my sentence, Nekrichta smiles and attempts to tap on my shoulder, in such a soft and candid way that her hand sways around, as the friction between skin and fabric occurs: low velocity and fumbled movements make her touch friendly and sweet, explicitly showing longing for a friend’s heart in this night.

Nekrichta – “You better, and I hope you’ll like what I’ll get you.” Her hand stays there, as if she forgot where it was, already taking hold as a place of comfort, not wanting to move: her arm is asleep. And so, I gently take her hand and slowly move it back to her side, before answering to her bantering threat:

Lixi – “Of course I will.”

We exchange a look and a smile of appreciation. The wind weaves once more in our hair, defining this night as a memory to dearly keep. I suppose that is how friendships are formed with her. I think I’d like to be her friend. There’s maybe something about being a friend to Manifestations as well, even if it’s like being friends with harbingers of nothingness. But even then there’s something that’s destructively, perhaps nihilistically ‘cool’, about that sort of thing. Maybe I’m an idiot for feeling that way, and honestly, I don’t really understand how this sort of thing comes to be. So I’m probably an idiot. I’d rather see them as friends rather than anything else, even if they are anything else. As Oudis and Nekri would say... Friends are first and foremost friends, before anything else.