

# ***Terror at Romance***

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## **Terror at Romance**

Zenwar Kazemi listens carefully as the man she has just killed closes the door of her hotel room behind him. She follows the drumbeat of footsteps down the corridor, the hiss of lift doors as they open and close. Zenwar takes a swab of the man's semen from her thigh, seals the swab in a sample bag, sighs in contentment and falls asleep.

Zenwar has not physically eliminated Andreas Angelopoulos; but with every move in her seduction of him filmed, recorded and editable, she has the means to destroy the career, the marriage and the reputation of the Chief Coordinator of the United Nation International Romance Office, should he prove recalcitrant in accepting her future suggestions. It has been a rewarding night's work.

Angelopoulos was easy to seduce but not to find. He is known for his lengthy absences from the Uniro campus in Turin, Italy, where he is the boss. The reason he gives is that to spread romance in the world, he needs to get out into that world and rally his “troops” in Uniro's branch offices across the globe. Either that or he is off undertaking spiritual retreats in far-flung ashrams and monasteries to raise his consciousness to a level befitting the spearhead of Uniro's mission. This leaves him untraceable for months at a time. But the network Zenwar had built up of contacts in Uniro's many international branches came good and located him in Amsterdam when the sound money was on his being in upper Myanmar. Zenwar had then engineered a 'chance' encounter at the conference he was attending there (“Romance in Post Pandemic Perspective”). She had dressed to appeal to his known penchant for curvy blondes like herself, lured him to her hotel to discuss developments in her department in Turin, namely Personal Relations, spiked his drink with an aphrodisiac at the bar, and taken him upstairs to her room to get close and personal, while the cameras and microphones she had set up recorded intimate

details of the encounter. That is all it took to bring the New Persian Empire one step nearer.

Zenwar wakes the next morning refreshed, if somewhat sticky. It is hot in the hotel room. Under a cooling shower, she plots her next move. Yes, leave right now for Turin in case Angelopoulos thinks he gets a second bite at the cherry; gather up last night's recordings and the rest of her gear, take the train south, and stop off in Paris to give her husband's credit card some game time. As long as she is home by Saturday afternoon, when she helps out at the battered women's refuge.

Zenwar contemplates her face in the mirror. The face is decidedly handsome: it could have been painted by a miniaturist of the Safavid period, except that the eyes are green and the hair a natural blonde. She practises making her eyes sparkle, but soon gives up – even for a born actress it is a hopeless task – and turns her attention to her mouth. Just a touch of light lipstick to heighten the contrast with her teeth, which she keeps perfectly white yet visibly sharp.

Early on Saturday afternoon, a taxi from Turin's central railway station drops her off in Via della Rocca, right outside the elegant building that houses her modest family apartment and several more. The taxi driver offers to help carry her luggage up to her floor, but Zenwar declines, though she accepts a hand getting it to and into the lift. The flat is empty – even on a Saturday her husband will be at work overseeing his chocolate factory in the small nearby town of Alba. Her daughter, of course, is untraceable – emergencies apart – at her camp in Palestine. Zenwar nevertheless checks the phone, but the only messages for her concern work, and can safely be ignored.

After a snack from the fridge and a nap, Zenwar dresses down for comfort before she heads out to the refuge. It is located in nearby Via Giolitti, so she goes on foot, trying to keep in whatever shade the buildings offer against the September sun.

The entrance to the refuge is on the more dilapidated side of the inner courtyard of a what has become an apartment complex. It occupies the ground floor. Zenwar rings the buzzer. Eventually, a middle-aged woman creaks along a corridor and opens the door to let her in.

“Hey, Zenwar, look at you. I knew it was you, you know. In fact, I saw you coming.”

“Through the blinds?”

“Yeah, through the blinds. I've learned to peer through the slats without being seen. How about that? When I have nothing more pressing to do, I keep an eye out. For the sake of our security, you know. Been away, have you, dear?”

“Yes. Sorry I didn't make it last week. I've been travelling, setting up a new world order.”

The older woman, Cristina, laughs.

“Come on in, now that you're here. It just so happens I've got a couple of new people for you to meet. And plenty more news for you, too, because we all like a bit of gossip, don't we?”

Once Cristina has brought her up to date, Zenwar spends the afternoon listening to women telling their stories, women who are not used to being listened to, let alone believed. From time to time, she draws out, and focuses on, the fact that they are not to blame for the abuse they have suffered: *they* are the victims. It is something that Zenwar has proved good at, so she is trusted to do it by the regular staff at the refuge, even though she is an outsider.

That evening, Zenwar helps out some Tunisian brothers by having a kebab at their Slow Food restaurant in the Diatto shopping centre. It is not as good as a proper Persian kebab, of course, but she is there to test more than to taste. It is young Aziz, the brother newly arrived in Italy, whom she wants to talk to. She has a word with the owner, Karim, a long-standing acquaintance, and he brings the boy to her. In full charm mode, Zenwar tries to put the adolescent at ease – inviting him to sit down and having food and a soft drink set before him – and

starts her gentle interrogation. The lad confirms what Karim has told her, that he is an orphan raised and educated in a Koranic school, that he has trained at the very camp in Palestine where Zenwar's own daughter is currently rounding out her education, and that, despite his youth, he has no fear of death left in him.

“Do you know what paintball is?” Zenwar asks.

“No.”

“It's a game where you shoot people with bullets made of paint.”

“I know how to shoot.”

“Karim told me you're very good at shooting. That's why I'd be honoured if you would join my paintball team.”

Azia gives her a suspicious look.

“What's in it for me?”

Zenwar looks him directly in the eyes. She does not smile.

“You help us win. *We* beat *them*.”

After a long silence, Aziz nods.

“OK. *We* beat *them*. That's good!”

Zenwar arranges for Karim to bring Aziz over to the squat around the corner, where Zenwar is assembling her team, once the kebab place closes for the night. Zenwar has persuaded the squatters' self-appointed leader, Andre Levein, to put on concerts there every weekend that send magnificent Italian reggae and superb Piedmontese-dialect rap into the bedrooms of the working-class district that surrounds it, until dawn, in the name of culture. She does not want the place to become over-popular, in case it attracts too many people for her to be able to manipulate. Apart from culture, it runs a food bank and has volunteers who provide free legal services for people who cannot afford market rates.

Zenwar pays her bill and puts a donation into the collecting box for Kurdish refugees. The night air is still warm. She strides the short distance to the squat, though she keeps a weather eye out for anyone following her or who

looks as if they might be tempted to harass a woman on her own. Zenwar hates having to hurt people simply to protect herself.

The squat occupies the buildings and grounds of a former primary school, relocated when the site was sold to developers, who ran out of money and abandoned the buildings along with their plans. After a couple of years, squatters moved in and set up a “social centre” in the hope of helping meet the needs of the poorest people in the neighbourhood while bolstering their own egos.

Only one building is in use tonight – the one that houses the former assembly hall of the school. It has a band of dreadlocked Italian trustafarians on the stage, a makeshift bar at the far end, with a few plastic chairs and tables in front of it, and a large space in the middle packed with heaving and gyrating bodies, enclosed in a cloud of tobacco and ganja smoke that appears to move in time to the pulsating music. Zenwar goes to the bar, eventually gets served a beer and carries the bottle to an unoccupied table.

Zenwar decides the best way to ignore the deafening music is to dance to it. She finishes her beer and takes to the floor. As she dances, the tension accumulated in the past week begins to dissipate. She closes her eyes and yields to the rhythm. When she opens her eyes, she sees a group of young men staring at her and joking among themselves. *Poor little monkeys*, she thinks, and returns her attention to the music and her own body. The song ends, and Zenwar's head fills with the sound of a man's spoken voice. It is grating, and Zenwar does not pay attention. She feels a hand on her shoulder and opens her eyes. A slim fellow from the group is standing in front of her, leering and bringing his designer-casual clothes so close that she can inhale his sweat. She flicks his hand away from her shoulder and looks steadily at him while she slowly moves her tongue along the sharpened surfaces of her teeth, left to right along the upper teeth, then right to left along the lower set. When she has finished, there is a filament of blood along the surface of her tongue. The man's smile disappears;

he backs away and rejoins his cronies, saying something to them; they stop smiling, move away. Zenwar returns to her dancing, this time with her eyes open.

The taste of blood in her mouth becomes unpleasant, so she heads to the bar to get another beer. The coldness of the liquid helps to overpower the iron flavour of blood and to heighten the after-taste of the lager. She stands at the door, looking at the dancers yet keeping an eye out for new arrivals.

“Looking for someone? Like me?” The man's face shines but his eyes do not. Zenwar has not noticed him arrive; he must have been here all the time. Nevertheless, it is indeed Andre Levein, the man Zenwar has been waiting for.

She looks into his pudgy face. For him to hear her above the music, she has to raise her voice more than is comfortable.

“Glad you're here, at last.”

Levein fails to note the irony.

“I was doing important stuff, but we've got the paintball attack to discuss. My team is locked and loaded!”

“Not here!” *You fool*, she thinks as she pushes Andre towards the door. His bulk moves unwillingly.

Outside, the autumn air already hints at winter on its way. Zenwar is not dressed for it. She shivers. Andre's overbearing demeanour fails to warm her in the slightest.

“I'm very glad you're ready.” *Humour him*. “With this attack,” she continues, “we'll really strike a blow at international capitalism in its late-phase expression.”

“You're right about that! My name will be justly famous. All the comrades will respect me!”

“Of course. You will reveal for all the world to see the evil inherent in the commodification of human emotion!”

“You know, like, I could hardly have put it better myself!” Andre preens.

“I'll text you the day and time. I'll know the right moment soon. In any case, the High Level Seminar Toward New Perspectives In Challenges On

Issues Around Romance Going Forward will be on September 23 and 24, two weeks from now. On the Uniro campus, of course.”

“Good, good, the sooner the better. As I said, my team is ready. They can't wait for me to lead them into battle!”

“I'll let you know when your wait is over, Andre. In the meantime, reconnoitre the site. And for God's sake don't confuse us with that United Nations lot next door.”

“OK, I know, right? You're United Nation, they're the United Nations. And they act as though you don't exist, even though your campus is next door to theirs.”

“Good. I'm glad you've understood.”

Zenwar sees Karim and Aziz standing in the entrance to the former school compound. Karim is well wrapped up, but Aziz is shivering in shirtsleeves. She waves an arm to beckon them over. They notice, wave back and stride towards them. Zenwar addresses Andre.

“I have an extra member for your team. I want you to welcome him. He is young but fearless.”

Andre looks at the pair coming towards them. He realises who Zenwar is talking about: not the stocky man but the skinny youth. His lip curls.

“Him? If this is Iranian humour, I don't appreciate it.”

Zenwar signals Karim and Aziz to halt, still out of earshot.

“It isn't. Your appreciation is not necessary. Your collaboration is. You welcome Aziz into your team. You make sure he feels a full part of it.”

“We don't have a spare paint gun.”

“He'll have his own, which I shall supply. And one more thing, Andre: he does not drink alcohol. If you, or anyone else here forces any on him, I'll personally rip you to shreds.”

Andre snorts. “Yeah, right, sure thing, girl. You and whose army?”

“I mean it literally.” Zenwar grabs Andrea's arm. He tries to jerk it free but fails. Zenwar moves him into the shadow of the building, out of the light.

She slips her right hand inside her coat; it emerges holding a knife made up of multiple layers of razor-thin steel.

Despite himself, Andre whistles.

“Jesus, a Di Natale!”

“Designed by the master craftsman himself. If you doubt that I know how to use it, I can make you feel otherwise.”

“No, no! I believe you.”

“Good. So are we agreed?”

“Yes. Sure. Of course. I'll protect your boy as if he were my younger brother!”

Zenwar does not see that as a very reassuring prospect, but it will have to do. She emerges from the shadows and signals to Karim and Aziz to join them.

“How on earth do you do it?”

The speaker is Zenwar's boss, Lancia Avenida, Head of Personal Relations at Uniro. Zenwar guesses that she is recalling the days when she might have done it herself: the Swedish woman of Paraguayan origin is tall, apparently blonde, and shapely, though her dancer's muscle is inching toward fat as her life becomes increasingly sedentary. Best not to jump to conclusions, though.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh come on, you *know*, Zenwar dear. I mean how do you wrap our Chief Coordinator around your admittedly powerful little finger?”

Zenwar shrugs. “I'm still in the dark, Lancia. What exactly are you talking about?”

“I mean, our beloved Chief hasn't even graced us with his presence for months. We all assume he's in Myanmar again. Then, out of the blue, he sends an e-mail with various instructions about preparations for the first Romantic Arts Festival International, and in addition, a note concerning you, of all people!”

“Well, I’m glad he’s remembered our existence. What did he say about the festival?”

“Oh, never mind that! The thing is, our computer wizards have calculated that he sent the message from Amsterdam, so he must have been attending the conference on Romance in Post Pandemic Perspective. I mean, it stands to reason, doesn’t it?”

Zenwar shakes her head. Lancia ignores her disagreement and carries on.

“Oh, Zenwar, it’s just like you. You were there at the same time. At least, that’s where you told us you were going. Quite a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Look, Lancia, you’ve got all the evidence of my stay in the Netherlands. I always document my missions in full. And obviously, for such an important subject, the whole conference will be published on video soon, and you’ll be able to see little me sitting in the front row of every session, almost. As for Angelopoulos, well, I looked out for him, of course, as we all do, but I didn’t see him once. You know how he likes to keep a low profile, especially if he isn’t the main speaker.”

Lancia leaves her imposing desk and walks over to Zenwar’s more modest one, so that she can look down at her.

“So, my dear, why do you think it is that he sends us, I mean me personally, a memo with instructions to give you a grade rise?”

Zenwar shrugs again. “I won’t say no to one.”

Lancia carries on. “It’s not as though you’ve added any new qualifications, not this year anyway. And you’re not even Palestinian. Although you do have your daughter at a camp there. What’s that all about? It just makes our Italian colleagues gossip about your being unfit to be a mother – *una madre snaturata*, you know the refrain, they say it about all of us sooner or later.”

Zenwar looks up at Lancia and through her.

“I’ve told you before, that’s the only experience I can give her of being on an equal footing with young men in the Muslim world, the world she comes from.”

Lancia gives no indication of having heard this.

“And what’s more, he tells me I should value your input on all major decisions. Well, I always listen to my subordinates and value whatever they say that’s of any use, but really! I’m the Head of Personal, and you’re just an assistant, so don’t get any funny ideas.”

Zenwar is laughing inside.

“Don’t worry, Lancia. You know how much I respect you. We all do! And I wouldn’t be here, in my present position, if it wasn’t for your help and support.”

“Oh, now you’re talking. That is so very, very true.”

“Incidentally, Lancia, our policy of giving Palestinians precedence in hiring may have outlasted its usefulness. It makes it really easy for the Israelis to keep tabs on them. Like you always said.”

“Did I? Yes, I might have done.” Lancia cannot actually recall having said any such thing.

“You’re so smart, Lancia. By the way, did the Boss say anything about our next big event, you know, the one here in two weeks?”

“Yes. He said he had complete confidence in our ability to produce a fantastic conference that would live in the memory even without his participation in the flesh.”

“I’m sure he’s right.”

“Our Chief Coordinator is always right! Now, if you have no further questions, I have an important meeting in the Coffee Lounge to attend.”

Lancia pirouettes, steadies herself and flounces out of the room. Zenwar looks out of the window facing the river and contemplates how she will ensure the conference is duly memorable. Between the

picturesque river and Uniro's boundary fence is a narrow footpath. It is along that path that her augmented paintball team will come.

The day slated for the attack arrives, a fine autumn day as it turns out. The sun's reflection makes the river Po shimmer, yet there is already a nip in the air and wind from the distant mountains rustles the russet leaves of the trees which line the Po as it flows alongside Uniro's green campus at the edge of the city.

The Very High Level Seminar On Integrating Romance As A Tool Around Post Conflict Challenges is enjoying its second and final day. Already, it is a great success, with participants from the city's social, economic and political elites flocking to the Uniro campus to join the many international participants. Uniro's own experts have more than held their own in the debates on the future of romance, which have at times become heated without ever becoming hostile. Moreover, it has proved to be a fantastic networking event. Right now, between seminars, the Coffee Lounge is packed with seminar participants rubbing elbows with Uniro's regular staff. Only Zenwar remains in the Conference Room, making sure that the windows are open to let in a maximum of fresh air and projectiles. She feels calmly confident that her plan will work, and that the attack on Uniro will be bloodier and attract far more attention than those who initially devised it could have dreamed.

A voice hails her from the doorway.

"Zenwar, you are just too good, using your coffee break to tidy up the room for everyone. Look, I've brought you a nice cup of tea. Camomile, no sugar, that's your preferred, isn't it?"

"Lovely. Thank you, Stefy."

Stefy Rollo is currently secretary to the Vice Coordinator, Frank Feydeau, and a valuable ally in the feminist struggle within Uniro. She tosses her dark curls back from her thin shoulders as she brings the cup over to Zenwar.

"Care, it's hot!"

*I guess it'll settle the nerves I don't have*, Zenwar thinks as she accepts the cup and takes a wary sip.

“Just the job!”

Zenwar manoeuvres Stefy away from the front rows and they both sit, Zenwar in an aisle seat and Stefy next to her.

The room fills as groups of people drift back in after the break. Zenwar looks for Feydeau but doesn't see him. She leans towards Stefy and asks whether Feydeau is coming to the session.

“Of course he is. He wouldn't lose New Impetuses in Love and Marriage Architectures. Wouldn't lose it for the world! It's his current maximum focus, at least until his wife escapes again.” Frank Feydeau is known for his uxorious nature; it is perhaps the main reason that Zenwar has failed to seduce him for the cause.

Stefy places a hand on Zenwar's arm and gives her a conspiratorial smile. “Why, Zenwar, are you planning one ambush against his outmoded gender stereotypes?”

“Who, me? I would never try to harm Frank's reputation. I love the man. Don't we all?”

*He'll be dead soon enough*, Zenwar thinks.

The seminar gets under way without Frank. The Italian government has sent along an expert from the Economic Incentives Unit in the Expanding Families Department of its Ministry of Italian Values to lecture this multinational captive audience on its own many achievements, and the woman is soon well into her stride.

Zenwar feels excitement mounting in the room as the audience is led to imagine the myriad ways in which financial incentives could help boost healthy family romance. She herself is on tenterhooks, hoping her squad will not arrive before its designated victim does, but then a side door slides open and Frank Feydeau comes quietly into the room, heads turning in response to the charisma he exudes despite his attempt to be unobtrusive.

Frank notices Zenwar staring at him, smiles in return, and makes his way along the walls to the empty seat nearest her, a couple of rows in front of Stefy. Soon, he too is transfixed by the scenarios outlined by the suave speaker from the Ministry.

*Poor boy, thinks Zenwar, I'd rather it wasn't you, but you're the only person at the Romance Office that the world has heard of. Knows and loves, even, after those Valentines Day events two years ago. When you die, the world will notice, and tremble as Persia's day of judgement upon it approaches!*

And now she can barely wait for the moment to arrive, for her squad to get here and bring her plans to fruition. But where are they? Zenwar brings her breathing under control and concentrates on the speaker's words, though her heart is battering her chest from the inside.

Her concentration is broken by a window rattling. Several people start; some turn towards the sound, fear on their faces. Zenwar remembers that several delegates are from conflict zones, where fear is a reasonable response to sudden loud noises. But this is just an errant bird getting too close to a window Zenwar had not opened, since it is not on the target side.

The room settles; the speaker continues. Zenwar sees Frank smile to himself. She counts her heartbeats, willing them to slow down.

The audience hears the voices first, forcing their way in through the windows that Zenwar opened and drowning out the good news from the Italian government. Are those songs? No, rhythmic chanting, in Italian, mixed with the international language, broken English, and getting even louder as the chanters come closer to the Romance Office's Conference Centre.

The woman from the Ministry looks puzzled, then peeved. She mutters something in Italian under her breath. Zenwar forces herself not to show the exultation she feels. She pulls Stefy forward off her chair and forces her down so that she is shielded by the chairs in front of them. There is a volley of subdued shots, then screams as paintballs fly in through the windows facing the path by the river. They splatter against walls, furniture and the ceiling. The

squad is getting its distance. A second volley adds to the hues overlying the institutional colouring of the room. Several invitees yelp as they are struck. Everyone dives for cover, including the now-flustered speaker. Only Frank Feydeau rises to his feet and approaches the open windows.

Zenwar offers a secular prayer: *Get him, Aziz! Shoot the bastard! Shoot him dead!*

Frank, though, is still on his feet. He moves away from the window, through a side door onto a balcony and towards the fire escape.

Zenwar realises he is going to confront the attackers. She wants to see this, to see him die. Ignoring the mayhem in the room, she gets to her feet and follows the Vice Coordinator. Her great moment, the moment she has been planning and preparing for, is coming. Even if she is caught, tortured and imprisoned, it will not have been in vain.

From the top of the fire escape, she sees Frank approach the fence that separates the Romance Office from the outside world. The attackers are wearing bulky, shapeless camouflage gear that renders them indistinguishable; hoodies, Guy Fawkes masks or balaclavas make them faceless. Zenwar only recognises Aziz by the boy's gun: a real one. He points it at the man on the other side of the fence.

In exultation, Zenwar yells “Take that, Papa – Pa – Patriarchy! Patriarchy! Take that, Patriarchy!!” but nobody can hear her as the third volley explodes.

For some reason, Frank is still on his feet.

Zenwar sees Aziz struggling with his gun, then Frank clawing at the fence, climbing it to get at the attackers. They hadn't bargained on retaliation, or even resistance. Their job is done; there is no shame in retreating now. Off they run, hell for leather, back in the direction they came from. Only Aziz is left, struggling to un-jam his gun. Then Frank is upon him, stretching his hands to grab the weapon. Aziz steps back, out of his reach.

“Stop!” Frank yells. Aziz seems not to hear him, just moves backwards pointing the weapon he cannot fire, until he loses his footing on the mud of the

riverbank and slips, in what seems to Zenwar to be slow motion, into the swift-flowing water of the Po.

*Can the boy swim?* Zenwar asks herself. It seems improbable.

None of her squad turns back to help him. The current pulls Aziz into mid-stream; the river is not wide at this point. Then it is carrying him downstream. Frank hesitates on the bank; he sheds his jacket, kicks off his elegant shoes and dives in.

Zenwar scuttles down the fire escape. She jogs alongside the fence until she reaches a gap she knows in the wire, which no-one has bothered to fix. She eases herself through it. From the path on the other side, she sees Frank in mid-stream, swimming with strong strokes and cutting the distance between him and the bobbing head of the boy being propelled downriver in front of him. Zenwar starts to run along the path, past the confines of the Romance Office in the direction the river is carrying them, but an abundance of riverside trees means they are soon out of sight. Nevertheless, Zenwar carries on running, her thoughts on the boy.

Zenwar passes a couple strolling in the direction of the Romance Office. “Bon dí,” they mumble, but she does not hear their greeting. Her evident distress catches their attention for an instant before they turn their gazes back to each other. Nobody else seems to be about at this time of day.

Zenwar slows to a jog, stops to catch her breath, starts to run again. She feels like crying, though she cannot tell whether it is for the failure of her murderous plan or for the fate of the boy.

Zenwar carries on past the borders of the Uniro campus, along a paved path that she and many others have often used for jogging to keep fit, or to get fit. There is no sign of anyone in the water. She passes a couple of rowing boats tied up at a partially hidden landing stage below the pathway; they are empty. Something nags at her subconscious. She stops. She hears the sound again, more clearly. It is a cough, a low, choking cough.

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