

## Noir Casino 1943

by Raúl Fresneda, MSPE

**Editor's Note:** Following is an excerpt, translated into English, from *Noir Casino 1943*, a play written in Spanish by Thousander Raúl Fresneda. Inspired by *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*, this play includes historical, ethical, and philosophical themes. At its premiere on January 24, 2026, in Gavà, Spain, the play received positive reviews that recognized its strong script. The full play runs for about two hours and includes several original songs (such as a jazz piece in English, a fado in Portuguese, and a tango in Spanish). Later this year, *Noir Casino 1943* will be performed in other towns throughout Spain, including Manresa, Castelldefels, Sitges, L'Hospitalet, and Barcelona. Our Thousanders are invited to join Raúl's Ning group, "Theatre, Literature, and Philosophy in the Performing Arts," to engage in discussions.

CAFÉ LISBOA LISBOA

# NOIR CASINO 1943

UN REFUGIO EN EL EXILIO

INTRIGA AMOR  
REDENSIÓN  
LOCHA ESPERANZA

LISBOA

Una obra de teatro de cine negro

Sábado 24 de enero de 2026  
a las 19.00 h

Espai Maragall (Gavà)

## ACT I: SCENE 1

*The casino is in darkness. A beam of light illuminates NARRATOR 1, who is dressed in a black toga and a black-and-white mask. He enters alone and stands in front of the audience. He holds a sheet of paper in his hand. Another dim beam illuminates the static silhouette of MAX STAR behind him. The revolver in MAX's hand points at the floor. A shot is fired.*

### NARRATOR 1

*(Reads.)*

A shot. Silence. Blood spreads across the casino floor. Max, the owner of this place, still holds the gun. Whom has he saved? Her? Himself? The world? Not even he knows.

*(Pause.)*

He lowers the gun. He looks at the body.

*(Looks at the audience.)*

Perhaps we still have time to stop the bullet.

*(The lights on MAX fade out, and he disappears from the scene.)*

*(REFUGEE 1 and REFUGEE 2 enter, carrying bags and a large suitcase. They move nervously, looking disoriented, and sit down at a table.)*

### NARRATOR 1

*(Points to them.)*

Days earlier, a new wave of refugees arrived.

*(Reads.)*

Lisbon, 1943. One of the last ports of entry for those fleeing World War II. Although neutral, Portugal, under Salazar's regime, restricts the entry of refugees, forcing them to live in hiding and change their identities to avoid being detained or deported. Transit visas, also known as *keys to exile*, are their only hope for a new life. Even if the refugees are persecuted, having a visa allows them to set sail for South America or other distant destinations. But the government has halted the issuance of visas; and for many people, their only chance is to procure visas on the black market.

*(INÉS DA SILVA, VITORIA DE LUCA, MARCO DELACROIX, and COMMANDER FERREIRA enter. They spread out across the stage and settle at various tables. MARCO stays in a corner, visibly restless.)*

### NARRATOR 1

*(Points at them.)*

Meanwhile, others are trapped in the dilemmas of their own conscience.

*(Pause. NARRATOR 1 looks at the audience, then shows the sheet of paper.)*

I only have this sheet of paper; there is nothing else written. I am a narrator. I never thought the day would come when I wouldn't know how a story continues. All I can say is that the fate of our protagonists depends, in some mysterious way, on you.

*(In the background, the characters murmur and look at each other, confused.)*

*(NARRATOR 2 enters, dressed the same as her companion. She walks decisively and stands next to NARRATOR 1.)*

### NARRATOR 2

*(Interrupts.)*

I refuse.

### NARRATOR 1

*(Surprised.)*

How dare you interrupt me? Can't you see we're in the middle of a performance? Besides, who are you?

### NARRATOR 2

A real narrator. I know the outcome of this story, and I refuse to let the script be rewritten. Neither the audience nor the characters can escape their fate.

*(The characters stir, whispering and gesturing intensely.)*

### NARRATOR 1

*(Shakes his head.)*

You're a relic. Hell, so am I. I want to reinvent myself.

**NARRATOR 2**

You think we're outdated? Are you sure?

*(Thinks.)*

I've never thought about it. But you're talking about giving up control. What if the whole thing falls apart?

**NARRATOR 1**

Wouldn't you like to do something different? What if, for once, the characters' destinies and the pre-written stories could be changed? There's nothing to lose by trying. It might even turn out well. If we see that it doesn't work, we'll just go back to doing what we always do.

**NARRATOR 2**

*(Hesitates.)*

I don't know. I don't know if I should. Do something different? But I'm tempted.

*(Thoughtfully.)*

Let me try something.

**NARRATOR 1**

*(Suspicious.)*

Are you sure?

**NARRATOR 2**

Don't give me that. I know what I'm doing.

*(Looks at the audience.)*

In this city, where danger and hope intertwine, one man becomes the key to many destinies. His name is Max Star, at least here in Lisbon. But perhaps somewhere else, in another reality, there is another Max Star making different decisions.

*(The NARRATORS look at the audience. Behind them, the characters look up. Some murmur; others show gestures of complicity or concern.)*

**NARRATOR 1**

Welcome, dear audience, to our refuge: Noir Casino, 1943.

**NARRATOR 2**

Where heroes are fragile, victims are many, and decisions... always have consequences.

*(The NARRATORS exit.)*

**End of scene.**

**ACT I: SCENE 2**

*The atmosphere is dimmed. Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" begins to play. A light briefly highlights each character as they speak. Voices overlap, creating a theatrical cacophony of thoughts and emotions. The characters' inner voices loop like echoes of conscience. There is no dialogue but rather an ethical and existential counterpoint. A symphony of dilemmas fills the air. Duty versus desire, corruption, fear, flight, blind obedience. The result is an emotional tapestry of sound that conveys the moral fracture of a Europe at war.*

**INÉS**

*(At a table with several cards from a poker deck scattered before her.)*

I have to choose: duty or desire. What's the price?

*(Audio loop: Duty or desire? What is the cost?*

*What if I'm wrong?)*

**VITORIA**

*(At a table, counting bills.)*

In times of war, business is booming. But what value is there in taking advantage of desperation and not playing fair?

*(Audio loop: And the suffering? Can suffering be ignored? What is the worth of a clean conscience?)*

**MARCO**

*(In a corner, looking around.)*

I've got the visas. They're mine to sell. Stolen, obviously. But is it worth the gamble?

*(Audio loop: Is it worth it? What about the risk?*

*What if they find out?)*

**REFUGEE 1**

*(At a table.)*

I've lost everything. Who have I become?

*(Audio loop: Who am I? Who have I become? Am I only what I've lost?)*

**FERREIRA**

*(At another table.)*

Orders are orders. But what if they're dead wrong?

*(Audio loop: Orders are orders. What if they're wrong? Who takes the blame?)*

## **REFUGEE 2**

*(At the same table as REFUGEE 1.)*

Where will we go?

*(Audio loop: Is there really a safe place? Will we ever get there? What if there's nowhere left to go?)*

*(The music fades out.)*

**End of scene.**

## **ACT I: SCENE 3**

*INÉS and FERREIRA exit. The rest remain on stage. The casino gradually lights up to reveal roulette, poker, blackjack tables, and a bar with side tables and a central bar filled with bottles and a radio. Behind the bar, JOHN skillfully prepares cocktails. In one corner, the refugee area contrasts with the rest of the casino. On the right, a stage for musical performances. At the other end, MAX's office. Jazz music plays.*

*IVETTE and JOHN enter. IVETTE, the waitress, moves between the tables while taking orders in a notebook. She returns to the bar and hands the slips to JOHN, who is mixing cocktails. IVETTE then distributes the drinks. Her movements are mechanical, repetitive.*

*MAN IN A TUXEDO enters and sits down at a table.*

*ESTABLISHED REFUGEE enters, observes the others with the resignation of someone who has been in Lisbon for a long time, and stays near the bar.*

*REFUGEE 1 and REFUGEE 2 rise from their seats and pick up their bags and suitcases. Fatigue and loss are etched into their faces. Their clothes, torn and disheveled, reveal their uprootedness. They walk toward the bar. As they cross the room, their eyes meet those of the customers: some look at them with curiosity, others with indifference.*

*Meanwhile, other customers calculate how to take advantage of the refugees' desperation.*

## **THE OLD-TIMER**

*(Bitterly staring at REFUGEE 1 and REFUGEE 2.)*

Look at these poor people. They still believe they can rebuild their lives.

*(Pause.)*

*(Looking at the audience.)*

Not long ago, I was bathing in an abundance. But now I know there is nothing left.

*(The two REFUGEES approach IVETTE at the bar.)*

## **REFUGEE 1**

Excuse me, can we see Mr. Max Star?

## **IVETTE**

*(Leaves the bar and glances at the luggage.)*

He's not here yet.

## **REFUGEE 2**

We've brought some family jewelry. We want to sell it so we can leave Lisbon.

## **IVETTE**

*(In a soft tone.)*

Max doesn't buy jewelry, although some customers do.

*(From his table, MAN IN THE TUXEDO watches the scene with a cold smile. He takes a sip of his drink without looking away.)*

## **REFUGEE 2**

*(Cautiously, she looks around. She opens a bag and shows a necklace and some jewelry.)*

That's all we have. Can we talk to someone?

## **IVETTE**

*(She looks into the distance.)*

Try the guy in the tux.

*(Pause. Seriously.)*

But remember something: in this place, trusting someone is the first step toward losing everything.

*(MARCO DELACROIX, an old-school rogue with a sophisticated air leaves his corner and goes to the bar. JOHN finishes a cocktail while IVETTE waits by the counter, watching the table of MAN IN THE TUXEDO.)*

**MARCO**

*(To IVETTE and JOHN, ironically.)*

Another night in this earthly paradise. The usual, please.

**JOHN**

Right away.

*(IVETTE walks away with the tray and distributes the drinks among the tables. JOHN prepares MARCO's cocktail.)*

**MARCO**

*(To JOHN, somewhat impatiently.)*

I need to see Max. Do you know if he's arrived?

**JOHN**

Max? No, he's not here yet.

*(MARCO drums his fingers on the bar, stifles a sigh, and leans back. JOHN serves him his cocktail.)*

*(Suddenly, silence. MAX STAR emerges from his office. His presence is imposing: firm, with a hard, intelligent gaze. He is wearing a pale beige suit and a striped tie. He walks calmly towards the bar. All eyes are on him.)*

*(MARCO watches MAX. JOHN arranges glasses and bottles. MAX stops next to them.)*

**MAX**

You're the manager, John. You shouldn't be getting your hands dirty behind the bar.

**JOHN**

*(Smiles.)*

I make the best in town. And from here, I can see everything that's going on.

**MAX**

*(Condescendingly.)*

Whatever you say. Pour me some whiskey.

**MARCO**

Hi, Max, I need you to do me a favor.

*(He shows him a leather box, locked with a padlock.)*

Stash this in the safe for me... for a while.

**MAX**

*(Coldly.)*

What is it?

**MARCO**

*(Smiles.)*

You know me.

*(Short pause.)*

I don't want to risk losing anything tonight.

**MAX**

*(Skeptically.)*

All right.

**MARCO**

I'm going to play some chips at the casino. I'll ask you for it later.

*(MAX nods. MARCO walks away toward the gaming tables.)*

**MAX**

*(To JOHN.)*

Better leave the whiskey for later.

**JOHN**

Do you want the box on the books?

**MAX**

I'd rather not. You know I don't trust anyone.

*(MAX enters his office, a small art-deco-style space. There is a chessboard on the desk. MAX opens the safe and puts MARCO's box inside.)*

*(At the same time, VITORIA stands up. Elegant and confident, she walks forward, her heels echoing in the room. JOHN, seeing her arrive,*



*pours a glass of champagne and leaves it on the counter.)*

*(MAX returns, takes the whiskey JOHN has left for him, and takes a sip. VITORIA waits for him by the bar.)*

*(At that moment, the refugees reject the offer made by MAN IN THE TUXEDO and leave, heads bowed.)*

**VITORIA**

*(Cordial, almost seductive.)*

How curious to see you here, Max. I thought you would avoid me tonight, too.

**MAX**

Hello, Vitoria. How can I help you?

**VITORIA**

I need information. A few hours ago, transit visas were stolen. Many people are worried.

**MAX**

What do you want from me? You expect me to go out and save the world?

**VITORIA**

Come on, Max, you must know something.

**MAX**

All I know is there are two ways: illegal bets or the black market. Neither is accessible to most people.

*(IVETTE returns to the bar after serving drinks, exchanges a few words in a low voice with JOHN, and leaves discreetly.)*

**VITORIA**

*(Ironically.)*

And you also know that we live in dark times, that smuggling networks with bribes and favors control them, and that their seal is extremely difficult to forge.

*(MAX watches her silently, expectantly. He takes another sip.)*

**VITORIA**

There are rumors that they have been authorized by consuls, breaking the prohibition rules. The clandestine networks were caught by an armed group. They may have taken hundreds of them. The situation is tense throughout the country.

*(Incredulous.)*

What have you been doing?!

**MAX**

Staying out of trouble.

*(Pause.)*

And the authorities?

*(COMMANDER FERREIRA enters, walks to a table, and sits down. Some customers look at him uneasily. MAX and VITORIA notice his presence but continue their conversation.)*

**VITORIA**

*(Lowering her voice.)*

They suspect rebel groups, although they're not ruling anything out. There are interests everywhere, and many people want them back.

**MAX**

Are you among them?

**VITORIA**

Of course. I didn't have many, but I've been robbed too. I'm afraid whoever has them won't survive.

**MAX**

If I find out anything, I'll let you know.

**VITORIA**

*(Changing tone.)*

Have you thought about the other thing? Will you join my business?

**MAX**

No, Vitoria. I'm not interested in the black market. I like things the way they are—letting others do as they please while I stay where I am, retired at a comfortable distance.

**VITORIA**

*(Resigned.)*

If that's what you want. My luxury goods are highly sought after. You could help buyers to enjoy them. And you'd get your share.

**MAX**

*(Cynical.)*

You talk about helping? I already do that. I offer alcohol and gambling.

**VITORIA**

All right. I just want to remind you again. If you ever leave Lisbon, sell me your casino.

**MAX**

I'm not going anywhere.

**VITORIA**

I'll wait for you to get over whatever is keeping you here. Although, I don't know if there's a cure in your case.

**MAX**

Am I sick?

**VITORIA**

*(With a faint, knowing smile.)*

Perhaps. I'd say you suffer from anxiety. Anxiety is just the dizziness of freedom, or so they say.

**MAX**

*(Sarcastically.)*

You seem very sure of yourself.

**VITORIA**

Not so much with you. The secret to my success is that, a long time ago, I learned to distinguish between the three types of people. That helped me

see opportunities...

*(Pause.)*

...but I can't classify you.

**MAX**

*(Skeptical, looks at her.)*

Really? Only three?

**VITORIA**

Basically, yes. The banal, who are motivated by superficial things...

*(With contained irony.)*

... the ethical, who question what is right and what is wrong; and the perfect, like Buddha and Jesus Christ, who don't exist in this world, although I've heard of them. Everyone needs something.

*(Pause.)*

And you, Max, where do I place you?

**MAX**

Couldn't someone perfect become banal from one moment to the next, perhaps due to circumstances, the time of day, or bad weather?

**VITORIA**

*(Raises an eyebrow.)*

Possibly.

**MAX**

In that case, put me in any of the three.

*(Pause.)*

What about you, Vitoria?

**VITORIA**

Who knows?

*(She drinks champagne, barely lifting her glass, and leaves it on the counter.)*

It's up to you. I'm off now. I have things to take care of tonight.

*(She turns away without looking at MAX.)*

Bye.

*(VITORIA exits. MAX remains at the bar, deep in thought.)*

*(Two PVDE AGENTS [border/immigration police] in dark uniforms enter. They stay close to the entrance and look at FERREIRA, who nods.)*

*The customers watch them uneasily. Some get up and leave discreetly. MAN IN A TUXEDO stealthily makes his way to the gaming tables, away from the bar. MARCO, absorbed in his game, does not notice the police presence. COLONEL VON SCHATTEN enters. He is a German diplomat with impeccable bearing, wearing an elegant suit and tie. He walks steadily toward FERREIRA, who gestures for him to sit down.)*

**FERREIRA**

Welcome, Colonel Von Schatten.

**VON SCHATTEN**

*(German accent.)*

I come from the embassy.

*(Pause.)*

Commander, this robbery worries us.

**FERREIRA**

I don't think the situation is that serious. We're making progress.

**VON SCHATTEN**

And my country is grateful for that. But it's not enough. We have a list of fugitives who cannot escape from Lisbon. They must be arrested. Under no circumstances should they be allowed to use those visas.

**FERREIRA**

I have received orders from the Minister of the Interior. Tonight, we will settle this matter.

*(MAX and JOHN are at the bar.)*

**MAX**

Problems?

**JOHN**

*(Glances at the agents.)*

Not yet. But just in case, stay close by.

*(INÉS DA SILVA, deputy commander of the PSP [city police], enters wearing a blue uniform. She walks purposefully to FERREIRA's table and remains standing.)*

**FERREIRA**

*(Pointing to Max.)*

Deputy Commander, is that Max Star?

**INÉS**

Yes, Commander.

**FERREIRA**

Invite him over. I want to meet him.

*(VON SCHATTEN watches attentively. INÉS nods and goes to the bar, where MAX waits calmly.)*

**INÉS**

Good evening, Max.

**MAX**

Hi, Inés. Why is there such a heavy police presence tonight? They're scaring away my customers.

**INÉS**

There's been a robbery.

**MAX**

I know. Visas.

**INÉS**

They think someone might have brought them to your casino to sell them.

**MAX**

I see. And they don't know who it is?

**INÉS**

No. But they suspect a few people.

**MAX**

*(Ironically.)*

Doesn't surprise me, in this place.

*(Looks at the agents.)*

Do you think everything is under control, or will there be problems?

**INÉS**

*(Frowns, hesitates for a moment.)*

The commander of the Secret Police came tonight.



**MAX**

The one who's with the German diplomat?

*(Short pause.)*

What's going on?

**INÉS**

*(Gently takes his arm.)*

He asked me to take you to meet him.

**MAX**

What if I don't want to meet him?

**INÉS**

*(Worried, steps back.)*

Max, please. He could order me to take you.

**MAX**

*(With a hint of irony.)*

I see. All right. Let's go meet your commander.

*(FERREIRA makes a sharp gesture. The agents position themselves near the bar. JOHN remains alert. Seeing them make their move, other customers hesitate for a moment and then leave.)*

*(INÉS leads MAX to the table where FERREIRA and VON SCHATTEN are sitting. MAX, tense, glances around uneasily and remains standing next to INÉS.)*

**INÉS**

Commander, allow me to introduce Max Star, the owner of the casino.

**FERREIRA**

*(Shakes his hand firmly.)*

Mr. Star, may I introduce Colonel Von Schatten.

*(Looks at INÉS.)*

I see you've spoken to the deputy commander.

*(Lowers his voice.)*

Do you know anything about that... robbery?

*(IVETTE enters with a box of bottles. Noticing the police presence, she stops at the bar and leaves the box on the counter. JOHN nods at her, discreetly asking her to stay there. IVETTE, nervous, nods. They both look back and forth between the agents and MAX.)*

**MAX**

I'm afraid not, but I'd like to ask the colonel a question.

*(FERREIRA looks uncomfortable. He glances at INÉS and then at VON SCHATTEN.)*

*(At the same time, the officers approach the gaming tables. MARCO and MAN IN THE TUXEDO try to leave, but an officer blocks their way, asks for their ID, and orders them to wait off to the side.)*

**VON SCHATTEN**

Go ahead. Ask your question.

**MAX**

*(Defiantly.)*

Colonel, what, in your estimation, is the true nature of conflict?

*(INÉS looks at MAX, surprised. FERREIRA presses his lips together.)*

**FERREIRA**

*(Smiles smugly.)*

I see you're interested in the colonel's opinion.

You're right to ask, Von Schatten is a cultured man.

**VON SCHATTEN**

*(In a measured voice.)*

It's always complex. Time gives and takes away reasons. But in history, conflict is an evolutionary step.

**MAX**

*(Restrained.)*

And does progress always demand such a bloody toll?

**VON SCHATTEN**

*(Confident.)*

Without conflict, humanity does not advance. Even if the price is the suffering of many, it is the cost that must be paid.

**MAX**

Don't you think that justice, morality, and the common good should prevail over violence and the domination of one over another?

**INÉS**

*(Alarmed, in a low voice, she touches his shoulder.)*

Max, be careful what you say.

*(VON SCHATTEN, visibly annoyed, gives FERREIRA a stern look.)*

**FERREIRA**

*(Furious, confronts MAX.)*

You're treading on dangerous ground! There are questions that should not be asked, Mr. Star. This gentleman is more than a friend; he is a valuable ally. And we are in no position to discuss it.

*(Shouts erupt at the gaming tables, and there is a brief commotion. One agent draws his gun and aims it. The other searches the suspects. Amidst the pushing and shoving, an agent handcuffs MARCO and MAN IN THE TUXEDO.)*

**AGENT 1**

*(To the suspects.)*

Don't resist! You have to come with us.

*(FERREIRA, INÉS, and VON SCHATTEN remain at the table. MAX stands apart, watching the scene from a distance.)*

**VON SCHATTEN**

What's going on?

**FERREIRA**

*(With satisfaction.)*

The arrest, Colonel. I told you we'd settle this matter tonight.

*(The agents lead the two detainees toward the exit. Some customers, still at the entrance, murmur among themselves. MARCO lowers his head as he passes MAX. The agents and detainees leave the casino, followed by FERREIRA and INÉS. All the police officers leave. Shortly after, VON SCHATTEN leaves. Gradually, some customers return inside.)*

**MAX**

*(Addressing everyone.)*

Sorry about the mess, folks. Please continue to enjoy your evening.

*(MAX gestures to IVETTE. She nods, leaves the bar, and walks toward the megaphone. MAX addresses the musicians, the saxophonist, and the image of an orchestra that are on one side of the stage.)*

*(Lowering his voice.)*

Play something to calm everyone down.

*(IVETTE walks over and begins to sing, in English, the jazz song "All is well." The melody, soft and enveloping, conveys calm and hope. The lights dim and a beam illuminates the singer. MAX enters his office.)*

**IVETTE**

*(Sings.)*

All is well.

All is calm, gentle dawn. The breeze sings to me, nothing to fear.

Sunlight dances on the glass, the day begins, all is peaceful. Life whispers with sweet taste. The

leaves whisper songs of love.

The world moves without haste or evil; each step is a dream that wants to shine.

All is well, there is nothing to fear.

The sky takes care of us, the earth is a pleasure.

With every heartbeat, life is given,  
and the soul smiles because everything goes.

All is quiet, gentle sunset,

and life sings to me, all is well.

The faces that pass by carry goodness. It's a simple world full of peace.

There's no rush, there's no shadows coming here,  
only the warmth of what's to come.

All is well, there's nothing to fear.

Heaven watches over us, the earth is a pleasure.

When the night whispers its song,

the world calms down in a single corner. It's all so simple, so beautiful and fleeting, an eternal instant that will never go away.

*(When the song ends, a spotlight finds MAX. He opens the safe, takes out MARCO's leather box, and places it on the desk. He picks the lock and opens it. He stops, incredulous. He picks up a visa and examines it carefully under the light.)*

**MAX**

*(He throws it furiously on the table.)*

Delacroix!

*(Pause. He mutters to himself.)*

Those damn visas! How the hell did he get them?

*(The lights go out.)*

**End of Act I.**

**ACT II: SCENE 1**

*(ANDREA LASKER enters slowly. She is dressed modestly, with a touch of distinction. Her face reflects fatigue. She is the former world chess champion.)*

**LASKER**

*(To JOHN.)*

Good evening. I'm Andrea Lasker. Do you know where I can find Max Star?

**JOHN**

*(Hesitates.)*

Wait a moment.

*(JOHN enters MAX's office, where he is reviewing some documents on the desk. MAX looks up.)*

**MAX**

Yes, John?

**JOHN**

Andrea Lasker is here. She wants to see you.

**MAX**

All right. Tell her to come in.

*(JOHN returns to LASKER.)*

**JOHN**

Ms. Lasker, Max will see you. He's waiting for you in his office.

**LASKER**

Thank you.

*(LASKER walks to the office.)*

*(MAX is standing by the table, waiting, and looking at a document.)*

**LASKER**

Good evening. Mr. Star?

**MAX**

*(He puts the document on the table.)*

Come in. What is it?

**LASKER**

I'm Andrea Lasker—

**MAX**

*(Interrupts.)*

The chess champion. Wanted in several countries. A woman of principles, so they say.

**LASKER**

*(Looks at the board next to the table.)*

I see you play chess, too.

**MAX**

Sometimes. Against myself.

**LASKER**

*(Takes a book out of her coat.)*

I know about you, too. I've read your book. It talks about human rights, freedom, justice.

**MAX**

*(Grabs the book and examines the cover.)*

The author of that book no longer exists.

*(Drops it on the table.)*

Get rid of it. It's dangerous.

**LASKER**

It's hard to stop being what we were. The past always finds a way to catch up with us.

**MAX**

Sometimes you have to step aside. Struggles end when their causes die out. In the end, all that remains are scars.

**LASKER**

I need to talk to you about something. It's urgent.

*(Pause.)*

As you can imagine, the Liberation Movement sent me. We're active all over Europe.

**MAX**

*(Ironically.)*

Didn't you come here to play chess?

**LASKER**

This country is neutral. We took advantage of the tournament to slip in under the radar. Some of my comrades are with me, though I suspect we won't be able to stay long.

**MAX**

Why are you telling me all this? You're taking too much of a risk.

**LASKER**

Are you going to report me?

**MAX**

No. It's not in either of our interests.

**LASKER**

Several people were arrested here last night. I was going to meet one of them, Marco Delacroix. He was seen talking to you before his arrest. I need to know what he said to you.

**MAX**

*(Feigning disinterest.)*

Delacroix? He's just another name among many who come here.

**LASKER**

*(Urgently.)*

Max, I've been investigating. I know Delacroix gave you a box that has disappeared. Now we can't find him, either.

*(Pause, serious.)*

We know he tried to escape after the arrest. We don't think he survived. If you know anything, tell me. It's very important.

*(Silence. MAX looks away for a moment, affected by the news of MARCO's fate, then looks up at LASKER.)*

**MAX**

These days, everything is.

**LASKER**

We can offer you compensation.

**MAX**

I'm sorry, but I can't help you.

**LASKER**

*(LASKER paces the office anxiously. She stops.)  
(Desperate.)*

Max, listen to me. The fate of many depends on what you know. The consequences could be very serious!

**MAX**

Are you aware of the risk I'm taking by seeing you? Have you seen the police outside? I understand, Lasker, but all that no longer exists for me. I paid a high price. Those days are over.

**LASKER**

I understand the risk, but lives are at stake.

*(Pause.)*

What's left of you?

**MAX**

I've changed my priorities. I realized that justice, rights, and freedom are just empty words when you witness the carnage with your own eyes.

*(Pause. Changes tone.)*

Tell me, what are you fighting for?

**LASKER**

I still believe in justice.

**MAX**

*(Cynical.)*

Justice. It's hard to know what that means.

**LASKER**

Perhaps.

*(Moved.)*

I'm also fighting for my daughter. I lost her father. I want to give her a better future.

**MAX**

I had a daughter, too. I lost her in a bombing raid. She was only eight years old.

*(Looks at the board.)*

She taught me how to play chess.

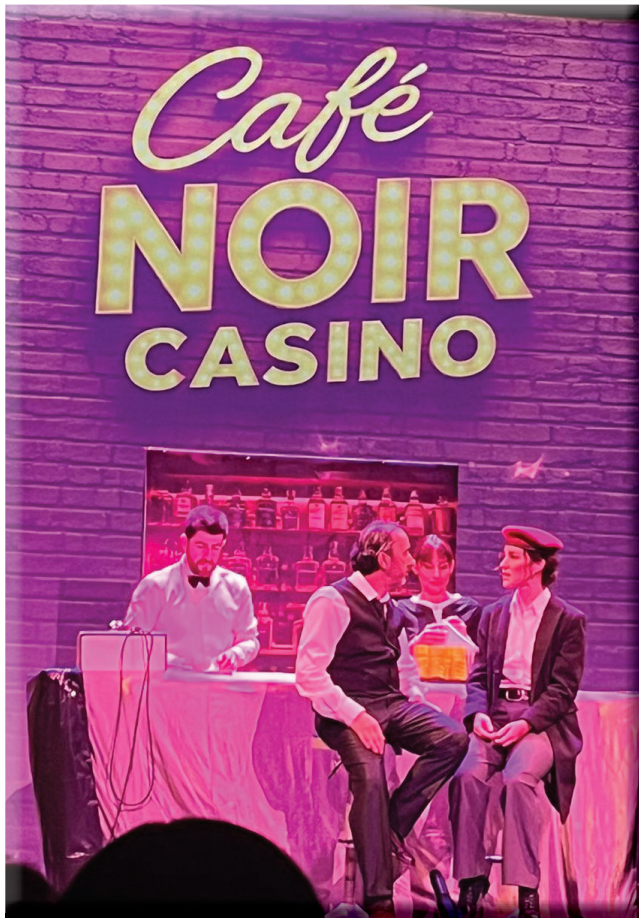
**LASKER**

*(Sincerely.)*

I'm sorry.

**MAX**

Maybe you still have a cause. I appreciate that you continue to believe. I really do. I almost envy you. But don't expect anything from me.



**LASKER**

People still need hope. Justice, even if it costs lives and years, is still necessary. Because in an unjust world, we all end up paying the consequences.

**MAX**

Justice is everyone's responsibility. I chose mine.  
*(Pause.)*

I'm a tired man. Tired of fighting, tired of waiting. I just want to live in peace, if such a thing exists.

**LASKER**

Do you really not believe it's possible to change anything? A better world, even if only a little?

**MAX**

And what does that entail? Have you ever really thought about it? Innocent victims are inevitable.  
*(Contemptuous.)*

Struggles: have you never considered that not everything is worth it for them?

**LASKER**

Sometimes. But fighting for a fairer world can't be a mistake.

*(Explodes.)*

Max, this is vital! What did Delacroix tell you?

**MAX**

*(Coldly.)*

Don't try to drag me into something that doesn't concern me. Look elsewhere.

*(He turns his back and picks up the documents on the table.)*

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to.

**LASKER**

*(Accusingly.)*

If you know something and don't tell me, the consequences will be on your conscience.

**MAX**

*(Turning around, harshly.)*

My struggles ended long ago. I advise you to take care of your daughter. Don't waste your time promising hope, especially if you don't know if you can keep your promises.

*(LASKER gives him one last disappointed look. With a gesture of helplessness, she leaves the office silently and heads for the exit.)*

**End of ACT 2.**

**ACT III: SCENE 1**

*Afternoon. The casino is closed. MAX is alone, leaning on the bar with a note in his hand. JOHN enters.*

**JOHN**

Hello, Max. You look terrible. What's eating you?

**MAX**

*(He hands him the note.)*

We can't open. They slapped me with a shutdown order this morning.



**JOHN**

*(He reads it quickly and hands it back. Max puts it in his jacket pocket.)*

What are we going to do?

**MAX**

*(With disdain.)*

It's just Ferreira blowing hot air.

*(With determination.)*

I'll take care of it.

**JOHN**

*(Sighs thoughtfully.)*

Simone came by last night. I was really surprised to see her after so long. She was asking about you. Did you see her?

**MAX**

Yes, I spoke to her. She showed up at dawn, when everything had calmed down.

**JOHN**

She seemed to be in trouble.

**MAX**

*(Nods.)*

She told me she's with the Resistance. She came with Andrea Lasker.

**JOHN**

Knowing Simone, I'm not surprised. What are they really up to?

**MAX**

Helping refugees.

**JOHN**

*(Surprised.)*

And why can you help them with that?

**MAX**

Because I have what they need.

**JOHN**

I don't understand.

**MAX**

Do you remember Delacroix?

**JOHN**

*(Nods.)*

**MAX**

The box he made me keep was full of transit visas. I was supposed to give them to Andrea Lasker on the night of the arrest.

**JOHN**

*(Alarmed.)*

The stolen ones?!

*(MAX nods. JOHN becomes agitated.)*

**JOHN**

Who else knows you have them?

**MAX**

I've only told you. But more and more people are becoming suspicious.

**JOHN**

Have you thought about destroying them?

**MAX**

All the time. But for some reason, I don't. I can't destroy them or hand them over to the police.

**JOHN**

*(He turns, rests his hands on the bar, and remains silent. He looks at Max.)*

You know, Max? I think it's moments like this that truly test a person. Part of me wants to tell you to get rid of them right now. But then I remember everything we've been through, first in the war, then here, and I honestly don't know what to tell you.

**MAX**

If I get rid of them, we'll be rid of the problem.

**JOHN**

*(Bitterly.)*

I don't know. Are you sure? When we were younger, we thought rebellion had no limits, that it justified all kinds of sacrifices. We saw what that caused, the horrors it left us with. Now I realize that between doing nothing and risking everything, there are many more options.

**MAX**

*(Coldly.)*

Why should I help anyone? We escaped the war, came to this city, and thrived. Many others tried and failed. We started with an old bar and a few gambling tables. Our luck has been nothing more than a winning streak, that's all. I have no intention to risk my head. It would be irresponsible.

**JOHN**

Maybe we should consider what's right without risking more than necessary.

**MAX**

*(Sarcastically.)*

What's right? Some have said it's happiness, morality, knowledge, God, or duty. It all depends on what we choose it to be. That's how we justify everything.

**JOHN**

Do you remember that night when we saved that family from the bombing?

**MAX**

*(Tensing.)*

That was a lifetime ago. We were kids.

**JOHN**

And now we're cynical old men, is that it? The grateful look on that mother's face, didn't it mean anything to you?

**MAX**

*(Disillusioned.)*

At the time, it meant everything.

*(With disdain.)*

And then the world—what was the point?

**JOHN**

It mattered to that family. And to us. It reminded us of our humanity.

*(Brief pause.)*

And what if Simone were that mother now? Would you leave her to her fate?

*(MAX remains silent. JOHN watches him.)*

**JOHN**

What's right isn't always the obvious, Max. Sometimes it's hard to see what's at stake. But what if it means rebelling against ourselves, against everything that drives us to be less than what we could be?

*(Brief pause.)*

Even if there are risks, when everything is falling apart around us, isn't that when every good action shines the brightest?

**MAX**

*(Sighs. Looks at the closure notice.)*

The right thing: Lasker and Simone are convinced they're doing it. But what is the right thing, John? Do you even know? Because I don't.

**JOHN**

*(Gently.)*

Maybe I don't know, either. But I believe it can't be imposed, because it comes from the fight against absurdity and injustice. It should be based on compassion, respect for others, and standing together against a violent and senseless world. Maybe those should be the limits that prevent us from ever witnessing the horrors of our age.

**MAX**

*(Laughs to himself.)*

Sometimes I wish I could see the world the way you do.

*(Pause, hesitantly.)*

And what do you suggest I do?

**JOHN**

Whatever you must, Max, whatever you must. But whatever you decide, do it soon.

*(MAX remains thoughtful and silent. JOHN exits.)*

**End of Scene.**

**ACT III: SCENE 2**

*A soft light isolates MAX, who is standing in the semi-darkness of the empty casino. In front of him is a table with a matchbox, the visas, and a theater script. MAX lights a match, looks at the visas, hesitates, and then blows it out. INÉS enters and approaches MAX. The atmosphere remains dreamlike.*

**INÉS**

Max, what are we doing here?

**MAX**

We're dreaming.

**INÉS**

But we're aware. It doesn't feel like a normal dream.

**MAX**

It must be a lucid dream. Don't overthink it.

**INÉS**

*(Looks around.)*

Have you noticed? We're on a stage, and there's an audience in the back.

**MAX**

Yeah, there's even a script on the table.

**INÉS**

*(Flips through the script.)*

Let me see. Look at this. Title: *Noir Casino, 1943*. There's a playwright and a director mentioned.

**MAX**

Makes sense. Dreams must be like cinema or theater. They need a script and a director.

**INÉS**

*(Flipping pages.)*

There are blank pages. I can't see the future.

**MAX**

It would be easier if we could. But that's how things work.

**INÉS**

Can you imagine if dreams were reality and our lives a script? That we were actors performing in a theater?

**MAX**

Then we would be daydreaming.

*(Pause.)*

But leave it. Even if it feels real, this is just a dream.

*(Looks at Inés.)*

Have you heard anything from Delacroix again?

**INÉS**

No, nothing. I don't think we'll see him again.

*(Touches the visas.)*

Are these the visas?

**MAX**

Yes. I've always had them.

**INÉS**

When I asked you before the search and you said you weren't hiding anything, I didn't believe you. Delacroix gave them to you, right?

*(MAX nods slowly.)*

**INÉS**

Ferreira suspects it, too. But I think, deep down, he doesn't really care. He's trapped in his own world as well. Sometimes I think he's another victim.

*(Through the mist, the NARRATORS appear from opposite sides of the stage. MAX and INÉS turn to them.)*

**NARRATOR 1**

What does it matter, Max? Dream or reality: it's just a nuance.

**NARRATOR 2**

You're troubled by the same thing, wherever you are. The question isn't where you are but what you will do.

**MAX**

*(Surprised.)*

Who are you?

**NARRATOR 1**

The narrators of this story.

**MAX**

*(Skeptical.)*

I never would have imagined such things.

**NARRATOR 2**

Why not? Don't dreams exist, just like us?

**MAX**

*(Bitterly.)*

Can you help me? I have to make a decision.

**NARRATOR 1**

Ask the audience.

**MAX**

*(Curiously.)*

Can they speak?

**NARRATOR 2**

Probably. You can choose whatever you want, but if you ask the audience, their decision will prevail. You'll have to accept it and act accordingly.

**MAX**

Why does it have to be that way?

**NARRATOR 2**

Everything has rules and consequences. Should dreams be any different?

*(The NARRATORS fade into the mist. Brief silence.)*

*(MARCO DELACROIX appears, in pajamas and looking carefree. MAX and INÉS watch him.)*

**MARCO**

*(Yawning.)*

I was sleeping. I heard someone asking for me. I'm still alive.

*(Emphatically.)*

It wasn't easy. They detained me, but we all know how this works. Someone owed me a favor, and let's just say I found a way to escape Lisbon.

*(Smiles.)*

Now I live on the French Riviera—parties, dominoes, the good life. Sometimes luck smiles on us in the most unexpected ways.

**MAX**

*(Sharply.)*

What a mess you've gotten me into, Marco! Better go back to your Riviera!

**MARCO**

*(Shrugs.)*

I meant no harm, Max. But suit yourself. I'll go dream somewhere else.

*(MARCO fades away. INÉS and MAX are left alone on stage. MAX walks a few steps, thoughtful, then stops.)*

**MAX**

Inés, do we face the world or stay the same? Me in my casino, you in the police, both surrounded by the same rot?

**INÉS**

If we can change, I'd rather take the risk and pursue my true desires. I can't keep obeying orders that go against who I am.

**MAX**

So... do we rebel?

**INÉS**

I don't know, Max. Risk always has a price.

**MAX**

And what could happen to us?

**INÉS**

Die trying?

**MAX**

*(Cynically.)*

Death. Isn't that inevitable? It comes for us all in the end.

**INÉS**

But what if the choice isn't ours? What if free will is just an illusion? Or if we're born predetermined to be who we are?

*(Pause.)*

Whether we are good or bad, flawed or gifted, are we defined from the start?

**MAX**

Inés, it's unbearable to dream with you.

*(Pause.)*

It's enough for me to believe that I make my own decisions to choose good over evil, even if we don't know for sure what each one means.

**INÉS**

And what if it doesn't even matter what we choose?

**MAX**

Maybe it doesn't. Perhaps we are just stardust, doomed to disappear.

*(Pause.)*

But if that's true, why not shine while we can?

**INÉS**

And if we decide to try, what can we do to change our lives?

*(Lowers her gaze, thoughtful. Then lifts her head.)*

Why don't you ask the audience? Someone might help us decide.

**MAX**

Yes, it's possible. We have nothing to lose.

*(Picks up the matchbox and the visas from the table, walks to the edge of the stage, and addresses the audience.)*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I have a box of matches in one hand and these visas in the other. What would you do? Would you burn them to save yourself, even if it means condemning innocent people to darkness? Or would you risk everything for the cause—for Simone, Lasker, and the lives of those refugees? What should I do? The decision... is yours.

*(Bends slightly toward two people in the front row.)*

And you, what would you do? Yes, you. Would you save yourself or help others?

*(Pause, listens.)*

And you?

*(Pause, looks to the back.)*

And all of you?

*(Listens for a few seconds. MAX smiles faintly, melancholic. Looks at Inés.)*

When it comes to important questions, the

answers aren't always easy. But we've taken the first step. Let's think about what they've told us.

**INÉS**

When we wake up, will we remember any of this?

**MAX**

I don't think so. Dreams are forgotten. But as you've heard, the audience's decision will prevail.

**INÉS**

But, Max, what if the narrators, the playwrights, or someone else had already planned that decision?

**MAX**

*(Shrugs indifferently.)*

How could we know? This is just a dream.

*(Brief pause.)*

But even dreams can change lives.

*(MAX and INÉS remain still, staring into the void.)*

**End of scene. Ω**

