

Call from Beyond

The evening was pleasantly refreshing after the hot day, the slight breeze coming from Lyulin winning the confrontation with the heat emanating from the city streets' asphalt. Mitzi was sitting in her study and perusing emails. Riste was bragging about his grandchildren and Vera was sending her best regards and some recipes, Elka and Kosta were enjoying a splendid strawberry crop and inviting her to share, Hande was sending pictures from Pamukkale, goofy as her style of arguing... The lady of the house stretched back in her chair and smiled, the world was in order, at least for the people who had sent messages about it.

The phone rang. Mitzi thought about letting the answering machine pick it up, but some strange feeling literally pushed her hand to the receiver.

'Good evening, Mrs. Spassova.'

'Good evening, and you are?'

'Tanas Tanassov.'

Now that was a first. They have been dancing around each other for decades, never personally meeting, but always aware of the presence of the counterpart. Once the most powerful man in the country, Tashev's former boss the Black Cardinal, as he was known by some, had received back his former fortunes that the family had amassed for generations, and had become one of the most influential businessmen, despite his advanced age. His son and grandsons were waiting for him to release at least a part of his grip, but knew better than showing their eagerness, were the rumors. They would have to wait, Mitzi thought, the patriarch was an old battle horse and would die in the chariot if she knew something about people. But what could he need from her, that was a puzzle.

'I doubt we have met, Mr. Tanassov, but I will be glad if you tell me the reason for your call.'

'Mrs. Spassova, I would like to ask you for a favor. But the matter is hardly to be discussed over the phone; I would appreciate if you meet me personally at a time and place convenient for you.'

Surprises were mounting. Did the formidable Mr. Tanassov, whose name could send half the male population of the country into violent shivers, if not worse, just asked her for something? More, he had

asked her to choose the conditions. And it was something not to be discussed over the phone. Curiosity got better of her.

'Is the matter urgent?'

'No, not at all, but I would be glad if we may go over it sooner rather than later, Mrs. Spassova.'

'How about tomorrow? As it is not a telephone conversation, I presume you would like to keep it private. How about I pass by your office?'

'I appreciate your consideration. At what time would you like to come?'

'Any time in the morning, if you can fit me in your schedule.'

'Is nine really early?'

'Nine is fine, I am an early bird.'

'Then until nine tomorrow. Thank you very much, Mrs. Spassova, I will be expecting you.'

Mitzi put down the receiver and turned back to her computer screen. She wondered what the mighty man might need from her personally, confidentially, urgently. Not money, he had enough of it and if not, he could easily get it from one of his cronies. He paid his own art expert, a very decent man, so it would not be something regarding a purchase or sale of an objet-d'art either. So it should be something to do with an old story. But which one? She did not want to discuss Tashev, no matter what Tanas had to say about him - although knowing the man, he would rather be silent than to spill beans over old bones. Iossif - he has been dead for decades also and the fund would have got an official question about him before anyone decided to go to Mitzi directly. If Tanas had any information about Tea, he would not have asked for a meeting, he would have ordered her to come. So he needed something... Well, the morning was not so far away.

A minute before nine Mitzi stood in front of beautiful private house in the center of Sofia. Tanas had bought it for obscene sum from the heirs of Dr. Vassil Poshtov after the restitution and done the incredible to restore it to its formal glory. He had converted it to a discrete office space on the ground floor and living quarters above for him since he moved to Sofia from his Varna fortress. The only detail that spoiled the tranquil picture was that the door was answered by a lithe man that no living soul would mistake for a secretary. Mitzi told him her name and the hand that was resting on what she was sure was a concealed gun, made a sweeping courteous gesture of invitation. She was transferred to a good-looking woman in her early fifties

who greeted her by name and led her to the inner sanctum of Tanas' study. He stood to meet her, still a fairly handsome man, immaculately dressed in a business suit, his white hair carefully combed away from his face. For an instant he reminded her of Iosif - an imposing presence without being intimidating, but it was a matter of a blink to change. His assistant had already served two coffees and two glasses with ice next to a selection of sodas on the small low table in the corner overlooking the garden.

She was as ever beautiful, Tanas thought, the years had passed by her merciful to her appearance, if not to her heart. She was dressed in a pleated dark blue linen skirt and a silk blouse a shade lighter, matching blue straw hat to protect from the summer sun and high-heel pumps. At the lapel of her blouse he saw a brooch carved from a piece of wood and when they shook hands, he had a chance to look closer at the jewel. His heart did a jubilant step dance; the Destiny was hopefully in good mood and would back him up!

Mitzi accepted her cup of steaming coffee and smiled. 'Your staff is fairly efficient, Mr. Tanassov, but I did not expect less. Now, if you would like to skip the small talk about the beauty of your office and the heat outside, I am ready to listen to your request.'

'I am glad to finally meet you, Mrs. Spassova, as I can see that you are even more impressive than the rumors about you!' chuckled the old man.

'They are exaggerating my humble qualities, I believe, that is what the urban legends are for. But I doubt you called to compliment me over some questionable information.'

'Indeed. You are right, let us get to the heart of it. I need to ask you a monumental favor, Mrs. Spassova. I would not have bothered you if there was any other way. Believe me, the rumors that I prefer to pay my way are truer than the ones you dismissed. Unfortunately, I cannot buy what I need this time. It is not for me either, if that bothers you, given some facts in our past.'

Mitzi could see he was threading very carefully. Tanas had not been begging for something for ages, maybe he had forgotten how to do it, but he was stepping on his own song for something that was crucial to him. He sighed and looked squarely into her eyes.

'What I need to ask you about concerns my grandson.'

'Forgive the audacity, but I fail to see what Tanas Jr. may need from a grandma like me...'

'It is not for Tanas. I have two grandsons. You see, Tanas is, how to say, the visible one. Dimitar is not, it is hard to imagine that they are coming from the same set of parents, they are so different. I know you have read about Tanas, and as painful it is for me to say that, most of the ugliness is true, rather than imagined. Dimitar is the exact opposite. He was a quiet child, who preferred to draw in the company of adults rather than play with his elder brother or other kids. He went through mountains of play dough, then switched to clay, he is immensely talented artist, and it is not only my biased opinion of a grandfather. He graduated from a drawing school, then he went to the army, served there as a clerk, and when he came back, I sent him to France to study. It is not for me to tell you the conditions at present at the Academy of Fine Arts, you know them better, I believe.'

They sighed in unison, over different things, or may be same, who knew. Mitzi tried to remember the boy, Dimitar, but he had not made waves yet, and she waited for Tanas to continue.

'Well, he graduated three weeks ago and was about to return.'

'Congratulation!'

'But he does not want to, he wants to study under one famous artist in France, and no one else would do.'

'So why he does not do that?'

'Because the famous artist does not accept apprentices.'

'Surely he may be convinced if your grandson is talented. Who would refuse to hone a gift?'

'This one had never ever accepted a pupil; he always says that he has enough of his own to take care of. And he will not do it for money either.'

The other shoe dropped with thunder. They were talking about Stoyan Debarski. He was known to be a father of an almost full football team of boys all of whom had followed their ancestors in the carving business. His works sold for astronomic amounts and if they appeared at a gallery, it sealed its success. Stoyan practically never gave interviews. He was above the money, above the glory, above the flattery. And no, he had never taken an apprentice, as far as she knew.

'It is his work, isn't it?' Tanas motioned at her brooch.

'It is.'

Tanas' face was suddenly very old.

'Mrs. Spassova, I have nothing to offer you in exchange for your eventual agreement to attempt to influence Mr. Debarski to accept my grandson as an apprentice. I cannot bribe you, I cannot entice you with a position in a company or in politics, cannot save some dirty secret for you, otherwise I would have rushed to do it. I can only beg you to put aside whatever your feelings for me or for anyone you associate with me are and look at what Dimitar can do. I know that if anyone on the planet can persuade Mr. Debarski this is you. My lad is ready to go sweep the floor and sleep on it, if these will be the conditions to be close to his idol. And he is the last decent thing I have left unbroken!'

That last sentence was torn out of him with such fierceness, that Mitzi pulled back. There he was, the man in whose hands so many fates were held, the man who could pave the streets of Central Sofia with gold and still have some money left to sip coffee on the sidewalk, who was the envy of the masses, past and present, the man who had gone through everything to get to the pinnacle of power and stay there longer than any of his compatriots. The same man had found that he had nothing left except the burning hope to help a kid follow a dream as elusive as the morning dew. His long life in pursuit of power had led him to the understanding that not everything can be bought, that not everyone had a price tag, that the power he had spent his life running after was an illusion, while the goodness of a dream was not. She wished Iossif were next to her to see it. What would he do in her place? Would he believe that a dove could come out of the nest of vipers? He would not believe, he would check, Mitzi thought. She looked at Tanas' shoulders, hunched as if he was carrying an invisible bundle. He probably had taken her silence as a refusal, which was not fair to the young man. Mitzi shook herself out of the reverie and asked, 'Will you show me something that Dimitar has made?'

Tanas' face lit up, like a lantern in a dark night. He went to the corner cabinet and took several small figurines which he put in front of Mitzi on the coffee table.

'You can touch them!' he said as if offering her a candy, the pride in his voice palpable.

Mitzi looked at the collection. It was from different years. The clumsy smiling mushroom bearing the marks of child's fingers on its hat that had once been red, but has faded to indescribable brownish. The wood fish as in motion suspended from its wire hook. The duck made of plaster almost standing up and peering at her. The cherry-sized bronze crab coming out of a bronze shell. The craftsmanship was there, Dimitar had talent for several other artists to spare. Mitzi reached to touch the crab and to her vast surprise it retreated into its

shell. She exclaimed something completely unladylike, then chuckled and bended over to look more carefully. The crustacean was hanging on a delicately balanced mechanism and her touch had triggered the motion. The woman waited for few seconds and was rewarded first with the sight of a pincer and then the crab again. She touched the polished bronze shell lightly and could have sworn that she felt a wave of pure, undiluted joy coursing through her fingers. Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand and turned to Tanas.

'He did it all himself!' he defensively raised his hands. 'The mushroom is one of the first things he made for me. The fish - an old gypsy taught him how to carve at the pier, he was running from home to go to him and I was sick with worry that the caravan could do with one more kid, you know. The duck is a school art project, he made one for everyone of the entire class when the teacher left them for five minutes. The crab is before he left for France, he tells me that he wants his work not to be still-life. Please, Mrs. Spassova, look at them again, I am not trying to trick you.'

'You don't need to. Hopefully, his fancy French school had not spoiled him much! You are right to fight for him, Mr. Tanassov.'

'You will help him? Just like that?'

'It has always been just like that, Mr. Tanassov! It cannot be otherwise. I will call Stoyan today and you may send someone to get the letter for Dimitar tomorrow at ten. He is Dimitar Tanassov, right?'

'Right. You will not regret it, Mrs. Spassova, I can assure you!'

'I know,' Mitzi sighed, then looked at the crab and clapped her hands. 'Tell him not to forget to take one of these with him when he goes to see Stoyan. Do you think ten days will be too soon for the letter to get to him and him to get to the South of France? I will be glad to send something small to Stoyan also, a book.'

'Of course! He will be there as soon as he can, I have no doubt...'

Mitzi stood up and Tanas followed suit.

'Thank you for the coffee and the most interesting conversation,' she smiled.

'I thank you, Mrs. Spassova; I am forever indebted for what you will do for Dimitar. If you need...'

'Oh, I may take you on this one, so stop there!' Mitzi grinned and moved through the hall. Tanas saw her off to the front door and went back to his study. His secretary nearly dropped the tray with the cups and glasses - she had never seen her boss crying, and by the look of him, he did not even know about it. He sat at the table where Dimitar's crab had come out again and looked at her. 'Who do we usually use as a florist?'

"Dear Nia and Stoyan, It had been some time..." started one of the letters, which accompanied the luxury edition of Iossif's autobiography.

"Dear Stoyan, the young man who is bringing this letter had worshiped your work and understandably had been deeply saddened by your long-standing decision not to take apprentices. His grandfather claims that he is ready to sweep floors to be closer to you, but I sincerely hope that you have someone else for that position already. I do not know Dimitar Tanassov personally, but I have seen one of his works and will be glad if you find the time and curiosity to have yourself a look at what he does. From there it is up to your judgment which is indisputable. I know Iossif would have liked the humor he put in the small details of his moving object and the intricacy of the mechanism there. I dare to hope you will be captivated at least to..." started the second letter.

The next morning, exactly at ten, a last model black car stopped in front of Mitzi's house. A dark-clothed young man brought out a bouquet of chrysanthemums and ivy and a package. He rang the bell and was shown directly to Mitzi's study. She accepted the bouquet and the package with a small laugh and handed him two letters and a book. On one of the envelopes there was a sticky note: "Send the crab with it, please!" The young man thanked her and left - he had to catch a flight to France at midday, now he had to pass through the office again before that. The time was tight.

Three days later Dimitar was standing in front of a *mass* in the South of France. It was still early morning, but the instructions of his grandfather were: "As soon as you can!", right! The young man could not believe it, he was holding a letter to Stoyan Debarski himself, and it was to be given hand in hand together with the crab in a shell packaged in his pocket. Dimitar pressed the button and somewhere far a bell rang. His arrival was obviously expected, as the door opened to reveal the stern-looking master, exactly like on his rare photos. He looked at the young man trembling in his summer outfit and held out his hand. Dimitar reverently gave him the letter, then pulled the package from his pocket and unpacked the shell. The man was reading his mail, which was less than a page. Dimitar was holding his breath and the shell with the figurine on his

palm. Debarski folded the paper and looked at the shell, then touched it with one scarred finger. The crab retreated and the bulky man burst with laughter, a low rumbling bass, then took the shell and looked inside. He chortled again and looked at Dimitar:

'You are probably hungry, sonny, let us get a breakfast and we will settle the living arrangements later, before we start work! Come in!'