

Being Late May Be a Family Trait, Right?

Tanas was getting impatient. Nobody seemed to be able to locate Rada's whereabouts and his second visit to the hospital was as fruitless as his first – he was told that the doctor was on holiday and would not be available to take new patients before the end of September. Mitzi's housekeeper had refused to tell the delivery guy when her mistress would be back which led him to believe the two were somewhere together. It could be anywhere in the country, that was true, but Tanas had a feeling that their joint disappearance at the time of his arrival was not a mere coincidence. His stepmother had not shown at home for the last two nights and it was not a good sign. His father had not leaked the information neither had filed a missing person report which made Tanas suspicious that those veiled threats about not seeking divorce may have materialized. Mila was not half bad as a stepmother, at least much better than the last two. It was unimaginable what she had in common with his father to breach the three decades gap between their birthdays. If the tendency would continue his next stepmother would be under twenty, he thought grimly. And the following would be underage.

What was the saying about the work that one wanted done? "You either do it yourself, tell your children never to touch it or pay someone to do it." The people he paid were not capable of doing it, he had no kids, so it was time to roll up his sleeves, Tanas thought. He picked up a stack of sheets and opened a new bottle of Perrier.

The first question was where grandma and granddaughter would go together for extended vacation. To place which was familiar to both or held special meaning to both. He pulled out the report on Rada and regretted that he had not ordered a fuller one, the pages that he had were a compilation of the well known facts of her life. Born in Sofia, mother, father, early nomadic life, parents disappeared in Africa while she vacationed with Mitzi, language school, finishing school in Switzerland, Medical Faculty, hospital, rumors about magical healing abilities. No boyfriends to speak of, seen with some family friend recently back from France, a banker. Stop, stop, stop, rewind.

To that pictorial dinner when their grandfather had dropped dead Dimitar had come after a meeting with Mitzi and had bragged about an old friend he had met there, a banker. The guys had met first in France and it was a coincidence that they had met again in Sofia. There were no coincidences in life, or Tanas did not believe in them. Who was the friend; there was a name in the report. Konstantin Kaloyanov. May be not so rare a name, but not Ivan Ivanov either. What was known about him, let see. Recently back from France, a banker. Piece of cake. He should just call every bank in Sofia and there were not that many, and ask to be put through to Konstantin to find which bank he worked for. Chances were that with such a limited experience he would be in one of the smaller ones, nobody would take him in the mastodons without the local meat grinding. Working from the bottom up should do the trick.

Yellow pages were on his desk and Tanas started dialing. He found two Kaloyanovs but they were Kamen and Albert before the sixth bank told him that Mr. Konstantin Kaloyanov was not available at the moment and they could put him through to his manager Ms. Diana Dimitrova who would help him for sure. No thanks.

Well, Konstantin had also disappeared. That would make the location easier. For the first time in his life Tanas blessed his grandfather for insisting on putting him at a language school. He picked up the phone again. It was the end of the day and hopefully Ms. Dimitrova would be tired and her guard would be lower.

Few minutes later the tall man leaned back in his chair and smiled contentedly. It had been easier than he thought. The legend was a no-brainer: Konstantin's university friend was calling from France as he was planning to go to a conference in Istanbul and thought of passing by through Bulgaria for a quick vacation. The receptionist had broken his heart telling him his friend was on vacation, as he could not reach him by cell phone either. Was he hiding with his gorgeous girlfriend Rada somewhere, he the naughty boy, and was so busy with looking into her eyes as to not check his messages? Diana had laughed and told him that Konstantin was out of reach in his obscure village. Oh, but was it possible that this village was so well hidden and so far from the communication means that one could rely only on a letter in a bottle tossed in the sea from Istanbul? Diana had laughed again and confirmed that the bottle mail could reach Brashlyan for sure however she could not guarantee the timely delivery, you know the sea currents. She offered to send an e-mail but the "friend" reassured her that he had already done that. He was very grateful for the

information but would repeat the attempt himself. Few pleasantries later he hanged in the best of spirits. He had a name of a destination.

Brashlyan was a speck on the map few kilometers after Tsarevo and there should be three houses there if the map was correct. It was well worth a try. Tanas was convinced that he had discovered his brother's hiding place as well. It would be killing two birds with one stone. Even if Rada were not there which he was pretty sure she was, he could scout the place and return later with some news for his brother. He called the office in Varna and spoke with his father. According to him Dimitar was nowhere to be seen again and Tanas told him that he was close to finding him but he would call from the road the next day. He heard the smirk and asked whether his stepmom was back. No, but she was probably with one of her brainless friends and would show soon. Valkuda was in Varna though and looked like a horse that had been ridden hard and put away wet. May be she would slip that time, hoped elder Tanassov. It was about time, he said.

A car with four guards was ordered for four-thirty in the morning and Tanas went home. On the way to the company apartment he stopped at a snotty book shop and bought the autobiography of Professor Spassov. One better be prepared to charm the young lass and her grandmother instead of grabbing and tossing her over his shoulder like it was proper in that village she was hiding in. The book had several illustrative photos, on one of them there were the three Spassovs, Rada's mother a beautiful young lady of about seven on her first day at school, her parents smiling at her. Tanas poured over the last few chapters while munching his take-away Chinese. He nearly jumped of joy and forgot his shrimps – according to the book, Rada's mother had been born in that same Brashlyan to an unfortunate young woman who had died at birth. Mitzi and the professor had fallen in love with the baby on the spot while visiting an old friend. There was no way that was a coincidence. Tanas propped his suit for the next morning and put on the alarm. He had found his princess's castle. The rest was a matter of time and chance.

The small group made a pit stop at Yambol for the men to stretch for half an hour. They had plenty of time to get to the remote village. Tanas left the four of them for a brunch at a decent looking bistro and went for a quick walk to find a place where he could talk to his father privately. The elder Tanassov was ecstatic – he had just got his hands on the unconscious Valkuda. The evil girl had made the ultimate mistake to walk

without a bodyguard out of the office and he had her in the trunk of his car. Oh, she was very much alive and he agreed with Tanas that they first had to have a talk with her and get more info before deciding what to do with the chit. But Dimitar did not need to know that, their cunning father said; he should be told that she would be killed at midday if he would not sign a promissory note that he would transfer the estate to their father as it should have been done at the first place. Then they would deal with him as needed, nothing bloody, of course, he was a family. No, his stepmother had not showed yet and her telephone was not answering. One thing at a time, his father had cautioned, they would find her later and who cared if she decided to depart under her own steam. Tanas' sober brain was telling him that his father was not exactly honest but he could not pin where the dog was buried, so he agreed with himself that he would find later. 'I will call you later!' he said in his cell and went back to fetch his guards.

The guards got instructions to stay in the car until they were called and Tanas went alone to knock on the gates that Father Ivan had pointed. He had not missed the speculative glance of the elderly priest. It was inevitable – he did look like his grandfather on his youthful photos that had been all over the press three months ago and even a remote village like Brashlyan got news sometimes. The gates opened and a decent looking young man smiled at him. 'What can I help you with?'

'I am looking for Doctor Spassova.'

'You are a tad late for that, she is former Miss Spassova and is presently known as Mrs. Kaloyanova.' Georgi thought that the face was familiar but could not pinpoint it at the moment. It was possible that the good looking man was Rada's friend and he did not want to mess there.

That was a blow below the solar plexus but Tanas sucked it up and decided that politeness would win him more points. 'Shall I congratulate you as her husband, Mr. Kaloyanov?'

'No, Rada is my sister-in-law. Would you like to come in and I will try to find them for you.'

Rada and Konstantin were somewhere in the garden so he went for a search while Tanas sat under the vine in the yard. The rest of the company was setting the table for dinner in the kitchen as the day was suffocating hot already. Two people glanced out of the window and exclaimed together, 'Tanas!'

Mitzi looked at Dimitar startled – he lifted his shoulders and his surprise mirrored her.

'He is here for me. OK, I will go!'

'Not so fast!' hissed Tantche and ran to her room with a speed of a world champion. She came back with something in her hand and grabbed a glass of cold water, slid the miniature pill and went outside.

'Good morning! Would you like something cooling while you wait? It is such a day!'

Tanas looked at the peanut size blondie and smiled. 'This is all that is left of the wedding feast?'

The girl dissolved in giggles and batted her lashes, 'You may want to save some space for later, I can assure you the hosts will have plenty to drink later. But you don't want to dry like a tchiros waiting, do you?'

One never knows when his next glass will be...'

Tanas looked at the glass and lifted it, 'Let me drink for meeting such a considerate soul under the sun!' and gulped it. It was water, after all, he had not had anything to drink since leaving Yambol and it was long ago.

The blondie's smile widened. 'I will go and bring something to your equipage – how many people are there, only your driver?'

'I hope you have enough for four burly men. Are you sure?' he genuinely liked her. There was something that inspired confidence in her heart-shaped face, clear blue eyes and tousled blond curls which color looked genuine. She was refreshing in her absence of make-up, simple sun dress and direct approach. And she had not flirted with him yet, which was a plus.

'I think I will manage! May I do something else for you?'

'How about clap your hands and my brother appears here to have a chat with me?'

He was bluffing, Tantche knew and was about to refuse when Dimitar opened the kitchen door and came out. Could this man sit on his derrière when told, she thought irritably. It was late to shove him back as Tanas turned and smiled like a wolf who had just seen a lamb alone in the woods.

'You see, I did it even without clapping hands. How about if you get inside and talk there, it is too hot here.'

She was aiming at the safety in numbers. If there would be a fight Dimitar stood better chances flanked by the men there. Riste, Georgi, Kosta and him might not be up to one to one with the flag pole in front of her but together it should not be bad. She turned and entered the kitchen and looked at Mitzi.

'Around three to five more minutes, I believe, but damn he is big!' she whispered in her ear while arranging a tray with cans of pop, straws and few quick sandwiches. 'I want to scout his tugs.' She sauntered outside and looked at the two men staring at each other silently. 'If you are playing who will blink first you can do that in the kitchen as well, it is more comfortable.'

Tantche's voice seemed to break their concentration and they both shook heads. She would have laughed how much alike the two of them were but there was no time for that. Tanas' size was troubling and she was not quite sure whether she should not have used two pills instead of one. It was late to doubt at that point. The instructor had said that overdose could send the specimen into trouble especially if he had some other medical history behind the screen. They wanted information not a dead body, those tended not to be talkative. She opened the small door on the side and approached the glossy black car. Tanas was correct. Those were four burly men. She approached the driver and smiled, 'Guys your boss is having an animated stare-up with his brother but says I can bring you something to sustain you!'

The driver's window dropped some more and she slid the tray there. Damn, none of them looked small, those were handpicked and prepared. She spotted Father Ivan at the church door and waved at him. One more man would be good although it would be better if they had to tackle them one by one. The one inside was the most dangerous although these were not kindergarten group. Damn, she had only two syringes of tranquilizer in her bag, who knew that the events would turn ugly so unexpectedly. How on the God's green Earth had Tanas managed to get to Brashlyan so fast? Only the day before Lily had called that all was clear in Sofia, Mila had not poked her nose out of the house and was still having nightmares. Was she a better actress sent to weasel the secrets? But then he would have been there on the day of the wedding, not two days after. Somebody had broken the silence. Were they to expect the rest of them here? There was no reason to call the cops for a brother visiting brother, but it would be darn late if the entire Tanassovs' squad showed up. Better go and question Tanas; he should be good and ready by now!

Mitzi had not wasted time, Tantche found. The unexpected guest was positioned between Konstantin and Georgi's empty chairs and given already a plate. The atmosphere was tense to say the least.

'Your people are having a bite, you may do that as well!' the older woman implored and Tanas put some fried egg plants in tomato sauce on his plate and looked somewhat puzzled. It was working, Tantche thought, it should work albeit she had no idea how his alcohol sodden liver would react. He looked in rather good form for the drunkard the newspapers pictured him. They better hurry up.

'I have my doubts that my granddaughter intended to invite her patient's boss to join her during her vacation. How did you find us?' Mitzi was on the same wavelength.

'I spoke with Konstantin's boss Dimitrova and she spilled the beans!'

'She volunteered the info?'

'No, she thought she was speaking with one of his French connections, you see, I happen to be good with languages.' Tanas had the audacity to laugh. "*Mais oui, je voudrais visiter Konstantin et sa petite amie, Rada la Splendide, comme il lui décrives.*"

Mitzi looked across the table and saw another Tanassov there – the cunning, ruthless, inventive Tanas Sr. They had been lulled into the false security by "Tanas Jr. the Drunkard" tales reprinted all over the yellow press. The man in front of her was not the playboy and drunken buddy and wet T-shirt admirer, or he was that all but behind the façade he was different. He had inherited the looks but not only. He was the mighty adversary and the great mind, albeit there was lurking the complete self-absorption, the look that he was fighting for something the others would not get as their minds were not that wide to encompass it. That was far worse than she had expected. None of the young generation knew the depths of darkness that the young Tanas Sr. had reached in his quest for power; they would not believe the intensity of the man who could bend iron wills like plastic straws. But that quest for power had been his curse and she hoped her life experience would help her beat the grandson where the grandfather had failed.

'So apart from visiting Konstantin you had other agenda, right? Will you please enlighten me?'

'Mrs. Spassova, my initial plans were to marry your granddaughter and ask for something that my grandfather had pursued all his life as a wedding present.'

The door opened and Georgi and Lorelei entered followed by Rada and Konstantin. The young doctor's face was furious and Konstantin was puzzled.

'Mr. Tanassov, I don't remember inviting you to any private party and I don't think you were passing by to drop unexpected. We do not know each other enough for this to be a social visit.' Rada was pulling at all stops.

'My dear, Mr. Tanassov was discussing his matrimonial aspirations towards you when you entered, may we ask him to continue?'

'Matrimonial aspirations?' Rada sounded scandalized. 'I have never given him so much as my cell phone number! What, you came to propose?'

'I am sorry Mr. Tanassov, as my brother had the pleasure to inform you the lady is already spoken for,' Konstantin was finding it amusing or faking it real well. 'You may congratulate us anyway!' He held a hand to the tall man who was standing by that time. He took it and after shaking it, turned it to look at his wedding ring. There was no doubt what Konstantin was wearing; the red gem was depicting the same khala that was described in the copy he had stolen from Dimitar. Tanas looked at his brother and he nodded with open pleasure.

'Yes, he got it and the lady also. You are late, bro!'

'May be I am for that part but I have something up my sleeve for you, bro! Dad says he has your green-eyed manager in his trunk so to speak and she will die at midday if you don't sing me a letter that you are transferring everything that came from Grandpa to him as it should be. I called from Yambol and that is what he told me, you know Dad, he is not much into bragging if he does not have the situation under control. Oh, but how the time runs! Fifteen minutes and not a second more! If someone shows me where the bathroom is, I will leave you to ponder it for a while.'

'First door to the right down the corridor!' Mitzi was pale as chalk.

Tanas strolled there as if he had not a worry in the world. The second the door closed behind him, Rada jumped, 'He is lying! He is just bluffing!'

'He is not! You can take my words to the bank,' Tantche countered. 'When was the last time one spoke with Valkuda?'

'She left me a message that she would call in morning. She did not!' Mitzi was trembling. 'And she is not the girl not to follow up. Her cell was switched off all the morning and the office told me she had left earlier alone to go for a quick shopping but it was taking too long. He had got her!'

'You can always sign whatever he wants and later renege, what is the problem, just get her out of his clutches.'

'I doubt it is on the cards. You don't know my father.' Dimitar's face was drained of any blood.

Tantche looked helplessly, 'Don't you think that if this bastard calls his father he will let her alive?'

'No' said Dimitar, 'He will not let her alive under any circumstances...He did not intend to let her alive at first place, it is just his game.'

'We have another ten minutes until midday, call Varna and get them going.'

'There is not enough time to get to the shore where she is. I bet my dad had made sure of it. I need a miracle!'

'Help me!' Konstantin was frantically twisting off his wedding ring. Rada shoved his hand in the bowl of strawberries and cream in front of him, he squeezed, withdrew his hand and finally pulled off the tight ring. He handed it to Dimitar, 'Go!'

Dimitar looked at him, 'What?'

'Put it on your right hand's fourth finger, turn three times counter clockwise plus half a turn till the stone is towards your palm and let's pray that it will work, fast!'

'You believe all that, you?' Dimitar did not trust his ears. His normal, down to earth friend, a banker, educated contemporary man was offering him to try an ancient legend.

'I would go myself, but I don't know where it is, and there is no time to search. Dimitar, go, we will take care of the crowd here! Go!'

Dimitar looked at the company around the table. Mitzi, Kosta and Rada, Georgi and Lorelei, Riste and Vera, Vantche, Tantche, Father Ivan. Those were the people who had opened their hearts and souls to him, the son of a killer, a grandson of a killer, may be a brother of a killer, they have trusted him when the entire history of his family had screamed the opposite, they have put their lives at risk for him. He could indulge them enough to turn a ring three times. Of course, nothing would happen; these were only old women's tales.

The young man put the ring on his finger, and turned it as instructed. Nothing. In the silence that ensued, Konstantin was counting, "one, two, three..." Dimitar was about to open his mouth when Konstantin reached twenty, but upon him muttering the word, the windows started rattling, then the china danced on the table, and the curtains flapped wildly.

'Earthquake, everyone run outside!' yelled his brother who burst into the kitchen and ran out first, the rest followed suit. Once in the spacious yard the little group stopped, bumping into each other as everyone who came out of the door was finding hard to tear their gaze from the thing that had caused the commotion.

In the middle of the gray stone tiles a dragon was standing.

It was like the storybook that Mitzi had shown them had been opened and the khala had stepped out of the page right into the yard. The stupendous wings were like translucent silver which were glowing even under the cloud, the body was covered with pulsating reddish-gold scales the size of a big coin from the tip of the frighteningly strong sharp tail to the ring of glittering green stones on the neck from where the scales looked smaller, covering perfectly the delicate curves of the giant horse head. The khala was steady on its four muscled legs, finished with steel-blue claws that looked menacingly sharp. The breath that came from its mouth was scalding hot. The beast had yellow round eyes which were scanning the agog group for someone. When its gaze reached Dimitar, it lowered its head to him as if to look closer. It snickered and wispy flames came out of its nostrils.

'Come on, you called me! What do you need to be done?' Dimitar was not sure if he was the only one to hear the rumbling sounds that reminded him of Stoyan, his mentor.

'I need to save a girl who is in mortal danger. My father is going to let her die at midday in a landslide at the seaside.' He was not sure whether he was speaking aloud or not, but it did not matter anymore, as the beast opened his mouth, licked its lips and motioned to its back.

'So what are we waiting for? Jump and I hope you know how to ride bareback. You can hold on my necklace though.'

Dimitar moved as if in a dream and mounted first one conveniently bended elbow, then over the back and held onto the necklace for dear life. Oddly enough, the feeling was not of scales, but of hot soft skin. The next he felt was the flap of the giant wings and the earth started getting blurred.

'Now you have to think about your girl for us to find her. If you really, really think hard, I will be able to pick up the direction once we are closer.'

'How do you know to talk?'

'It is not so hard, in fact you are not talking, you are thinking and I can read it, the same for you, it is like a private radio channel of sort. Now, you don't need to jump up and down my neck, it does not feel good. Why the progress is to be allowed for the human forms and not for us, is really beyond me. I hope you don't think that I will be sitting in a grotto all the time sleeping - that is boring. I snoop around when I can.'

'Do we have time to get there before midday? I don't have a watch.'

'You will not need it. It will not work properly while you are with me. I am still a pretty young khala, so I cannot stop the time for too long yet, but I am a good flier. In fact that spot under us is Varna, now think fast while I make a cloud, you don't want the entire town to see us, I presume, although I don't mind.'

'She sounds like Valkuda, bossy, protective, just right for me!' was Dimitar's first thought. He gripped the necklace tighter and concentrated on a pair of green eyes and tousled black hair, pink lips and gorgeous forms, just like he had seen her before he went to see Mitzi in Sofia before Tanas Sr.'s funeral, hot and pulsing like the fantastic form he was riding.

"I got it, thank you!"

Was there a jealousy he detected in the khala's retort, Dimitar thought, but the creature was talking again and he switched his attention to it.

'She is right under us in that white car, but I don't think she is conscious. Listen, I smell another presence, real rotten, around, your dad is too close and he is looking at his watch. He is sufficiently far enough for us to land, but you have to be fast. I will smash the back window, you get your princess and jump back. There is a bomb ticking somewhere down this hill, a small one, but it will trigger the landslide that you told me about for sure. Plus I hate flying off from moving surfaces. Hold on!'

It was a soft landing and immediately the mighty tail smashed the back window of the small two seats car. Dimitar slid to the ground and ran as fast as his trembling legs would carry him. He tried to pull the door open, but it was locked, so he knocked the glass remnants and unlocked it first, and then pulled on the unconscious body. It did not move. She was secured with the seat belt; he dived to open it and grabbed her bag from the passenger's seat while pulling back. The young man tossed the bag over his head, hoisted Valkuda's body on his shoulder and ran to the khala. It was harder to get up, and he heard the beast hissing 'Faster, I can't hold it much longer!' Then a monstrous hind leg unceremoniously pushed him up, like a dog scratching his ear. He mounted, holding Valkuda close with one hand while clutching the emerald necklace with the other. The silver wings flipped and they were again in the thick black cloud that the khala had made and moving. They did not have any intention to investigate the small bang behind them.

A man who had once been beautiful was watching the arms of his expensive watch. He could not believe his black eyes, the short arm had been on twelve for what seemed an eternity and the long one did not seem to move at all. He shook his watch to be sure it was working and heard it ticking, but the long arm did not move. He did not want to stay longer than needed but wanted to be sure that the plan would go smoothly. At twelve the small device would cause the car to slip down and in few minutes the nuisance would drown, he made sure to leave the windows opened enough. It would be classified as accident, one of the almost daily landslides caused by faulty construction and excessive development of the shore. He was pretty sure that there would not be a living soul to make a connection with another drowning accident at that place long ago, and if it was done, it would confirm that the place had always been treacherous. He looked at his watch again - a minute left still. The man glanced at the gigantic black cloud that had appeared quickly. Even better, some rain would make the landslide so much more believable, he thought. Then the sound of breaking glass startled him. It was not possible that the annoying bitch had woken up, he had made sure to whack her out properly, but she had a thick head. Better check, the time was running. He came out of his secure place and walked fast, he did not want to do down with her, but he did not want for her to walk out of it either, she knew too much.

The man was almost a fifty meters from the car when he stopped his run and stared. In front of him there was a golden dragon standing. No, it was not possible, that could not be a dragon, but there should be no stupid people dragging painted circus decorations around. His people should have made sure that nobody came around until he came back. The man was determined to go get the idiots out of the way as well. He pulled his semi-automatic and held it ready. The circus decoration slowly turned its head and looked at him, then opened its toothy mouth and actually laughed at him. The man pinched his arm, he had not had a gram of alcohol in the last two days and his eyes were playing him tricks, he thought. The dragon laughed louder, then it turned its back to the man. The beast was looking at something else, blocking the man's view.

Anger sometimes grants men extreme force and extreme stupidity. The man almost ran the next thirty or so meters and was close enough to see how a huge hind leg moved, pushing on the creature's back a young man holding a woman's body. There was not doubt who the body was; her black hair was flowing down the

arm that supported her. For a fraction of a second the man holding her turned and his profile was etched on the background of golden scales. Dimitar! His snake of a son had decided to get from the stupid village where Tanas had tracked him down and come to rescue his mistress. A rage beyond the reason hit him, he remembered the incoherent stories about an enchanted ring that could summon the supernatural that his own father and grandfather had fed him and that Tanas had recently started being rather interested in. So it was true, the power existed! His blasted father had left it to his favorite grandson to spite the others!. No way! The enchanted ring may be calling dragons, but a good bullet should do when needed. The man aimed and fired once at the hand holding the green collar, but at the same moment the beast flapped its wings and he fell on the ground. Before he managed to take aim again, the golden creature had disappeared. His searching gaze encompassed the clearing skies, fell over the car with its opened door and smashed window, then on his watch. The two arms rested perfectly one upon the other, pointing midday. The ground ran from under his feet.

The police arrived almost immediately to secure the place, alerted by the beach authorities who had registered the slide. They were met by two utterly worried sets of guards who insisted that their boss had asked for few minutes to go and stay alone on the beach not long before the land had moved. The police sealed the perimeter until it could be verified to be safe and sent a boat to access the dangerous place by sea. The security company director's body was pulled out of the muddy waters an hour later. The pathologist determined no foul play, as there were no traces of violence neither on the body, nor on the car, which was fished also. The investigation determined that the director had probably come out of the car right before the slide, had fallen and hit his head, so when he had reached the water, he had been unconscious and drowned, as otherwise he had been decent swimmer and there were no traces of alcohol in his blood. The case was closed as a tragic accident and the prosecutor went to call the next of kin. He was irked that he had to do at least two calls, as it was a public secret that the deceased's two sons did not speak to each other.

The next day the news about Tanassov's son death hit the town before it reached the press. The elderly immediately recalled that his first girlfriend had died the same way on the same spot. The gossip machine

started running at impossible speed, fueling wilder and wilder speculations. The romantics were seeing the death as almost a suicide over the spot where his first love had slipped into the afterlife tragically young. The skeptics were saying that the beach had been unstable for decades and needed maintenance, pointing at the city officials. The conservationists were using it as an example that once upon a time a wisp of girl had slipped, but the last accident had involved a car which had been a much heavier burden to the weakened shore structure and started a petition to forbid cars on the seaside route.

The only brother of the girl who had been forgotten for decades, a prominent lawyer in the capital, had remained close to the family of the deceased despite the tragic past. By following midday, his office was besieged by eager press representatives to the point that he opted to issue a press release. It stated his condolences to the relatives of the dead man who would never be forgotten, and asked for privacy as the circumstances of the recent tragedy had reopened old wounds. The press smelled front news for days, and special teams were dispatched to every place remotely connected with the girl that had died so long ago at seventeen. It was summer, the news were scarce and tearjerkers sold always very well. He could not have chosen a better time to die, if he wished, thought the delighted editors, rubbing hands. Somewhere, a man with a glass of cognac in hand was leafing through the pages picturing old grave buried in flowers and thought that Lady Fate was a dame with a strange sense of humor, just like his baby sister. But that was not for the press to know, right, he had asked for privacy.

'That hurt a bit!' the khala exclaimed, but did not stop. Dimitar felt the pain as his own. 'What a bastard! He could have seriously chipped my necklace! Please, have a look, it hit somewhere around your hand!'

The young sculptor did not dare to let go of the jewel, but bended over Valkuda's body and had a closer look. Indeed, there was a missing corner at one of the stones' ornate frames.

'It is not that bad, I can repair it for you, the stone is intact, it is only the metal!' he offered.

'I hope you are as good as you think, otherwise...'

'You will eat me?'

'You should not believe everything they tell you. Your nutritious value is not that high as a biomass, so rest assured, you are quite safe on that part.'

'How do you feed in that case?'

'On imagination, on the belief in me, that is delicious. If I am really starved, I could go for fear, but it does not taste good. Your grandfather was very yummy at one point, it was a time when almost everyone had forgotten about me, drops here and there, but he believed. I won't touch your brother, though, he smells rotten, just like your father, who did not believe in me one second, except when he died a minute ago.'

'Father is dead?'

'You will be surprised, but next time you are warned that "A person who digs a grave for someone else, may slide in it", you better believe it. His own bomb killed him.'

'So he got what he prepared for Valkuda then.'

'That is right. It is good that you have three doctors there, she had a pretty hard blow on the head, but will be fine.'

'How do you know about the three doctors?'

'I thought you understood by now. I am flying on their collective trust in me. If I had to come to rely on you only, I would have been no bigger than a kitten. Not that I would not have been pretty, of course, but useless as well. They all trusted the ring; you did not, when you called me. Now, be careful, we are going to make an extra circle before landing.'

The dragon's departure had left the yard in awestruck silence. It took few seconds before Tanas yelled, 'It is true, then, it exists, the ring, and it works! I was right all along; it was here all the time! Oh, but it is not here now! By the time my stupid brother comes, if ever, because dad will take care of him there, I will finish with you all and will get the blasted ring from him upon arrival! Then I want to see who will stand on the way of Tanassovs when they wish something...'. He pumped his fist in the air.

His mad laughter was echoing in the silent yard. A few seconds later he was on the floor, face down, hands tied behind his back with his own belt, with Tantche sitting firmly on his waist, one hand holding tight on his hair, the other in a headlock. It had happened so fast, that nobody had time to react.

'Get his tugs, please!' she said conversationally.

Tanas was trying to get rid of the petite blondie, trashing madly, but her steel grip did not release, she unceremoniously tugged on his hair and he yelled in pain. The next moment Father Ivan was holding his

head as well, Riste was steadying his feet, Georgi was pulling the rope from the well, Konstantin run inside the house for a knife. By the time Vantche fetched the guards from the car outside, Tanas was bundled like a Christmas present. The guards were blinking in disbelief and before they came out of their stupor, the petite blondie who had brought them food initially came forward.

'Guys, I am sorry, your boss seems delirious. I don't know if this is a frequent condition and it had happened to him before, but trust me, I am a resident physician in an asylum for mentally ill and I know the symptoms. He was quite normal when you arrived, after that started bubbling about some ring, then he said he was seeing dragons, then he started threatening us, so we had no choice but to restrain him.'

'She is a manipulator!'

'Am I? Did you see a dragon, you said?'

'But there was a dragon and you know it, blasted woman, it was real!' Tanas blurted it, whether under the serum or not. 'Let me go! I am perfectly sane!'

The petite opened her arms towards the guards, 'You see! That is typical also; no insane person had ever confessed that he is insane! Did any of you see a dragon flying around at any rate?'

The guards mutely nodded "No!" and continued to stare at their boss. Tanas was foaming at the mouth, 'You know what I will do with you, idiots, when I get rid of this rope, don't you? You are here to do what I say, not to listen to some crazy bitch!'

'The crazy bitch warns you that if you let him out, he will be violent. It looks more and more like an alcohol abuse problem coupled with an abstinence at the moment. I don't know if he drinks, but you probably are aware. He may be dangerous to himself as well, if it is so, especially in the phase of a delirium when he sees things. If I were you, I would first show him to a physician for evaluation and will be very, very cautious around him. Here is his gun. Please, for your own safety and for his as well, don't give it to him before you are sure he is all right, ' the doctor's face was a picture of professional concern.

'Wait, the dragon should come back, let us wait and you will all see it with your own eyes! It should bring Dimitar back from Varna!' Tanas was desperately trying to shake the rope.

The older woman standing nearby looked at him with compassion and then looked at the guards, 'It seems that it is worse than it initially looked like. Gentleman, I think the poor boy needs specialized care as soon as

possible. Especially with his family history, you know. Would you like to drive him to Bourgas or you prefer to wait for an ambulance? It may take some time to get here, we don't have a resident doctor in the village.'

One of the guards finally gathered enough of his wits back, 'No need, it is evident that he needs help right away. It is damn hot, may be he had been in the sun for rather long, who knows.'

'I will show you the sun and the moon and all the stars once I get away from here, I promise you!' Tanas' eyes were bloodshot and his voice a menacing yell. 'Just wait!'

'No, you wait! Guys, let us scoop him and get him to Bourgas before he gets completely lost! Someone knows a hospital in Bourgas? Well, we will see once we get there.'

The guards approached their bound boss cautiously and when he spat an obscenity on them, their worst fears were confirmed. The always volatile Tanas had finally lost his mind, but he was still dangerous. One of the men pulled out a pair of handcuffs, deftly fixed his boss' hands behind his back and took off the belt. The guards quickly stuffed the wiggling and yelling Tanas in the middle of the back seat, two of them sat on both sides and fixed his seat belt, then their own ones, while the other pair jumped to the front and the car peeled rubber. The only thought of the guards was to get their boss to the nearest madhouse. They would think about facing his father later.

A minute after the car had left Brashlyan in a cloud of dust, a big gold dragon landed in the tranquil yard. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. One of them - a fiery one. Some garden flowers would never be the same, but nobody cared.