

Damsel in Distress

Boris looked at Iossif and shook his head.

'I know that it is against the rules of the day, but I prefer to be honest with you. Your blood pressure is unstable to say the least, your vessels are already fragile and today's nose bleed was a lucky one. If it had been somewhere else up, you would be knocking not at Lambri's door, but at the doors for one St. Peter to open. You are otherwise in excellent health for your age, this is the only thing to watch, but please keep in mind that the prognosis is not rosy. I would give you a year if you are lucky, two if you are overly lucky, and six months if you continue to teach like you are younger than me.'

'See, son, teaching is what I love and keeping in mind that I am almost twice your age, it is a miracle that I am still around. Not that so many people will notice if I am not, but my housekeeper will be upset if I mess with the carpet cleaning that is scheduled on Tuesday, that is all. I have no family to get upset, even not a cat, so I am ready for the Lady with the Scythe whenever she deems it is time for a rendezvous. Between the three of us, I think she is really late for it, but it is only in the nature of the ladies to make us wait, I believe.'

Iossif sat somewhat more comfortably and continued, 'Look, I have arranged for the house to go to the National Art Gallery fund together with the paintings. The rest is going to a fund to pay some scholarship to my present and former students to study here and abroad. I have even written my memoirs, so what is there to be done... Let me see... Oh, sure I have regrets like any one of the mortals, between me and you, I had always dreamt of saving a damsel in distress, but never happened to fell upon one. I mean the real romantic part of it, not giving few coins to a student to go get a pastry as she is fainting from not eating, but a smashing grand gesture... Well, some things may never come our ways, so let us go and join my favorite goddaughter for a coffee in the salon.'

'No coffee,' said Boris automatically, 'oh, I apologize, I did not mean to...'

The old man patted his shoulder. 'I know you did not mean to, otherwise I would not have listen to you in the first place. But if this upsets you, I am not going to drink my coffee in front of you. Dora will make me a lemonade.'

'Iossif, you are incorrigible!' roared Lambri. 'Boris is concerned and so am I, we will sorely miss your advice when we solve riddles, so try to keep calm for a while and we will have you around longer!'

'Nay, you won't, if I stop I will die immediately and you both know it. Now, where is that lemonade and I hope you did not spend all the ice in this house on my bleeding nose!'

The three men exited Lambri's study and headed for the salon. Lambri opened the door and froze. Iossif bumped into him and Boris almost followed the pattern, so the three of them were looking at the same picture.

Dora was sitting on the sofa, holding tight the sobbing Mitzi, whose little suitcase was put next to her. For the first time since she was out of high school and in public, Mitzi was not wearing make-up and high heels, and her simple dress made her look much younger than even her own age. Her face was red and puffy, and she was trying to stop the torrent of tears with a handkerchief that was already sodden. Dora was obviously trying to shake some sense into her, but to no avail.

'What shall I do now?' Mitzi wailed into Dora's shoulder.

'Mitzi, we have a company!' cautioned her friend, but the sobbing girl did not seem to notice.

'Dad said never to shadow his door again, and mom said she did not want to see me as long as she lived...'

'Mitzi, stop it. We are not alone!'

Mitzi did stop. She lifted her head from Dora's shoulder and looked around. She spotted Lambri, Iossif and Boris in the frame of the door, then buried her face in her hands, and wailed again, 'It does not matter, by tomorrow everyone in the town will know anyway! What difference does it make?'

Lambri finally shook off the shock and with few strides approached the young woman who he had known since she was a teeny-tiny trouble in a pram. He put his large hand on her head and asked, 'Mitzi, what is that so terrible to know, would you like to tell me?'

She looked up at him with her blue eyes swimming in tears and blurted, 'I am pregnant! And the father showed me the door! And my father showed me the door also! And I did not know what to do, so I came to see Dora, I need someone to talk to!'

Lambri swallowed all the words that could wait, as "We told you so!" lecture would not do a shred of good in her present condition. He drew a breath. 'You did the right thing to come here. Now calm down a little bit and we will try to think of something together... Dora, bring Mitzi a glass of water!'

'I think I have already thought of something,' said Iossif. 'Boris, I think that my final wish is about to be fulfilled if we can convince the young lady to co-operate... Oh, Dora, while you are there, I would like a glass of water also!' Iossif entered the room and sat in the armchair to the right of the sofa. He gestured to Boris to follow suit and the baffled doctor sat to the left. 'Lambri, I believe an introduction is in order!' Iossif chimed, drawing the attention of both his friend and the young woman.

'Eh, yes, Mitzi, meet Professor Spassov! Professor, this is Mitzi, well, Miss Maria Altinova, Dora's classmate and friend.'

'I am really glad to meet you, Miss Mitzi, what a nice name! In fact, are you not in my class of classic Roman architecture this fall?'

Mitzi mutely nodded.

'I can't recall seeing you at the last two lectures, though, but I might be mistaken. It is a pretty big group and I may have missed you...'

'No, you did not miss me, Professor, I was not there, I though, well, ... I thought...'

'Hopefully it is not because you find the subject or the lecturer boring, by any means...'

'No, not at all, I mean, I love architecture and you are really interesting. I just thought that I should concentrate on getting married and ...'

Dora brought the water to Mitzi and the professor, then sat on the other side of her friend.

'Very well, very well, I see, we have quite some things in common already, if you like architecture and my way of teaching... And about the marriage, are you still intending to concentrate on getting married?'

Fresh tears sprang in Mitzi's eyes. 'I told you, the man I loved told me that he did not intend to marry me!'

'No, no, that is not the answer to my question, it was do *you* still want to get married, may be not to him, of course?'

'Professor, you do not seriously think that there is a man who would want me like that, and with the baby, do you?' Mitzi tried to smile at his ridiculous question. The professor, despite Dora's obvious attachment to him and insistence that he was genuinely nice man in private, was somewhat out of the line. A lot out of the line.

'Quite the opposite, young lady, quite the opposite!'

Boris got Iossif's idea first. 'Professor, you are not suggesting that...'

'Exactly, that is what I am suggesting, my dear boy! Didn't I tell you just five minutes ago that the greatest regret of my life is not to have met a damsel in distress? And here she comes, like a fairy, I just cannot let it slip without a try! Lambri, I know you will oppose, but I think this is a solution to everybody's problems, most probably me being the most selfish, of course. So may I solicit your help in furthering my cause?'

'Iossif, you cannot be serious!' Lambri exclaimed. The next moment he caught the twinkle in his friend's eyes and gasped. 'You are serious! But...'

'Miss Mitzi, I will be honest, it has been an old dream of mine of help a lady in a difficult situation and now that you are in one, may I suggest that we both help each other? I am offering you to marry me and I will acknowledge publicly the child as mine! I hope you do not find the idea too offending!'

The look of the young women's faces was beyond stunned. Both mouths opened, eyes as round as saucers, the only signs of life their rapid breathing and the trembling of their clutched hands. Dora gathered her wits faster. 'Godfather, if you are joking, it is not nice! Mitzi needs help, not teasing!'

'Ah, but my dear, how many times you have seen me joking about serious matters?' chuckled the old man.

'Rest assured, the offer is in good standing, as your dad may say! In fact, in the light of some recent diagnosis, it may be better phrased: Mitzi, would you like to be my widow? I may not going to be around for long, but for now I am not yet kicking the daisies to grow, so if you accept, you will be free again soon and well heeled at this, I may say.'

Mitzi came out of the numbness and shook her head vehemently, 'No, I cannot do that to you, Professor, you will be ridiculed around the town! Everyone will talk that you have lost your mind; imagine what your students will say, or the University authorities! No, I have caused enough trouble to do that to you!'

Iossif smiled more broadly - she had not mentioned anything about herself, even in that utter distress she was thinking about the others first. He might have gotten a better bargain that he initially guessed. It was time for some pressure.

'My dear child, I am so close to Olympus, that these talks do not affect me. Just the opposite, I have not enjoyed the public attention for a while, it is about time. And don't think about me, think about the new life

that you are carrying. Even if I have no children of my own, I know that they come pretty expensive to start with. Not to mention the stigma of being called bad words all one's life for something the little mite had not have a saying about at all.'

Mitzi drew a sharp breath and clutched Dora's hand so tight that her fingertips turned bluish. 'I know,' she sighed desperately. She needed another handkerchief, and it materialized from Lambri's pocket.

'Then just accept my offer and I will take care of the rest. Oh, and before I forget, you will have your own bedroom, probably on the next floor from mine as I snore awfully loud. Here Boris, who is also my doctor, will attest that I am not up to strenuous exercises of climbing walls to young ladies anymore. He also had just advised me that I should not get overly excited, so please say "yes" fast and put me out of my misery!'

Despite the gravity of the situation she was in, Mitzi smiled through her tears. That was so far from the image of a marriage proposal that she had created in her dreams, that she felt the first wisps of hysterical laughter bubbling through her system. The young woman called all her strength and looked at Lambri for reassurance to say the final "no" - and saw his thoughtful expression. Was he actually considering this charade for real?

He was. Iossif has been his friend for decades and had been also a friend of his father even before that. Everybody knew that he was an eccentric, brilliant art scholar, a dazzling opponent in any academic dispute, a guest that any hostess would consider the crown jewel of her party, one of the richest teachers of the University, the fear of every student and the nightmare of every rector. Yet there was another Iossif that few people knew about, well camouflaged behind that sophisticated appearance. The orphaned boy who had come to Sofia when it was little more than a village from the highlands of Trakia and who never ever spoke of his childhood. The early years when the young lad has worked every menial job to get himself through night school and university. The awe of his cards-playing partners and opponents at his unerring sense of the play, the almost mythical power to turn the odds on the table in his favor, the amount of money that had changed hands night after night, yet the players were drawn to him like bolts to a magnet, despite his reputation. Iossif the player was irresistible, merciless and some were claiming - a Seer, as nothing less could explain his phenomenal success. He had married in his late twenties choosing the daughter of a small-town clerk, a frail-looking wall-flower with mischievous blue eyes, spent a fortune trying to prevent her tuberculosis from devouring her, and when it was painfully evident that all the efforts were in vain, bowed to

her wish to be a mom. That had ended tragically, both the woman and the child never making it through the birth on Blagovets. Since then he had not allowed anyone to mention a new marriage, building a wall of "No trespassing!" around his private self so high that even his closest friends were not allowed a glimpse at the other side. It was the first time that wall had shown a crack and initially Lambri was not quite sure what to make of it. Then bits and pieces started arranging in a logical sequence and Dora's dad saw that there was some predilection in the situation. The logical train of thoughts was not applicable, but Iossif had always been a man outside the scope of conventional. Could it be that the professor was seeing something the others were missing, something too light for the rest of them to acknowledge in the flighty-looking Mitzi, something worth forfeiting almost half a century of confirmed widowhood? Lambri looked at Iossif again and saw the solemn assurance in his features. He had gambled again a steep stake. By the looks of it, he was sure he had won that hand.

Mitzi followed his gaze and saw the same. There was a genuine care behind the sparks of laughter in the professor's unexpectedly young eyes. He would be safe, he was a fighter, she thought, so would be the unborn child, and Mitzi did not care what would happen to her one iota.

'Yes!'

'Thank you, my dear! Now that we have established that, here is the plan. I hope Nada and Dora will be kind enough to spend their time today and tomorrow with you buying your trousseau and a wedding dress. I hope my favorite goddaughter will not refuse me this little pleasure. I will first get to your dad and properly ask for your hand, then get a special license from the mitropolit. Then I have to visit my tailor also, as I may need some adjustments made to my formal attire. I will book the church for Sunday, I hope you do not mind Sveta Nedelia Cathedral, as it is our local parish church and it will be easier. Then I will order the flowers and the invitations, so please be ready for tonight with the list of people you would like to invite. The envelopes will be hand delivered tomorrow; we need to give our guests at least a day to prepare, sew buttons, fluff feathers, air the mothballs, you know. May I suggest a small dinner party tonight to celebrate our engagement? I believe "Union" will make it for us; I will call to reserve a room before I talk to Mr. Altinov. Now, am I missing something? Yes, first - I hope your passport is in order, as we are leaving for a honeymoon immediately after the dinner on Sunday. It will be short, of course, but I hope the University will

spare me for a week, and it should not be too taxing in your present condition. Do you need a passport, my dear?’

‘No, it is in order,’ a completely dazzled by now Mitzi could not produce another word.

‘Wonderful! Now the last question - your accommodation for tonight and tomorrow, we have to find an appropriate place, as I think you would be somewhat reluctant to go back to your parents, and the propriety is of utmost importance in view of our hasty marriage.’

‘Mitzi will stay with us!’ Lambri reassured him. ‘You know, it will make the shopping foray much easier, and I am sure Dora will not mind sharing her room.’

‘I don’t mind!’ Dora jumped and went to hug her father, all decorum forgotten. ‘You will not regret it, Daddy!’

‘I am sure I won’t, daughter mine, now let’s pay some attention to lossif’s plan! We will talk about bedtime arrangements later.’

‘Thank you, Lambri! Now I hope that these two lovely ladies will exercise their kindness to my parched throat by going to the kitchen and making us some lemonade, while I go home and be back in good ten minutes, please do not consider that I have deserted you!’ lossif stood up and left, leaving the rest of the small group speechless.

The swift closing of the front door shook everyone of their thoughts.

Boris tossed back his head. ‘Please, do tell me that I have had too much laughing gas myself and I have not just seen the unthinkable - lossif had proposed to Mitzi and she accepted! Mitzi, I think that you are a formidable woman to achieve that. There were countless ladies of all kinds that had put years and decades of efforts to snap the most eligible widower in town and you did it without so much as batting an eyelash at him!’ Then he sobered. ‘I apologize, Mitzi, congratulations!’

‘I am still not quite sure I have done the right thing, but under the circumstances...’ Mitzi’s voice trailed. Then she thought about the baby and pepped up. ‘I will be as good as I can. I hope the professor will not regret his kindness when the entire town starts joking at his expense.’

‘He is much sturdier than that, rest assured,’ Lambri interjected. He patted Mitzi’s shoulder. ‘Now go and make this lemonade, young ladies. If lossif says ten minutes, you can verify your watch upon his timing.’

Dora and Mitzi went to the kitchen and the two men sat for a few seconds in silence before Boris asked, 'Do you think that it is right?'

'Oddly enough, but I do. First, there is not much that we could have done for Mitzi in the present situation. It is too late for lecturing, Tashev is not the one to reconsider and marry her, you know her parents; this leaves her on her own. We can care for her, and help when the baby comes, but it is not a long-term solution. Iossif will have his wish, but I have that feeling that he may be seeing further than me and you. Just recall how many people he had bailed out during the years, yet he never wanted to be involved personally on such a level. He has been a gambler all his life, although you may not know him at the days of his glory as a player. I am warning you, do not bet with him anything that you will hate to part with. May be he is doing it on an impulse, but rest assured, his impulse had always been right, as far as I can remember and it is a substantially long period. Mitzi will be safe with him. He is, above all, a decent man.'

'What about the age difference? You know he is not that healthy, his blood pressure may play him a trick any moment!'

'You know, with the events that happened recently, I think my philosophy has changed to "*Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero!*"

'I was afraid you may say something like that...'

'Good morning!' said Nada, who entered the house. Both men stood up and responded. One look at their faces and the alarm etched on hers.

'What happened?'

'You better sit,' Lambri put her in the armchair that Iossif had vacated.

'Eh, well, nothing bad... I am not quite sure where to start...'

'Whose suitcase is this?'

'Mitzi's.'

'She is going somewhere? I thought...'

'Well, you see, Mitzi's pregnant!'

'But she is not married? Where is she?'

'In the kitchen with Dora, making lemonade.'

'And she is planning to elope with Tashev? Oh, why had I not talked to her more about it before?' lamented Nada, her face a picture of distortion.

'No, Tashev showed her the door, her father showed her the door...'

'And she ran here, thanks God she had enough sense rather than do something really stupid. Now we have to find what to do to help her. I will go talk to her,' Nada started to stand up.

'One second, you have to know everything!'

'Oh, God, is there more to that?'

'Yes, Iossif was here when she made the announcement and he offered her to marry him instead.'

'Iossif? Professor Spassov, you mean this Iossif?'

'One and only. Nada, I know it may be a shock but I believe it is the best solution for her. She thought of refusing, he insisted and she finally agreed. Please try to understand...'

'I understand... I just need time to come to terms with it... I never thought Iossif would marry again, he still carries Anna's portrait with him... Well, there is a lot of new things that I have learnt today...When are they planning to do that?'

'Sunday.'

'But that is the day after tomorrow!'

'I know. He had already laid a plan and went home for something, but will be here any minute now.'

The door opened and Mitzi and Dora entered, Dora carrying a tray with a tall decanter with lemonade and five glasses.

'Good morning, Mrs. Mihailova,' said Mitzi not quite meeting the eyes of the older woman.

'Good morning, Mom,' chimed Dora and put the tray on the coffee table. 'I will bring another glass!'

Nada stood up, went to Mitzi and lifted her chin for look into the girl's eyes. Then she said, 'Whatever happens, it happens for a reason! Now let us look forward, child!' and embraced her. Mitzi buried her face in Nada's shoulder and sobbed. Dora's mother held her for a while, then patted her back and ordered. 'Go to the upstairs bathroom and wash your face. The lemonade can wait!'

Mitzi reluctantly let go and hurried up the stairs.

'Good morning, Nada, did you just scare away my bride?' came Iossif's teasing voice from the entrance.

'Good morning, Professor, please accept my best wishes for your upcoming nuptials!'

'Nada, Nada, if not for my great respect for your husband, I would have snatched you from him long ago!

Lambri, you are one lucky man, you know that! Nada, now that you know, I hope you will help us all a lot.'

'What do you need a help with?'

'First of all, I need a best man and a matron of honor. I believe you and Lambri will do the honors. Seriously, I think Mitzi is quite attached to you and she will be glad, no need to mention that I will be, too. What will you say, Lambri?'

'Do I have really a choice?'

'No, unless you can propose a more suitable candidate, and you will not have anyone on such a short notice anyway. That is decided, then. Now, Nada, I need you to get the girls shopping. I am so far away of all the things that a young woman needs in her proper trousseau, that I am completely useless. I know I am imposing on your time, but I feel obliged to point that I am not marrying very often and I pray for your understanding...'

'I suppose I can take Mitzi shopping for you...'

'Lambri was so kind to offer her the hospitality of your home for tonight and tomorrow, I really appreciate it, but I doubt this suitcase is enough, so whatever needed to be procured, please do!'

Iossif pulled out his wallet and withdrew a small pack of bills. The amount was a no small fortune by any standard. He handed it to Nada. 'You will see that she has the dress of her dreams, will you not? I will pass by the bank and get more money in the afternoon, so please let me know how much you will need.'

'Iossif, it is already too much!'

'No, Nada, I don't want any expense to be spared. And while we are at that, please take care that she eats today. I doubt she had had much of a breakfast and there will be a lot of running until Sunday, she needs to be strong. May I suggest that you take both girls shopping, then visit a cafe in the middle of the run and get something to sustain you? We all will be dining at "Union" tonight at eight, it is arranged, you just have to show and grace our company with your presence. I would have given a dinner at home, but I cannot spring that of Martha on such a short notice, she will kill me.'

'Who is invited?'

'You and Lambri, Boris, the girls, and I doubt her parents will come, but I am willing to risk a try. Now I have to go, there is a lot to arrange. Boris, you will be there before you go to the hospital?'

'I will go to the hospital in the afternoon, then come to "Union" and return from there. I am somewhat worried about you, Professor, maybe you should take it slower...'

'My dear boy, there is a wedding to organize for Sunday, I cannot take it slower! But don't get worried on my account, I will be perfectly fine! If I don't feel well, I will drop at the hospital to see you! And where is Mitzi?'

Behind the closed door of the second floor bathroom, Mitzi was arguing with Dora. 'You will see, he will come and back off!'

'No, he won't! I have known him all my life and I have never seen him backing off if he had promised something! You remember my doll Rosy, the one with the violet eyes? Well, he promised me a doll with violet eyes and when he could not find one in Sofia, he telegraphed his Vienna's agent to go buy one and send it via night train here. I think he had paid a full ticket for her.'

'I am not a doll from Vienna.'

'No, you are not. He may act strangely yet he never loses an argument, Dad says. Now let us get down, we cannot hide here until Sunday!'

'If you say so...'

The two young women came down hand in hand.

'Good, now I would be glad to ask something before I go. Mitzi, did you mention to your father who is the child's father?'

'I did not. He said he did not want to know anything about it and...' Two flaming red spots formed on her cheeks and her voice trailed.

'I did not want to upset you, child! I just want to know what I should tell him. Do you think he will be home at the moment?'

'He said he would need to take the day off to try to find out how to face the people who he works with, so probably he is.'

'Write for me the address on a piece of paper, please! Then I need to go, but I want you to be confident - everything is arranged, Nada has the money to take you both shopping, and then we will dine together.'

Dora fetched a pencil and a sheet from her father's notepad and Mitzi wrote her address, her hand trembling a little, but the script was neat and beautiful. Iossif smiled - the girl had more character than was given credit for. He felt something stirring inside him, some feelings that he had forgotten about, the passion for winning not for the win itself, but just because he wanted so, because he was ruling the game. It was a game he intended to win, just this last time, he prayed, one more time. The professor bid the company goodbye and left together with Boris.

The silence in the sitting room was disturbed by Maritsa, who was returning from the morning shopping. Through the back door, she went directly to the kitchen, but the noise coming from there made everyone laugh and the spell was broken. Lambri hastily excused himself that he had to be at University and left. Nada went to the kitchen to tell the little maid that she was going shopping with Dora and Mitzi and was greeted with a profusion of excuses about a broken glass. The older woman consoled the genuinely upset girl and on an impulse let her have the rest of the day off as they were anyway going to eat out. She was unconsciously reluctant to let Maritsa know about the upcoming events, and she caught herself about it. Unlike most of the people, she did not shrug the feeling off, she just stored it for further thoughts. There was some uneasy feeling that was making her try to keep the information under the lid as long as possible.

At that time Iossif had negotiated the two flights of stairs to Altinovs' apartment with a spright of a much younger man. He checked his suit, adjusted his bow tie and pressed the bell button. There was some commotion inside the apartment, but nobody opened the door. He pressed again, this time longer. The door sprang open and a furious looking man shouted at him, 'I told you never to ...' and stopped at mid-sentence.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I was not talking to you. And I am not buying anything either!'

The man tried to slam the door. Iossif held on to it. 'I am not a seller. Before you suggest, I am not a travelling preacher either. I came to talk to you about your daughter.'

'I don't have a daughter anymore; you are wasting your time! Now, you either go or I will call the police!'

'If you prefer so. You will receive the invitation for the wedding by courier then.' Iossif turned and started going down the stairs.

'Wait, what wedding? She said she was not marrying!'

'Evidently, she changed her mind, but as you insist you don't have a daughter, I think...'

'I don't care what you think! A decent woman does not carry a baby before she is married, so if I were the father of your son, I would not let him marry her!'

Iossif had already reached the turn of the staircase and did not bother to stop. 'Mitzi is not marrying my son, as I don't have one. She is marrying me. On Sunday.'

The young woman's father managed to close his mouth in sync with the closing of the building's front door. He pinched himself twice to be sure that he had not imagined the encounter, but as hard as he tried, he could not recall the face of the man who he had spoken to. Mr. Altinov wished he had paid attention. He looked at his slippers and home trousers and decided that he better not run after the visitor down the crowded street. It would be humiliating enough when he had to talk about his flighty daughter and her bastard, he did not need the neighbors to start talking that he had lost his marbles already. His wife had retreated in their bedroom and was pretending to have a migraine. Mr. Altinov debated with himself as whether to tell her about the strange visitor, or chalk it off as a nasty prank. Yes, that was it, may be Mitzi had tried to find solace in her lover's family and the father had decided to come and meet him under that bizarre pretext. Nobody would marry a girl who spreads her legs before she got a ring on her finger, and Mitzi's lover had obviously told her so, hence the morning argument. Mr. Altinov felt more confident in his decision to cut her off. He did not need that trouble. He went back to his apartment and closed the door with a bang.