

Summons

Valkuda needed Dimitar to sign some documents in Sofia. She thought that the month and a half in hiding was not sufficient to cool down his relatives and was wary about them, but Dimitar had blistered that he would not spend his life in exile, even such a pleasant one like his stay in Brashlyan and that he was going to take the next bus to Tsarevo anyway with or without her permission. Konstantin went to see him off to the town where predictably the old Moskvitch was waiting for his friend and Valkuda waved at him before speeding away. The shutters were ordered, the young man ate his first restaurant meal in ages, found it disgustingly salty and overly fried, shook his head at the thought and bought a box of chocolates on a whim. May be someone would come to his solitary confinement, the tourist season was starting and he had a beach property, no, he was the sole owner of the beach along the entire Brashlyan except the monastery, up to the state reserve that started a little after the village and carried to the frontier. Then he thought that he had not told anyone of his Sofia friends where he actually was or what he was doing. The next thought was even more disturbing - he had not told anyone as not a single person had asked. He had vanished from their social radars and their interest in him had been as short lived as the green fluorescent drop of a passing plane on actual radar. After the obligatory for any polite person condolences he had received few invitations that had been of the type "Come, we will party there at that time" which were sent to the entire friends' list and after sending a note that he was out of town, he was erased from the mass-mailing until he would come back. Few casual lines were dropped informing him about some social faux-pas and some upcoming gossips, but the world did not stop moving around without him. The remaining ones who wrote were his brother and Lorelei who were thinking about coming to Brashlyan for the Indian summer at the end of September if something unexpected would not pop up, his parents back from Montreal with exciting news about new culinary exploits with a Russian couple they have befriended, Mitzi with her optimism and Rada with her funny hospital stories. Roumen's wife had got a whiff of Matsa and had filed for divorce, the boss was bound to stay in Sofia, which made her summer program more flexible, she wrote. Konstantin found that he missed her. The easy banter, the Saturday demolition of cakes and tins of cookies at Mitzi's study.

The unexpected drops at odd times. The visits to obscure places like forgotten museums in small villages around Sofia. Just being with her. She loved fairytales. May be he could entice her to come and stay with him for few days and share with her the story about her grandfather and his generosity. May be she knew it, but it would be nice anyway. It was an idea; he could enlist Mitzi's help. They could come together even, although he would have liked Rada for himself. Friends were scarce. The boys and girls from France may be unrealistic to drag to his den, but Rada was closer. He could not wait for the bus to come.

In her library Mitzi rubbed her hands. She was expecting the e-mail requesting her assistance to ship Rada to Brashlyan and was delighted by the young man's enthusiasm. It was time to talk to her ambitious, wonderful granddaughter and it was a talk that she would remember for the rest of her life. Better get more chocolate. She had a little more than a month to do it and would be glad to start earlier rather than later.

'It was not an invitation, it was summons!' Rada intoned.

'You are right, my dear, but I hope to compensate that with an extra box of fresh chocolate fingers!' Mitzi was unapologetic. It was a Saturday morning and the table in her study was laden with every type of chocolate Rada fancied. That was not a good sign, the young woman thought, something was about to happen and Mitzi was setting the *mise-en-scène*. When she spotted a decanter and two snifters on the side her defenses went up a notch. It would not be the usual "I know a good man" stuff, as they were officially an item with Konstantin, so it might be worse.

'I need your help and your cooperation, my dear!'

That was new, Mitzi could single handed organize an international conference or turn the tide, so what a beginner's doctor could do for her, Rada's mind was sprinting.

'You know that Elka planted Kosta in Brashlyan and it is forever, even if he would find it hard to adjust at the beginning. But that is not all. She told me something that I did not want to hear and she insisted that I have to act or else the fabric of time would go to shreds as she put it. I know it sounds unorthodox but you never knew me to be orthodox, did you? You know the story of your grandfather's miraculous healing from that wound. It is time for you to do it.'

Rada gaped. It was not possible that her completely sane grandmother of the day before had gone completely nuts in the morning hours. Her grandfather was dead for forty-something years and there was a grave to prove it. Even if he had faked his death at that time, nobody lived to be hundred and twenty-eight around unnoticed. What was Mitzi referring to?

'I am still completely within the limits for sane people, my dear, so you can close your mouth. You know that Brashlyan is not an ordinary place not only because your mom was born there. I know your rational generation will not believe it, but time is not a straight line, sometimes it is like the layers of water in a stream that go with different speed. The different eras can mesh although it is rare and people may leave their time to jump into the other period, but they are bound to return to what is theirs. This is what will happen in July. Your grandfather will emerge as a young boy and will be allowed to stay with us for a little more than two months. He will come badly injured, almost dead, and it is up to us to heal him and return him to his time for his life to pass as it had been. No, no, no! I am not telling a fairytale, you have not but I have seen his scars and how they have healed. It could not have been done in his time and place, Rada. I have wondered how it had been done until Elka told me before she died. I know it is an imposition but all I want is you to take at least a month and a half of leave and go to Brashlyan to help me.'

Rada was speechless; there was not a trace of hesitation in Mitzi's voice, no doubt in what she was asking for. That was either a very elaborate ploy to get her to Kosta or Mitzi had started waddling in the deep waters of the unbelievable. The young doctor knew that her grandma was far from ordinary but that was a bit beyond where even Mitzi would go. The voice of sanity was cautioning to take it with a pound of salt instead of the proverbial grain, but the blood in her temples was saying otherwise. Mitzi had pulled one too many miracles out of her sleeve on Rada's lifetime for her granddaughter to believe that those were mere coincidences. There was always the one dark shade that was constantly lurking around her, some words that the adults around her had swallowed when they had even an inclination to suspect they could be overheard. The extra special relationship with Vesselin and Milena was bonus but it could not be explained by the mere fact that his sister had been her mother's godmother, no matter how important the title had been. The way they treated her was beyond the call of duty. That was not all. Rada could sense that the two old houses on a quiet city street held more secrets that she had been told. She knew the code for Mitzi's

safe and how to operate the hidden library shelves but have never actually looked through the contents of the two hiding places. There were also the strange visits of people who never told their names but were on first name basis with Mitzi and their visits always precluded a major event. The odd phrases of Professor Nastin about her parentage and how little one knew about the blood in one's veins. The puzzling dreams involving her maternal grandfather, the man she had never met, and was not even her biological grandfather, but the adoptive father of her mom. Her parents' knowing smiles when they searched for an artifact and she was getting to the right place somehow first. None of those made a sense on its own. All of them made a disturbing picture, one of those prim and proper medieval paintings that were her paternal grandfather's hobby. He could sit with her for days explaining the symbols that the artists had hidden on the canvasses in plain sight yet it took a learned skill to decipher. "The doors of time can be opened if you have the right keys." Grandpa Schlosser loved to say that and not only because of the ancestral reference and she had the reason to believe him.

Three years earlier he had been invited by a wealthy gentleman in Thuringia to evaluate the treasures that his family had stacked in their grim old castle. The place needed substantial renovation and the family had toyed with the idea to make it a tourist place with its appealing turrets and spiels overlooking a picturesque mountain lake. As every decent castle do, that one had a related love story. The great-great-aunt of the present owner had eloped with a man her parents did not approved on using the unusually high lake waters and her long plait much like Rapunzel to smuggle her lover in the castle first, then not forgetting to get with her the family jewels and some other valuables. The girl's youngest brother had been so mad with the chatelaine who had seen them preparing to depart and failed to inform the family on time to stop the lovers that he had killed the woman right next to the window that the lovers had used to get away and the blood stain was never whitewashed. And of course there had been the rumors of secret passages and chambers that not a living soul had seen, their host had laughed at the dining room table over a decanter of local wine. It had been a hot summer by Germany standards. While her grandfather had closeted himself with the head of the family in the ballroom equipped with every table that could be dragged there from the other rooms, Rada had the chance to go swimming and riding with the children who had been her age. The eldest, Irma, was planning to marry in the fall. They guffawed over the idea that her parents could object and she should

go get a boat and run away. Irma had insisted that her short pinkish-tainted spiky hair would not withstand the weight of Mathias, her solid built boyfriend, and a motorboat would wake the entire neighborhood as Matz would not be the one to come with a row boat. Her brother Ernst had quipped that they did not have a chatelaine anyway, so he would have to go after the innocent motorboat for alerting them. They have seen the portrait of the killer; Ernst looked like him a lot but did not match the studious nature of his relative. He had inherited however the painting gift of the young man who had died few years after the murder of a strange fever with his sister's name on his lips. Ernst was spending his vacation making copies of some canvasses that needed restoration and would be sent for it, so their places on the old stone walls not to be taken by other stuff.

That particular afternoon had been rainy and the entire company had come to the ballroom to kibitz with their host Thomas and Rada's grandfather. The torrent outside was pelting the mullioned windows overlooking the lake. It was the perfect time to eat chocolate cookies, drink lemonade with ice and tell old tales. The host had obliged by repeating the love story for the benefit of Rada and Professor Schlosser. He had started with "It had been a stormy night after a long rainy day and the lake had swelled like today..." which had made his three children chuckle. He continued with the dramatic details up to the death of young painter and at that point Ernst mentioned that he was making a copy of his last work, a life size portrait of Saint Castulus, equipped with a set of odd keys tied to the rope on which the canvas hung. Grandpa Schlosser had shown a vivid interest in such a painting as ancient keys were one of his hereditary interests. The original was brought from Ernst's study and proudly displayed. Rada's grandfather had asked to take off the keys and inquired where they were from. Nobody knew, as far as they were concerned such strange set of three keys would not fit any door that they knew of. One was a very long thin stem with an intricate carving only half an inch wide, the second was a black iron one implying a big door or a hanging lock of impressive size, the third was a small bronze one, more suitable for a cabinet door. Rada's grandfather had handed her the keys and asked what she thought. It had been a weird feeling that the keys in her hand were too cold for the room there were in, "deadly cold" had been her first description. She had told the company that she had felt bad about those keys and the host's family had laughed, but not her grandfather. He had asked Ernst to help him put the portrait at its original place and they all had followed the old man along the

drafty corridors. Saint Castulus had been propped at his stone wall and the young painter had observed that it had been an unusual place for such a big canvass, the light had not been appropriate. Her grandfather had been pocking the stone wall with crumpling plaster and comparing something with the painting. The saint had been depicted standing on a stone road next to a castle wall. Behind him the grill of a wrought-iron door had been obscured by some foliage. The small group around had time only to exchange surprised glances and lift their shoulders when the eccentric archeologist had pulled his pocket knife and scraped off a small patch of plaster from one of the stones next to the picture. He had pulled the key set, had taken the long slim key and inserted it in the hole. He had turned it once and they had heard a screeching sound. The archeologist had turned the key one more time and something had clicked. Grandpa Schlosser had pushed the wall with his shoulder and it had moved in.

The dismay of the people present was voiced by Irma's scream to which few of the servants ran to help. Rada's grandfather was smiling like a kid opening a Christmas present. The host was shaking his hand and exclaiming that now that they had the secret passage, the castle would definitely going to be a tourist success, who would resist exploring such a place. Torches were brought, the hostess brought few surgical masks as nobody knew when was the last time the passage had been aired. Small expedition was equipped with two Polaroid cameras and a big roll of electric wire to unwind to be sure they would find the way back. The five men went ahead led by Grandpa Schlosser who insisted that his archeological background would allow him to spot a danger before the others. The eager crowd that by that time encompassed every living soul in the castle sat around the entrance to wait for them. The speculations were wild as to where the passage led as even the oldest of servants had not heard a word about it.

The expedition came twenty minutes later and they were pale as if they have spent an eternity there, even Rada's grandpa was not smiling anymore. Ernst and one of the cooks were carrying a suitcase size coffer that looked like blackened wood with bronze edges. Thomas invited everybody to the ballroom before they said anything. He confirmed with his expert that he had the keys and turned to the stone wall. He pulled a rope that released a spring which pushed the door shut. The silent procession proceeded to the ball room where the men put the coffer on one of the empty tables. Next to it they put a series of photos - the entry of the passage from within, the closing mechanism, a simple wooden door without a key, few turns and steep

stone steps, a small landing where the coffer laid under a thin layer of dust, narrow passage again leading down, another landing with a narrow channel of water, enough for the small row boat pulled on the massive boulders that were part of the castle foundation. The water was almost reaching the top of the boulders and completely covering the iron gate barring the opening leading presumably to the lake. There was no doubt that the mechanism that lifted the gate was locked by the black iron key on the key set - identical one was hanging not far from the lock, allowing the person to escape but not to enter from outside. The opening was probably not visible from the lake hidden behind the thick ivy that grew there in summer and the icicles that were formed in winter. The treacherous rocks around the castle made boating close to the walls dangerous business and a hole would not be discovered easily.

Thomas waited for the exclamations to subdue a little and took out few more photos. Rada still remembered them vividly. The flash had helped etch the two bodies pegged with one thick iron arrow. The top was that of a man dressed in dark clothes except for his once white shirt, the brown spot on it the blood that had sprouted from his chest when the hideous short dart had hit him. The bottom one was of a woman in sumptuous dress, a part of which was visible from the side. Her dainty satin shoe was next to his black boot, his hands still splayed aside to keep her safe behind him. The dry air around had preserved them intact, the flesh shrinking over the bones but untouched and the silver-blond floor length braid of the woman did not leave any problem with the identification of who the two had been. Next to them on the wall a mighty crossbow was propped.

Nobody wanted to have a look at the coffer any more. The beauty of a legend was shattered; the lovers had not escaped after all. Who had killed them would remain a mystery, the police chief said few hours later after inspecting the scene and whoever he had been, it was impossible to be alive, as the crime had been committed at the end of the previous century anyway. The versions were several - the chatelaine could have known about the passage and kill the couple in order to point at them about the missing jewels, the brother may have done it and tried to escape but something stopped him, like the high waters, it may have been the father of the girl and his son had tried to cover for him, killing the chatelaine to hide the pool of blood in the girl's chamber, then in remorse painting the saint with enough clues the murder to be discovered. Grandpa Schlosser was convinced that the last version was the most accurate - the girl's mother name had been

Irene and her husband had been an excellent archer, collecting crossbows. Rada's grandfather was convinced that the son had put Saint Castulus on the canvas as he had wanted to point to Castulus' widow Irene burying Saint Sebastian who was considered a patron of the archers, but not being so obvious to paint them. The father had died soon after the girl's death, but before his son, Thomas confirmed astonished. And the crossbow was visible in the wrought-iron gate behind the saint, Ernst said, he had been surprised by the form but never had put any meaning into it. So the son knew about the passage and what had happened to his sister and had left the set of keys to someone who would read the message. How tragic, Thomas said, the son had died of fever, and Saint Castulus had been burned alive, the boy had painted a prophesy about his own death or someone with a sick sense of humor had orchestrated it.

Mitzi waited patiently until Rada came out of her reverie, sipping her iced chocolate milk. She had already spoken with her in-laws. Bertrand and Mathilde had wisely agreed with her. They both knew the entire story and for them it had been a natural development. Mathilde had mused that it was time for great-grandchildren, Arv's two younger brothers had become grandfathers, there were four cute boys to play with, it was time for a princess, she said. It was a nice thought, what would two young healthy people in love do in a place where there was nothing to be done much at night. Mitzi smiled in turn.

'What would have happened if I were not a doctor?' Rada was back to Earth again. 'What would happen if he would have come at any other time and I was not a doctor and Mom was away?'

'I don't know but usually there was always a doctor available, first it was Boris, then Tea, then after certain time you. Elka would have given me an ample warning. The worst case scenario: I would have bribed or kidnapped one, my dear!' The notes in Mitzi's voice were light but it was a deception, Rada did not doubt for one second that her industrious grandma would have turned a mountain upside down if needed to save her husband.

'Mitzi, you know that I will go, no matter how far fetched it seems. Would you object if I get a help though?'

'Of course not, my dear, what do you need?'

'I will need supplies, but it is not difficult. I would be glad to have Vantche and Tantche with me there when he comes. Do you know for sure when it is going to be?'

'Saint-Elijah day, July 20th. I would put it in the early afternoon, but I am not sure about the time.'

'Agreed. I will call them and will promise a two week's vacation, food and board and they will come, I am pretty sure. Do you think that Konstantin will object?'

'Why should he? The more the merrier, I believe he will be happy with a company. I will bring food for everyone and I will help you pack. Last year Dora and I brought there ample supply of bed linen as we thought that all of you will come at the same time, so linen is not a problem. I think you need to bring only towels and I will bring some when I come, plus, we can always go shopping right before for whatever you find is lacking there.'

'One request - I want to surprise Kosta, so no sneaky e-mails behind my back, agreed?'

'I don't know what you are talking about!' Mitzi batted her lashes like she was twenty and Rada laughed.

'Do you want me to talk to Roumen? Oh, sorry, I forgot, he is getting divorced as fast as he can, so he is bound to be in Sofia. Better get some work done, he can have his vacation in October.'

'Now that is generous of you! As far as I am concerned though, I need some details of that wound that I need to patch; you said it was pretty ugly.'

'Let me get a piece of paper and you will have a sketch. Now, this is a human body, it goes like that and here it is like...'

'You are not taking all this rubbish seriously, are you?'

Tanassov's son was looking at his elder offspring with a mixture of pity and disgust.

'Father, these are three generations that had spent so much time researching it, there should be some reason behind it! Not only the fairytale that started it, but also the strange occurrences, the sequence of events. Read for yourself! You may consider grandpa at least - he never gave up and look at what he had to speak for his ability to reason. I believe he had come close to the ring again and that is why he was courting Mitzi. You said that yourself - the woman is not only wealthy, but mighty as well to be accepted by your father at equal grounds. It is stupid that the last pages are missing, but I think grandpa had decided that

Mitzi has the ring. She has been a known heart breaker in her time, possibly got involved with Todorov and he somehow transferred the ring to her as a promise, then got executed before they did something. How otherwise you will explain that whatever she wanted, she got in life? My search shows that she was a simple student of mid-level family and out of the blue she married her professor, adopted a kid and became a force to recon with. And all her money - that is not just a professor's salary and her translations, no matter how good she is with them.'

'Even if it is so and she does have the ring, you don't expect that she will handle it to you for the asking, right? Why do you think you will succeed when Tanas Sr. did not manage to get it after a lifetime of pursuit?' the snicker was barely suppressed.

'Oh, I have the same weapon she used to get it - I will get her granddaughter, marry the doctor and get the blasted ring as a wedding present!'

The laughter was quick and the derision was there as well, which made Tanas squirm.

'You are ready to marry a girl you have never met to get a ring that may be a pure fantasy - now even my father will not stoop that low and he had not been a paragon of virtue. What if she is a hag and will hate your guts?'

'The report says her dowry is excellent and she does not date as she has no time for that. And she has a penchant for tall men. Hopefully she has inherited her grandma's passion for older guys. I am going to Sofia tomorrow and will arrange a meeting and we will see from there.'

The elder Tanassov lifted his shoulders. 'I presume it is a form of amusement as well, enjoy yourself!' He made a mental note to make sure Tanas' visit to the hospital would not go undocumented, he would need it.

The hospital was full of fresh doctors just sworn and Rada was granted her request for three months personal leave without much trouble. On the sixth of July she loaded two mighty boxes of surgical supplies in her Jeep, a suitcase of clothes suitable for seaside, half a case of Melnik, a cooler topped by chocolate with nuts on the front seat and two sandwiches in a plastic bag, as there was not place for them in the cooler. Every nook and cranny of her car was stuffed with extra towels until she insisted that there was

enough to open a family hotel and she would not be able to see through her back window. She kissed Mitzi and Lilly and stepped on the gas pedal joining the steady stream of vehicles towards the sea.