

## **Revelations**

The road was familiar although Rada usually travelled it with more company. At least Mitzi was either already in Brashlyan or driving with her for the previous voyages. Or Alex and Bilyana were picking her up in Sofia and trying to get updates on thousand and one friends during the journey. Rada passed Tsarevo and stopped to fill the tank to the brim. Brashlyan was not known to have a gas station, although the monastery had a car as did Father Ivan. The monastery had an ample reservoir for emergencies and one was installed by Grandma Elka few years ago, but better having a full tank than sucking the Esmarch's tube. The young doctor checked for the umpteenth time the mid-size cooler that was full with medicaments. Mitzi had assured that the freezer was adequate and it would not be the old ZIL that she had to struggle to close, but one could never be too cautious. The rest would be fine, she could not imagine how once upon a time doctors managed to keep everything sterile without the modern facilities. She had four full boxes of sterile syringes, a block of bandages, catgut to stitch the Jeep a cover with the box of needles of all sizes, atraumatic needles with P.G.A., full set of clamps, scalpels and what not to equip a surgery, scrubs, sterile gloves and masks. Rada had calculated that she had enough instruments to survive without sterilization over twelve hours without interruption. Mitzi had described the hideous wound that was to be operated but a diagnosis over a memory of a scar that had healed seventy-something years before her grandma had seen it – and it was half a century ago - was a risky one. On the other part of the equation was that the patient had lived to be almost ninety, so the surgery was a success. Should be a success, she cautioned herself.

Vantche was going to come with the anesthesia and she was good with children as she frequently worked in the emergency and one saw a lot there. Tantche had had tons of surgical practice before switching to her psychos, chances were that she had not forgotten everything. She had even promised to go and volunteer in the children's yard of the hospital which was always understaffed. Between the three of them they should be able to do it fast, as that was Grandma Elka's main concern. There would have been already good fifteen to twenty minutes lost from the golden hour after the wound, or may be more, who knew. Additional trouble would be the significant blood loss and lossif's blood type – he had been the rare AB positive group if the

records were right. Oddly enough but Mitzi had the same blood type and she had offered vein-to-vein transfusion in case of need. However Rada would prefer not to do it. The young doctor had stored three precious units in the cooler after she personally had pleaded with her former patients to donate for the cause of a small child. She had arranged it discretely the day before she had left and was sure that she had enough time till the end of shelf life so to speak. Rada had the IVs and the stands no matter how old-fashioned. She would need to run a test of everything the day before. Gosh, she needed light and it was supposed to be at the time of a storm, what if the electricity would be cut off? She needed an independent generator, she could not remember if there was one at Grandma Elka.

It was such a pleasant early evening that Konstantin was reluctant to go and open the heavy doors to see who was banging on them. His heart did a joyous somersault at the red Jeep and Rada hanging from the window and laughing.

'I was about to trot back but if you don't mind company...'

'Don't lie, you never trot! Better get in, you know it is late and dark things may lurk outside!' Konstantin opened the gates for the Jeep to slip in the spacious yard. He got a quick peck on the cheek and Rada inquired, 'Where is your fridge and freezer?'

'Don't worry, I will feed you!'

'No, silly, I need to put the blood there!'

'What?'

'Let's do it and I will explain, please, I have been on the road without a break, I don't know how much this cooler holds at all, although I kind of tested it!'

'If I open the door, all this will bury me under! What did you bring with you?'

'Just get the cooler, OK?'

'Now, if you do that my tomatoes are going to freeze!'

'Who cares about your frozen tomatoes, my blood needs one degree and it is getting it!'

'I was positive your blood temperature is somewhat hotter. Rada, what is this?'

'Three units of AB positive and the cooling liquid that kept them safe while I drove. Will you hold this door for me please!'

'I have a red wine for supper, shall I took out other glasses as well? And you are driving under sunshine, how come?'

'Listen, nobody is touching this blood, even if you are inviting the local vampires. It is for Grandpa.'

'Grandpa Schlosser was partial on beer if I recall correctly but people change. Is AB plus his preferable brand or we may go and stock locally?'

'Grandpa Schlosser is still drinking beer; this one is for Grandpa lossif, which is why it is AB positive.'

Rada closed the fridge and lifted with one finger Konstantin's dropped jaw. 'No, I had not gone mad but may be I am a little more trusting than needed. Do you think that we can sit outside, get that glass of wine and I will tell you the entire story as Mitzi told me.'

Rada thought that she would shock Konstantin and he would tell her to go have her head checked. Instead he gave her a brief summary of Gran's diary. She told him about Grandpa Schlosser's story about the time opened with the right key. He promised to reintroduce her to the home snake, a peculiar yellowish creature that lived next to the big fireplace in the kitchen. It was long after midnight when Rada climbed in her usual bed on the top floor and Konstantin into his grandparents' big double bed yet neither of them managed to get asleep immediately.

'I am going to cut the grass at the monastery. Should be back by midday. Have some rest or come to pick me up. Kosta'

The message was put on the fridge with a cheerful magnet in the form of a ladybug. Her luggage was taken out of the Jeep and put in the middle of the kitchen for her to distribute it. Rada stretched and started separating her surgical stuff from the packs of towels. She was happy that she knew the house like the palm of her hand. She would use the first floor sitting room as an operation room as it was big enough. Vantche and Tantche could share a room and lossif would need a room after that, preferably next to Mitzi. She would keep her top floor room. The house had enough space to accommodate many more people without a strain

and Rada had ten days to put it right. The towels were brought to the storage room on the second floor, her few personal items to the attic and the rest to the sitting room. The sitting room will need to be stripped of everything and sterilized, she had the light and it should be started immediately to debug the potential troubles. The young doctor glanced at her watch – she had time to get together a lunch and go find Kosta at his job.

Mitzi was right again. The time was not a straight line, it may coil around and repeat itself, Konstantin thought looking from his vantage point at the monastery meadow how Rada was coming along the road with gran's picnic basket. If she were not dressed in her shorts and T-shirt and her head were covered by kerchief rather than her Tilley, she could have been any of his ancestor's wives bringing the food to their husbands who were cutting the grass around. Well, his jeans were tighter than the brown homemade pants of the people who would wait for that lunch, but his shirt was as white as theirs, albeit of different cut. Rada saw him and waved. His heart did a somersault. He loved her and wanted to be like that forever. He had to find a way to convince her that she wanted it also.

'If you have almost finished your agricultural foray may I suggest that we drive to Tsarevo and get some more towels and have an early supper? I will need a table made as the sitting room one is too wide, we cannot stitch two of us at the same time and we will be short of time to do it one at a time.'

'What else you think you need?'

'I will borrow your UPS for the day – what if the electricity cuts off.'

'We have the solar panels attached to the emergency lights battery, I will move you the lights there. Will that keep you from the UPS?'

'Deal! While you finish here I will go see Mother Ephrosinia if she needs anything.'

Mother Superior was very happy to see the young woman for now she had someone else to talk to how great Konstantin had been, she said. She was even happier to learn that Rada was staying for the entire

summer as most incidents in the village tended to be field work-related. Luckily the year had been good this far and few cuts did not require much attention.

'Elka told me that this year there would be more young people in Brashlyan.' The phrase was non-committal but Rada sensed the question.

'Yes, Mitzi is coming in few days; two of my friends will be here also. Did Grandma Elka mention something more about the coming one?'

'She did, she said that Saint Elijah will be on a stormy day and should be celebrated here at the monastery by the villagers. That means someone will be coming and she did not want anyone to meddle there.'

'So you know also... Why nobody told me before?'

'Not because we don't trust you, you just were not ready Rada! It is a big job to keep the time flowing right and if you can – to intervene properly. Sometimes people know beforehand, sometimes they find afterwards. Your grandfather had been instrumental for saving this place when he had been a very old man and he had kept saying "Brashlyan is like coming back home where I belong!" It is up to you now to make him feel that so intensely that he will carry it for another seven decades. You don't have kids of your own but I trust you will find what needs to be done. Brashlyan is a special place not only because the time could mesh here. It is a place to come to save your soul not only the body. A lot of things start here that we do not understand and whoever comes here it is not by incident. It is a turning point. Not many people know it and even less would agree with it, but it is so nevertheless.'

'Rada, tell me, is there any chance you are planning to open a bed and breakfast somewhere and are stocking on towels for it? I think we bought at least forty!'

'They don't ask for bread and water, do they? You can always use them after that. The washing machine and the dryer work, don't they?'

'Everything works. Listen, are you sure it is not just Mitzi's way to make you take a vacation?'

'No, she would not go to such a length of deception. This one is serious, I can feel it in my bones. I want to be sure that I have thought it as much as I can. Do you have nets on all the windows in the house?'

'Yes, there are decent mosquito nets everywhere. Why? You are afraid of mosquitoes?'

'I am. Here in this region there were rumors of malaria few years ago. If true and some is still lurking around, post-operative infection is not what I am looking for. Does someone in the village keep goats?'

'Several people have one or two. The biggest herd is at the monastery. You need milk?'

'Yes, I need goat yogurt with honey as I don't know what lossif had eaten as a kid. Mitzi insists that he had not been a picky eater, but she knew him when he was an adult. Will you come with me to ask around what was the menu at the beginning of the century? Granny Martha was so nice last year to even cook me some.'

How one told her best buddy that her feelings had evolved somewhat, well, a lot, mused Rada looking at Konstantin who meticulously ticked off the list of items that Brashlyan needed. He was different in the hidden village, Mother Ephrosinia was correct; he had reached a turning point and started a new life. It was obvious that he was not going to return to Sofia after the fall. Was she ready to drop career, home, friends, everything and move to his grand old house and share his life of simple pleasures? Wait a minute, the voice of sanity urged, nobody had offered her anything more than a temporary shelter and that only because it was required and arranged by his and her grandmas. So back to the initial question how to break the news convincingly. What would Tantche say in such a case: "Jump and while he is surprised, act accordingly!" What would her mom say – probably not much, but would stretch her hand to have a look at her wedding ring set and laugh that it was a magic ring as well. What would her father say: "Faint heart never won a fair lady!" Well, if one eliminated the gender prejudices it was still true, she should be brave and that was it! She had seen that shop on the parallel street; she needed five minutes alone there.

The bathroom door opened without a knock and startled Konstantin who was soaking in the tub . Rada was standing in the frame and the two candles at the tub flickered.

'I am not exactly dressed!' he warned.

'I am counting on it!' said the vision and came closer. Konstantin was immersed in the hot water up to his neck but his mouth went dry as chalk. Rada had left her hair tumbling over her shoulders and all she wore was something white and flimsy, full of shadows in the semi-darkness. She was barefoot and that explained why he had not heard her coming through the silence. The young man hoped that she was not coming to

discuss anything as he was not sure he could produce an entire sentence coherently. The only thought that he could form was that he wanted his hands on her for a start. The temptress came close and touched the water with her fingers giving him a close-up of that transparent excuse for a nightgown or whatever it passed for. She sighed dreamily, opened the dark bottle in her hand and poured its contents in the tub. The subtle aroma of lily-of-the-valley and jasmine mixed with something more exotic wafted in the air. The smile turned to mischievous and Rada entered the tub, nightgown and all. Konstantin thought that he would explode when she crossed the few steps and slid her hands around him. But her murmur demolished what was left of his old world forever.

'I hope you know the practical side as I am a pure theoretician about it!'

The practical guy could not remember a thing. He kissed her and she answered with a series of small, wet kisses all over his face and slid closer to him.

'We will both drown here, let's find a higher ground,' she pulled him after her and stepped out of the basin. Rada stopped for the water to drain a little on the stone tiles. Konstantin's hands were sliding over the drenched negligee with reverence that melted her wary heart. She took the candlestick and led him upstairs to his bedroom. At the door she blew the candles and Konstantin lifted her over the threshold for the ancient Lares not to be offended. His bed was made with silk sheet that had not been there when he left for his bath. The young man put his gentle load on the soft surface.

'It is forever and we both know it, don't we?' he kissed her temple.

'I hoped you would say something like that!' she sighed and pulled him closer. The springs screeched something but they did not hear them in the protective bubble of their shared promise.

Dating with a bodyguard on the neighboring table was not exactly Dimitar's idea of intimacy, but Valkuda had refused to go anywhere with him if there was no security at arm length. Nothing had given him any reason to think he would need it. He was still mostly anonymous despite the heavy press around the funeral and not known to the general public, but she was known enough and people could do the math quickly. Dimitar had Tanassovs' dark colors, but the rest of his features were from his mother's side. His few dates with Valkuda were conducted at places as far from the beaten path as she could arrange them and he was

getting irked at the patronizing. He was looking at his salad and seething about her attitude concerning his father and brother. In the morning he had come across the report of the security group who had transported the empty coffin to Varna or somewhere close to Varna. Dimitar thought that it had been unnecessary risk as by the time the group had started from Sofia the body had been already in Varna and she could have called and canceled the circus. He told her so and the young woman had repeated that those had been the instructions of his grandfather. She had taken precautions to execute them to the letter.

'But he cannot be right about everything even after his death, for God's sake!'

'That is what he wanted, Dimitar, and how he wanted it. May be it was his way to send your brother a message, as you might have guessed who was behind that highway robbery.'

'And if my brother had decided to kill the guards to make it more like a highway robbery, as you describe it? That blood would have been on whose hands? His?'

'Tanas would not have killed the guards!'

'Why not? You insist all the time that I am in mortal danger on his side, so why the guards would be spared?'

'Because they are not important for him and you are. He does not need to kill just for the killing. It is not so easy to hide the disappearance of five people who were expected to arrive in two cars. It is unnecessary trouble. While you are a prime target.'

'But they will not gain anything; all will go to you anyway!'

'I will be just the next on the list, if they miss me somehow.'

Her calmness was unnerving. Nobody could be prepared to die at twenty-five, no matter how much she was paid to do her job. There was something else that moved her and Dimitar did not understand what it was. The dark side of that unknown was making him nervous. Valkuda was looking at him with some maddening superiority, like she was a school teacher and he was a moderately dumb student and she had hope that he would come to the right conclusions by himself. He could not come to a conclusion if he had no idea about the facts, could he? To start with, Valkuda knew a lot about that mythical ring that his grandfather had pursued all his life although he was sure she had not obtained the knowledge from the Tanassovs' diary. She had not commented when he told her that he agreed with his grandfather's conclusion that the ring was

more curse than a blessing, as it had brought misfortune to the family who kept it last. The three last Todorov had died a violent death and the only son born Todorov had perished as a toddler in a tragic accident. The ring had vanished from the face of the Earth at the death of its last owner, mysteriously so and not a wisp of a notion had emerged up and until the last record three months before Tanas Sr. had died. Valkuda's green eyes were like swamps, dangers lurking under the calm surface.

'These are old secrets, Dimitar, may be someone had helped them been buried again until their time comes. The fact that the object is not located by Mr. Tanassov does not mean that it had vanished without trace. It was too mighty a ring to disappear. But consider something else; this ring has what we now call resonance with certain people. Imagine the trouble it may cause in the wrong hands, especially in troubled years. Imagine the imbalance of power it may create.'

'I hope you don't take too serious all that fairytale. What, you turn a ring around your finger and what, the Earth stops spinning? You are a modern woman! And if a simple ring can create such an imbalance of power, than it has to be guarded, not given to a person who has no idea what to do with it and does not believe in it.'

'May be it is guarded but the guards don't stand around with their weapons drawn.'

'Sure, they sit around looking innocent, why not? And like that for several millenniums, not less. Very rewarding position, no doubt. But what this has to do with us?'

'Ms. Martinova, would you like to look at the dessert menu?' the owner of the small tavern had one hell of a timing. By the time they choose their dessert, the moment has gone and the conversation went towards some Varna businesses. The visit was imminent as one of the managers was making disturbed noises about people recruiting his staff directly and one was concerned about few cases of vandalism which were suspicious.

One more reason to go to the sea capital came the next morning. In the office a pack of Varna's regional newspapers was delivered in which several articles had been marked. The initial article shed light over an alleged extortion on behalf of "a man closely related to a recently deceased former police executive".

Several other newspapers had picked up the story after which the first journalist had disappeared and his editors were concerned about his safety.

'Stupid kid!' Valkuda exclaimed.

'What do you mean by "stupid kid"?' asked Dimitar. 'The article looks pretty reasonable to me; he might have an informant inside the group.'

'You can put then both in past tense, if I know something the way the "man closely related" operates. I am ready to put my money that they will never going to be seen again unless by accident. He did not have enough to go to the cops and decided to go to the press, what an idiot!'

'You are saying that my brother and father are involved in that?'

'Are you surprised by that? Of course, it had never been proven but the rumors are flaring from time to time, usually spread by people who do not live long. Around your father there is a solid block of former thieves, nothing grand, but persistent, few guys who had served their time for wet stuff as well. Now they are all respectable businessmen with some kind of a company or another, very careful ones, but I would not be comfortable to have a drink with them, you know. Even Mr. Tanassov was careful about them.'

'No way! Grandpa was concerned about some petty thieves and few killers? Cut him some slack, Valkuda, he was flying high above that! He had the security company and all...'

'You continue not to get it, don't you? I am talking real, present danger, constant one at that, when you don't know from where the next blow will come. Damn, ask Andon Tsarev if you do not trust me! He has a letter from your grandfather to be published if he was to die unnaturally or if Tsarev would consider it unnaturally, at his discretion.'

'Is that so? But you and I were there when Grandpa died and it was natural, so this letter is obsolete now. May be I should go and recuperate it and see what is in it!'

'If you have nothing better to occupy your time before we go to Varna, be my guest. But not without the guards, OK, no tricks!'

'Yes, Mammy! I am going right now!'