

Coincidences

By the time Tanas called Dimitar not to worry about the robbery incident as it was bound to hit the news, shaved, took a shower, changed and drove back with another carload, Mrs. Hlebarova had been ready. She had called few fellow grandmas who gasped at her news, got her request and started calling their fellow grandmas who in their respective turn gasped at the news, got the request and started calling. Within forty-five minutes, the time for a school lesson, they had located the required item and had convinced the current owner to part with it if Tanas liked it enough. The grapevine buzzed again, that time with the much more difficult task of getting hold of a gypsy family who redid mattresses. Luck was with them as one grandma had recently redone her set and had been shocked to learn that the wondering gypsies wondered with cell phones in their pockets, a novelty to her. Both streams of information reached Siran with enough time to spare to get ready for the cemetery. She had ever been organized.

'I have such good news for you! It is such a coincidence, but a friend of mine called me today, she had heard about the yesterday's horrors, and among the other things she asked whether I know anyone who may need a big bed, and of course I thought of you. She sais you can go see it at any time. It was done by the same carpenter as your grandfather's bedroom, and she is such a clean woman. Her husband also could not sleep in small beds and they had to order a bigger one, what do you think?'

Tanas knew when he had been set up yet it was different. Someone had been doing something for him not because she was being paid or because she was responsible for it. It was because the old woman genuinely was happy to do something for him. He could not break the hopes of a legion of old women he was sure were involved in that "coincidental" call, he had to at least go and see the result of their collective efforts. Custom made bed meant additional trouble with mattresses and sheets, but the proper upbringing obliged to go and visit. He stuffed his wallet in his back pocket, picked Mrs. Hlebarova's "graveyard kit" and drove three blocks to her friend. The set was impressive oak one; the original satiny polish lovingly cared for, every last carved leaf and flower intact. It came with two mirrored wardrobes, two bed tables, a vanity

and a dresser. The top of the cream was a dainty footstool as the lovely mistress of the house had been definitely much, much shorter than her late husband with whom in mind the tall bed was made. It was all his for a very reasonable price as the lady had thought for years to buy herself a bed that she did not need to climb upon with the help of a footstool, she assured him, but never thought that she would find someone to appreciate it. The two grandmas even insisted that he tried it to be sure he fit. He could fit the national basketball team in it if needed, he thought, but instead asked when he could pick it up. Immediately. Two curly white heads whispered something to each other, then announced that the nephew of the sister of the mother-in-law of the fifth cousin of the owner's grandson had a small moving company, they usually were busy but for a small set like that and only for three blocks, of course they would accept to bring it in and install it. They needed only the keys and it would be done while Tanas was at the cemetery. He was sure that the movers were downstairs as they spoke. Tanas should have been outraged for being had by two old crows; instead he thanked and paid. He owed Raina big one.

Daisies. Someone had brought fresh daisies to his sister's grave - and according to the water drops on their petals - not so long ago. Tsarev put down the posy he had brought her and for the first time in decades looked in the eyes of the girl on the oval porcelain photo. He had spent years agonizing over the question of who had helped Tanassov's son kill her, but never had the chance to get a shred of where to start searching for the other dark soul. The lawyer doubted that the great mind that Tanas Sr. possessed had never wandered over the same mystery. Yet he had never acted. The previous morning had opened that abscess and despite the pain the poison had drained from Andon's soul. He was proud that he had had his last word with the filthy creature that had brought his sister for her last unwilling ride.

'She did not even have time to refuse when I offered her to sandwich instead of you, you know!' he chuckled. Andon let a sigh he did not know he was holding since the day Tanas Sr. had handed him the circumspect letter. Vilena was revenged and he was free, the bill was paid and the account was closed, as he had told Tanas the night before. Andon could continue to miss her and love the memory of what she had been in their lives, now without the bitter taste of justice not executed. He owed the guy big one.

The tall man was sitting on the marble bench in front of the double grave of his grandparents. On the marble slab a single white rose was laid and he was looking at it, his head resting on his hands.

'Waiting for someone in particular?' Tsarev said in a low voice for not to startle him.

'Mrs. Hlebarova. She asked to be alone for few minutes, but then I am picking her up and driving back home.'

'Thank you for the daisies, Vilena loved flowers, but I guess all young girls do.'

'You are welcome.'

'I saw you managed to get into the news again.'

'Already? Who would be interested in accountant dead by stroke?'

'No, not the accountant, Broken Jaw and Broken Nose, two prominent underworld representatives out of the scene for the season. Half the police force of the town loves you.'

'Nice to know, I confess. How about the other half? Shall I go and break something else?'

'I doubt it.'

'I have another confession to make and before Mrs. Hlebarova comes. Yesterday night she said nobody remembered old teachers and I told her you sent her best regards, hopefully you will not hold it over my head.'

Tsarev looked around. 'You did the right thing, I would have sent best regards if I though you would be seeing her. That is her coming, right?'

'Yes, that is her. You are right, she is a sweet lady and this sweet little lady managed to organize for me to buy an antique bedroom set within an hour.'

'The people of this generation should not be underestimated, I am afraid we do that mistake often.'

'Ah, Dontcho, have not seen you in ages, since poor Tanas died. You said than that you will come to visit me but I know you are a busy man, Sofia - Varna. Did Tanas tell you that he bought the attic and that he saved my life yesterday, such a brave young man!'

'Mrs. Hlebarova, I am blushing!'

'Someone has to tell this, I was telling him that if Vilenka had not died, you could be his uncle!'

Both men stared at each other and then looked at the angel gracefully carrying its eternal bouquet.

Andon was without a car and rode with them back to the center. Tanas suggested that they have a quick lunch together and it was accepted on one condition.

'We have to be home before one o'clock!' announced Mrs. Hlebarova.

'You think that the furniture will be there by then?'

'Oh, of course, but at one the mattress people are coming, they need to finish by seven tonight as they have some celebration of sort.'

'What mattress people?'

'Oh, did I forget, they will come to redo the mattresses for you to sleep in your own bed tonight. They are pure cotton and I need to wash and dry the covers, that is why we need to be there!'

'Auntie Siran, you have always been adamant if you decide to do something!' Andon laughed. He was careful enough to wait for her to go to the bathroom to add, "A force of Nature, you better listen!'

It was a hectic afternoon - Tanas had to bring his remaining luggage jumping over the mattress master who had brought his entire family to help. The old mattresses were painstakingly unstitched on one side, emptied of their stuffing and watchful Mrs. Hlebarova washed them in her old washing machine then hung them in the backyard to dry in the breeze like giant pillow cases. The family washed the white cotton balls in low tubs until they became snow white, squeezed them in enormous colanders, then spread them across the driveway on thick sheets of black plastic to dry under the scorching sun. They took out their lunch and sang funny songs, while the kids went to turn the mass to dry faster. Surprisingly, it took not that long. The head of the clan raised his main instrument which looked like a well worn giant bow and started fluffing the cotton with the string. Several women of indistinguishable age were sitting on the ground and chatting in their colorful language while helping him disintegrate the most stubborn clusters on evil-looking steel combs mounted on a piece of wood they held between their sharovar-clad tights. The children who were little enough not to be trusted with the sharp teeth were helping by pulling the cotton balls with their dark fingers while singing some rhymes. Small cotton ball fights erupted and were immediately extinguished with a stern reprimand by the gold-toothed matriarch overseeing the process. The two mattresses worth of cotton grew to a veritable snowy mountain and Tanas was not sure it can be stuffed back. He was bold enough to say that aloud and the mattress master indignantly assured him that his clan had been in business for more

years than he could count. Despite the fact that the renewed product would be looking short for the first few days, all the cotton would be inside up to the last shred. Mrs. Hlebarova brought the dry ironed covers and the stuffing began under her constant supervision. The cotton bags initially looked like Santa Claus attire. When the top seams were closed in hidden stitches, the women pulled out their humungous needles the length of which exceeded the palms of their hands and started expertly shifting the cotton inside. They made two neat rims on each side to hold the form, and then in equal intervals placed small cotton squares to keep the thick waxed thread from tearing the bags. It was enchanting to watch their dark fingers dancing with surgical precision, as the cotton squares on the top should match the cotton squares on the bottom for the finished mattress to be looking like a cut baklava - in symmetrical palm-size diamonds from corner to corner. The two mattresses were put side to side and Tanas was amazed that they did look identical. The chef of the clan came with his own monstrous needle, adjusted few bumps visible to his expert eye only and proclaimed the job done. He personally helped Tanas drag the mattresses to the attic, put them on the bed and said, 'Before you pay me, you lay down, for if you feel something is not to your liking, I will redo it here and now!'

Tanas did as he was asked. It was like lying on a cloud and he could honestly believe that the poor princess could feel the pea under nine such mattresses. He paid the sum that Mrs. Hlebarova had already agreed upon after a long negotiation and tipped the man, who brushed the banknotes on his bristles of a beard for good luck. The ethnic effect was somewhat spoiled by his ringing cell phone and he started negotiating the following day work while going down the stairs. The tabor was out as promised, before seven.

His king size sheets were short. He would have to order some made, Tanas thought, looking at his new bed which was even higher with the fluffed mattresses. The movers had been people with a sense of space as he liked the way they had placed the furniture - yet there was so much space left that the bed looked like a child's toy. He could waltz around without trouble. If he could find someone to waltz with him, if his own stepmother jumped in his presence. But that could wait. He had hanged his clothes in one of the massive wardrobes and put the small stuff away in the dresser so there was not much left for the next day. He had discovered that what he had initially taken for an outside wall was actually a separation to reasonably big storage room with windows on three sides that would make a kitchenette and a closet without much effort.

He stored there the remaining two big bags and felt hungry. He had not had anything to eat since lunch and the nearby deli appeared more and more appealing. Tanas decided to pass by and ask Mrs. Hlebarova if she needed something.

She was home, he was almost sure, but his first knock was not answered. It was early for her to retire for the day, he thought, may be she was watching her ancient TV and did not hear him. He knocked again and the door opened. The old woman looked like she had cried. The aftermath of the shock, Tanas thought, how he could think that it would go away so easy! She needed a change of pace, to go out after a day spent helping him.

'I was thinking of treating you to a nice Melba at the Casino for all your kindness if it is not too late for you and I hope you will indulge my little wish! I wanted to give you some time to prepare while I go and dress accordingly, please!' Tanas sincerely needed grooming.

Mrs. Hlebarova had been around for a while and she knew he was making an effort for her sake. She was grateful for it. The scenes from the previous evening had jumped on her when she had entered the kitchen for a glass of water. Even the reassuring steps on the floor above could not prevent the tears that came with the thought how close she had been to meet her beloved Matey on the other side of the curtain. The old woman bravely smiled and quipped, 'If your lady of the heart will not mind you being seen with an old jay, I will be delighted! Give me twenty minutes and I will be in my utmost splendor!'

Tanas grinned at her, 'The hell with the gossips! We are going to party! Twenty minutes!' and run up the stairs. The old music teacher smoothed her hair and went to get ready.

He had to admit his date was looking splendid - the black georgette was flowing around her in subtle waves, her full head of white curly hair was arranged in Greta Garbo style and the pearl necklace emphasized her youthful skin color. The outfit was complemented by completely non-grandmotherly pumps and a small black handbag. Tanas ceremoniously offered her a hand and winked. The old lady tittered.

The Casino manager had their table reserved and they were shown to it immediately. Mrs. Hlebarova accepted her shot of port and they discussed the menu for a while. It was pleasant, quiet interaction and

Tanas caught himself that he was enjoying it rather much. Over dinner the elderly lady was telling him stories about the entertainment at his grandparents' days, the rumors from years long ago slipped into the sea like the shore that moved constantly. It was like seeing Varna in a different prospective, one he never bothered to learn about. It was what made the town what it was, the fabric of it, with its shiny spots and its shadows, with its bohemian community of artists and musicians and actors, cinema lovers and beach goers, dancers and drinkers, barmaids and their patrons, gardeners and city officials. For the first time in his life he heard the details behind his grandfather's phrase that Tane had saved his life more than once. Tanas learned about the unrequited love of his great uncle and how it had shaped his life turning him into the unhappy wanderer that he had been, always trying to flee and always returning. They were ready to move to the terrace to have their Melbas when a short pudgy man stood next to the table. Tanas tensed.

'I see, you don't have the time to come with your friends to have a drink in you father's memory, but you do not mind going out with a woman old enough to be your grandmother! What, that is your new taste in women?' His father's friend bellowed for half the restaurant to hear.

Tanas slowly started to stand up. One more broken jaw in twenty-four hours, that would not be terribly bad. A small hand pulled him back with admirable strength while Mrs. Hlebarova's blue gaze trained on the guy.

'I see, the youth detention center did not make much difference in your manners after you were sentenced for selling the school brass to a wedding band, is it so, Mirtcho? Nether did the sentence for petty theft after that? I may regret that Tanas' grandmother and I vouched for you to have it suspended, claiming that you have been in the wrong company. I see that thirty-five years had not improved you a lot. Tell me, was the money from the brass and the theft enough to pay for a girl to be with you or you are still working to get enough for that?' The clear tones of her amused voice carried along the suddenly quiet restaurant.

Mirtcho became red as a peony. He recognized his teacher from the Music School too late - he had known her biting tongue and would have stayed away. He turned to see Tanas sitting relaxed in his chair and smiling as if he had heard a particular good joke.

'Your teacher had asked you a pretty reasonable question, I believe. If you don't know the answer, I think it is better go and continue working on the lesson!' he chuckled.

The pudgy man was not a coward generally, but was no match for Tanas and he knew it. Worse, the laughter from the neighboring tables was bubbling through suppressed coughs and those who had missed

the beginning of the conversation had been filled by the ones who had not. The entire staff of the place had poured out of the kitchen trying to look as if they had something to do in the room, except the chef who came with his carver in hand and unabashedly waited for more fun. Mirtcho decided that at least some cold water would douse the smirk on the old witch's face and reached for Tanas' glass. The steel grip of the young man made him squirm. Without much effort Tanas made the pudgy man back off and lead him to the door, the people on his way parting like invisible zipper was splitting the room. Maître d' was running after them obviously scared. Tanas deposited his former drinking buddy out of the door and before letting his hand, said with a thoughtful expression, 'Yesterday night the guy who tried the same left with a broken nose among other things. You may consider being nice to your former teachers even if your guarding angel is on duty.' He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his hand and closed the door, then patted maître d's shoulder before returning to his table.

'I apologize, Mrs. Hlebarova, I hope a bottle of champagne with that ice-cream I promised will do us both a lot of good.'

'No need to apologize, there are people who will never change and this piece of scum is one of them. I never ceased to wonder what your father saw in him to be friendly all these years.'

Are the wolfs friendly with the hyenas around them, Tanas thought while they were sitting in the breeze and enjoying their iced concoction with a glass of the best bubbly the place carried, courtesy of the maître d'. The manager had made a rapid mental calculation how much a good brawl would have cost him and his gratitude had materialized at Tanas' table. The pastry chef had put his soul in the tall sweating glasses and had personally delivered them garnished with moans that he had missed the exchange.

'That would have been the cherry on the top of the cream for my shift!' the young man had heaved dramatically pointing at the real cherry on the top of Mrs. Hlebarova's ice-cream.

'You are young, my boy, you will see a lot more of them!' she patted his hand. 'Thank you, this looks deliciously old-fashioned!'

Tane had been a topic of the memory lane promenade the night before, that is why he had dreamed of green eyes and black hair, Tanas tried to convince himself still stretching in his sprawling comfortable bed.

He knew that it was not true, yet did not want to examine why then another set of green eyes and black mane had made him turn and toss. Valkuda had tiptoed in his dream, clad in green and waving a magic wand with a star on its tip, the silver bells of her laughter ringing loud like church bells. She had looked heavily pregnant and Tanas had felt as if someone had ripped his heart instead of being a happy future uncle. Then she had said with the voice of Andon Tsarev: 'We both can start anew!' and Tanas had woken up with a bitter taste in his mouth.

Dreaming of pregnant women was considered a premonition of a trouble and it did not wait for long - one of his team leaders had fallen ill with the nasty summer flu circulating around the town. Tanas went to work instead of him, as the event was important. That was all that had been in his stupid dream; he tried to reassure his sober brain cells. They were not convinced though. He finished late for anything like shopping, got himself a sandwich from the local deli and went home. There was a note on his door from Mrs. Hlebarova to check with her if he came home before nine. He had another half an hour to the deadline and knocked. The old woman opened immediately and brought him to the kitchen with a thoughtful expression.

'Is something wrong, anybody bothering you again?' Tanas was concerned.

'No, no, no, nobody would dare, I am sure. But the lady who sold you the set yesterday gave me an idea of a sort. You see, your bed linen should be made as you cannot buy it, she said, I have completely forgotten about it. She gave me the phone of two elderly sisters who do that from time to time when there is someone who will place an order. They work very well, the nuns at their orphanage had taught them the French embroidery, very pretty, nobody does that any more. If you like, I will contact them and ask how much they will ask for the work. They don't charge much, my friend said, they use it to supplement a lev or two to their meager pensions. It is a pity they have to do that, but on the other side, it is such a delicate work, it will be a pity to die with them. I would say, three full sets will do for now, that is, if you like the work, of course.'

Embroidered sheets? What did he need embroidered sheets for? But he needed sheets, that was true, and if the elderly ladies could get some money from him, that would be fair.

'I would love that, but if there is a little less embroidery on them!'

'Rest assured, it is a really nice work and you will be pleased with it, I am sure, I have seen the sheets they did for my friend, I will take one from her for the measurements! You should not worry about a thing; I see how much you work!'

Tanas pulled his wallet and handed Mrs. Hlebarova a wad of cash. She started protesting that it was too much.

'But I need to pay for the material as well! I hope they do supply that also or at least know a place for me to go and buy whatever is needed.'

'We will see to that!' There was an enigmatic smile on Mrs. Hlebarova's face. This time Tanas caught it.

'Mrs. Hlebarova, please, you have been so good to me already! I can pay for my own stuff. I promise I will drive you to the shop with me, but no more presents!'

'It is not exactly a present, you see, I have had this material for so many years. My father had a small textile mill, and he had given me so much material as a trousseau that I still have good half in rolls not touched since then. The best quality cotton, they do not make this anymore. What do I need it for, I am not taking anything with me where I will go one day. You see, if Margarita was alive, she would have done it for you, but she is not and I have nobody to do it for, indulge me, take it!'

'But may be your relatives or friends...'

'My relatives have long ago forgotten me, and my friends are my age. They have loads of their own and it will not be for long anyway, they can do without it. You will enjoy it, I know...'

Tanas swallowed. There was no bitterness in Mrs. Hlebarova's voice, just the understanding that came with the solitude that had been her companion since her husband had died. They had not had children and Matey's prolonged illness had driven them away from their remaining friends. She had been taking care of her husband for so long that it had become a habit to take care of someone. She had shifted it to Tanas at the moment, whether he needed it or not. Was that what had happened to his grandfather when Margarita had died - he had shifted his undivided attention to Tanas's brother without even thinking of it. Dimitar had not had much of a choice in that, like him at the moment. Refusing the gift would have wounded the old woman and would have been rude as well. He tried his best at diplomacy, 'But you will take care that there is not too much lace, won't you? I am not that ticklish, but less is more!'

'Don't even worry, go get some sleep now!'

Mila rode with Dimitar to the company's office. She had been a bag of nerves and Valkuda had spent a good part of Sunday reassuring her that management was a big deal only on the outside. It was not real to her until Tanas gathered the men and announced that following the two sudden departures his father's widow would assume the position of his late father and Maria, the accountant assistant, would replace her boss. Mila recited her rehearsed speech about future success and got some claps. Maria got some more.

'That is because she would pay the salary!' Tanas joked.

That was it. The Earth did not shake. The sea did not dry. Nobody yelled that they did not want a former folk singer to be the boss. Nobody yelled, period. Tanas handed her a set of keys and sat down with her to discuss the core parts, some contracts and staff table. Dimitar amused himself with a light flirt with Binka, then sat and read the morning press, ordered flowers for Elvira's funeral the next day and brought the new bosses to dinner, then left. The next thing Mila knew was that it was evening and Tanas was asking whether she would ride with him to Dimitar's. The Earth still had not shaken and the sea was still wet, she smiled. It would work! She could not wait to tell Valkuda.

The week was uneventful; Tanas spent his time at the security agency showing Mila the ropes. She had shown decent enough acumen for a young lady and was making a steady progress. She sat with Maria for the preparation of the payroll and helped a lot. The new accountant had proven she was hard working capable pro and Tanas could breathe a little easier. He had renegotiated few contracts, canceled few and when Mila's new desk had arrived, fired the smart ass who insisted that when in a warehouse there was trouble, the owner changed the whores not the beds. The guy had been nuisance all along and his team was better without him. The buzz around the town had a positive effect - two decent chaps from a competition decided to jump ships as their boss had hired the dismissed troublemaker. They signed their new contracts on Friday and were on the shifts on Monday without a glitch. Raina earned another commission by finding a small flat for Mila in the vicinity of the office. The newspaper was ticking like a well-oiled machine and did not require intervention according to the reports. It was too good to be true.

Tanas had promised a house-warming party as soon as he got at least some chairs and Tsarev took it close to heart. He had kept his promise to visit Mrs. Hlebarova and had received a full description of Tanas' furniture. The lawyer called him and offered to be the middleman in purchasing the office set of his retiring mentor. Tanas was skeptical until he saw the walnut bookcases with a brass railing on the top for the polished ladder with hooks to keep it stable if someone would like to sit on the top step reading something from the upper shelves. Why one would do so was interesting question when there was a decent size desk with several drawers and leather top "place mat", and a matching swivel leather chair. Tanas used his proverbial charm and Tsarev's help to bargain also the wooden index drawers. They consisted of three sections of narrow long drawers each that would make great kitchen cabinet. The ancient lawyer was so fond of Tanas' blatant admiration to his office that offered to drink for the sale and showed Tanas that the central cabinet had a hidden bar in it. While the old guy was showing him the soundless mechanism that kept it looking like a standard bookcase cabinet, Tsarev kept laughing that he had been in that office tens of times and never managed to guess where the liquor would suddenly appear from. They got a glass of cognac each and sat in the old leather chairs facing the desk where the lawyer was typing the contract on a manual "Mercedes" typewriter. He finished, pulled the copies and looked around.

'You know what; get everything, the arm chairs and the typewriter also. They have been together for so long, may miss each other if separated.'

Tanas would have argued, but he had seen the traitorous moisture in the old man's eyes before he had swiveled his chair. The old lawyer was not selling his office furniture; he was partying with what had been his fortress for over sixty years. That was on Saturday and the moving company that belonged to the nephew of who-knows-who to Mrs. Hlebarova was ready again to do it immediately. The house-warming party was set for Sunday evening, as Tsarev was returning to Sofia with the midnight train.

The guest-list would have probably caused his father to follow Elvira into the stroke group - Dimitar and Valkuda, Mila, Tsarev, Mrs. Hlebarova and Mtre Iliev, the old lawyer, who had promised to come to show Tanas once again how to operate the bar. Dimitar had supplied his brother with enough china to last him the next few decades while swearing that it had been a fraction of what laid in storage left from Tanas Sr.'s

wedding gifts. The catering people had brought a table to put the food and drinks and Tanas had borrowed four chairs from Mrs. Hlebarova for everyone to be able to sit. And they started coming one by one.

The first to appear was Dimitar, bearing a coffee machine to keep his brother alert, as he said. He would have been heartbroken to learn that his brother was not into coffee, but that piece of news never reached him. Next came Mila, balancing antique set of wine glasses, hand cut crystal with a delicate pinkish tint, and a bottle of hearty red wine to go with them. Andon brought his mentor and Mrs. Hlebarova followed immediately after, the three of them suspiciously looking at their watches every few seconds. The door bell rang again and Tanas thought that it should be Valkuda, the only one missing, but to his surprise it was one of the guys from the moving company.

'Is something wrong?' Tanas asked.

'I am sorry, but the thing did not fit through the door of our small van, that why we are late!'

'But I got all my furniture yesterday, everything is here!'

'Bring it in, bring it in!' chimed Mrs. Hlebarova. 'It is our welcome gift from Dontcho, Iliya and me!'

Tanas did not have much time to ponder what would constitute a gift that could not fit through a door of a minivan - two guys came winded up the stairs dragging vintage wooden portmanteau. Behind them another man was carefully hugging something flat wrapped in a blanket. They came in, greeted the guests and quickly anchored the glossy antique to the wall next to the entrance while their colleague unpacked the full-size mirror that went with it. The portmanteau had a hat rack, a bronze rail with hooks that could be glided and a small hanging drawer for gloves. It fit as if it had been there all along.

'You know home is where you hang your hat!' Tsarev was enjoying himself immensely. Tanas did not dare to say that he did not have a hat out of fear that they would produce one. Never underestimate the people of their generation, the lawyer had told him a week before. He knew what he had been talking about.

'What did you do to your fiancée?' Tanas cornered his brother on the tiny terrace.

'Nothing that I know of. She always has to do something recently,' Dimitar shrugged. 'Quite a place I must say, quite a place. You have a bed for all kinds of indecent proposals! I have seen flats in Paris that have smaller surface.'

'That is why I don't live in Paris, no place to hang one's hat.'

'And this study set - that is a miracle how well it is preserved, it must have cost you a pretty penny.'

'You know the word is firmly associated with some accountants, that penny business!' Tanas chuckled. His absence at Elvira's funeral had split his father's acquaintances into the group of believers that Tanas had caught her red handed and she had popped a blood vessel after years of heavy drinking and the group of believers that Tanas had caught her red handed and had made her pay for it. Few wise ones thought that it had been both and exactly because they have been wise, they have called Tanas in private to express their support. He had carefully noted their phone numbers.

The door bell rang and Tanas hurried half expecting the movers again. He breathed a sigh of relief - it was Valkuda. His relief was short lived - she looked awfully thin and drawn. Something was not right with her; she should go and see a doctor. Either she was already pregnant and her condition was a result of a difficult first trimester or she had simply overtaxed herself. Her future brother-in-law was not quite sure which of the possibilities he hated more. She kept looking at him and he got that he was blocking the entrance. Hurriedly he moved aside. Valkuda made a good imitation of a smile and fished for something in her big green bag.

'I thought that you are not letting anyone without a welcome gift!'

'I hope yours is at least portable - the portmanteau is from Mrs. Hlebarova, Andon and Mr. Iliev.'

'Nice piece,' Valkuda caressed the satiny wood. Tanas bit his lip.

'Dimitar brought a coffee machine; I thought it is from both of you!'

'Coffee machine? But you don't drink coffee unless you started recently. No, we did not have time to discuss his gift. My present is smaller and not of the kitchen department.'

She shoved in his hand a long rectangular package. It was not gift wrapped if one did not count the fading cotton cloth soft from thousands of washings. Tanas glided his hand over it, feeling the content inside the loose wrapping. He knew it was a knife before he went through the middle but the hair at his neck stood up when he recognized the weight and the form. It was not a kitchen knife, she was right. The tall man gripped his present and found out that Valkuda had already moved and chatting with Tsarev next to the table. The elder man caught his stare and lifted his shoulders a fraction of an inch. Valkuda was piling her plate and talking a mile an hour. The Universe was about to tilt on its axes.

'I never thought that I will be sitting in your chair one day!' Andon turned to Iliev, who was sitting in the armchair across from Mrs. Hlebarova.

'Ney, it is not my chair any more. It is his!' the elder lawyer nodded towards Tanas.

'It is going to be your chair forever. When I was putting it down today I saw there is your name on the bottom.'

'My name? I never wrote on it!'

'May be it was the carpenter who made it, as it is penciled there...'

'You know, I have been sitting on it all these years and I never looked there, so I did not even know!'

'May be you were not looking at the right angle!' Andon swiveled in the massive chair. 'I am angling for another one of these spinach bites, really good one. Any one wanting something else because I am having all of them?'

'I will get some of the stuffed ham, please!' Dimitar jumped from his chair. Mila decided to get another salad bite and in the small commotion Valkuda slipped unnoticed to the balcony. A second later the host slid after her and closed the door.

'Why?' the tall man said.

'Why what?'

'Why did you give me Tane's knife? I thought it is yours now.'

'It was. Now it is yours for your new home. And I trust you know how to use it.' her voice was steady but flat.

'No, that is not the answer to my question. I asked why you gave it to me. Sure not because you could not find a bottle of wine on the way here.'

'Why do you always have to ask?'

'Because it is important. Don't skip the question, please!'

'Because I used it to open your dead grandfather's mouth to put his silver coin inside and your brother recognized it and said he would like never to see it again in my hands, you are happy now?'

He was not, she breathed as if she had run a marathon. He could throttle his brother for the sensitivity he had exhibited. 'You know that you can have it back any time you like. And don't marry my brother!'

'It is too late now for that. I promised that I will take care of him.'

'You don't need to marry him for that. Get him a nanny!' It was a futile attempt to cheer her.

'It is not that easy, everything is arranged and it will be all right, you will see!'

'No, it won't!'

The door glided with a "whoosh".

'What will not be?'

'It will not be necessary to open the red wine that Mila brought because I have champagne in the fridge. It is time to take out the petits fours from there also, otherwise Andon will not have enough time to get a piece of everything. Come, I need another pair of hands, you the French students should be good at opening bubbly!' Tanas virtually dragged his brother from the quietly staying Valkuda. He was not sure he could pry her off the wrought iron fence. Nor that he wanted to try.

The following week passed by uneventfully. Mila was getting speed and even did by herself two small contracts. Tanas was proud of her so he took her to dinner with Maria and Roman. The double date became the talk of the town for a day until a group of drunken high school kids did make a giant crab on the beach. For better preservation of their creation the gamins added some cement into the sand mixture and the city cleaners had to break it with hammers. Dimitar's wedding was scheduled for August 25th, a month from the application's date. According to him it did not matter that it would fall on Wednesday as time mattered less in Brashlyan. Vantche and Tantche were taking all the shifts on the weekends up to then to get three days to be present. Tanas kept pressing for an idea of a wedding present until his brother cracked and said that one more domestic item and the new family would need to go and rent an apartment due to overflow of home making goods. He agreed that "something light in weight and great in worth" would be appropriate. Tanas bought a cuff-links and tie clip set and upon Mrs. Hlebarova's advise - a sinfully expensive pearl necklace. It took him two days to find a puffed heart like the one with Dimitar's tooth mark but he packed them together and delivered them with a speech about being prepared for his future nephew or niece to bite into life. On Saturday he habitually drove his old neighbor to the cemetery and went to work on Sunday, after that the next week started as mundane as the previous one. He saw Dimitar and Valkuda briefly when he went to transfer the money from their safe to the bank and got the sinking feeling that something was going terribly not right. His future sister-in-law was pale and her expression was haunted.

'Now, I know that heart may be considered an incentive to work on the future mite, but shall I mention I did not insist on you spending all your energy on that right now! Keep away for another week, then you have a honeymoon, you know!' Tanas joked, but neither of future newlyweds laughed. Mila had politely but firmly refused to go as there had not been forty days since the death of her husband and it would not be proper to attend a festivity. Tanas was going directly to Brashlyan on Wednesday as his presence was not expected to be popular.

'On what rocks had your Armada sunk?' asked Mrs. Hlebarova without a preamble while he was driving her to the cemetery on Saturday. "And don't you dare tell me it is because of too much work this time!'

'Is it so obvious? Tanas raked his fingers through his hair.

'Maybe not, but I remember the gestures, Tanas. I may be old, but it is like yesterday when your grandfather was sitting at this same kitchen table and saying that doctors had told him there was no hope for your grandmother. So that should be Tane's girl then. Don't say a word; I have seen what she gave you as a present. Tane would have been stone cold before that knife would be pried from his fingers. I know how close they were, she grew on his hands, and she would not part with her legacy if there was no reason. Talk to her!'

'She is marrying Dimitar on Wednesday...'

'She is not married to him yet. You never know how the Fortune will turn the tables. At least you would have tried and not spend the rest of your life thinking of 'what if', right!'

'No, she is already too tense. She does not need it.'

'You never know before you try.'

At six in the morning on Sunday Tanas was through with pretending that he could sleep. He got up as quiet as possible, dressed and grabbed the bag of apples he had bought the previous afternoon. He tiptoed to his car and drove. His elderly neighbor shook unhappily her white head at the window, her gaze following his taillights.

'What do you mean, someone had taken Smerch! I had him reserved for eight o'clock today and it is the earliest you would give me! Look, that is not fair!' His day was not improving. Someone had gotten his horse, the only horse taken of all stables. And the receptionist half asleep was arguing that it was still seven o'clock and he had another hour to get it, as if they were talking about a rental car. He stomped to the stables and picked an old friend - the horse should retire any day soon, but loved a quick run to remember the days gone by. Tanas was adamant he would go get the pesky rider and exchange horses no matter what. He followed the trail.

A cherry-red horse was galloping towards him like the forest behind were on fire. Bended over his bare back was his future sister-in-law. Smerch came to stop next to the mare and sniffed around the bag of apples on the side. Tanas gave him one and one to the mare to chew until Valkuda picked up her breath.

'You are not going to tell them I was riding bareback, are you?' was the first sentence she managed to wheeze.

'You know I won't!' he was looking fondly at her. The ride had done her good; her cheeks were pink and her hair a wild mop of black curls.

'Good! I am sorry about Smerch! The girl told me he is booked, but I wanted so much to say goodbye to him, I managed to talk her I would take him for few minutes.'

'Is Dimitar carrying your saddle behind on foot? They told me one rider only.'

'He is not here. I slipped alone, he is not much into riding, you know...'

'He is not much into a lot of things you like so why do you want to marry him?'

'Don't even mention that it is for his money!'

'I would not anyway. But just because you promised Grandpa that you will take care of him is not a reason to forget that you have a life also.'

'You think I do? You can't be more wrong, Tanas! I never had a life of my own, I was born to follow an ancient tradition, groomed to do it, planted to do it and I was never asked if I want to. Tane loved me to bits and pieces and he did it to me anyway! Yes, he trained me expertly how to keep you all away from the blasted ring that finally saved my neck. Yes, he told me that my life will be linked with yours whether I want it or I don't. I am part of Tanassovs' package, don't you see it? I am the same as the lock at the door and

should I have been born a boy, no one would have noticed me, just like nobody noticed Tane all his life and his father before him. I don't have a life of my own; I am born to be a shadow of someone's life. What difference it makes whose shadow I will be?'

'It does! To me it does, damn it! You are not a shadow, no matter what Tane drilled into your head! Who cares about a stupid ring that had ruined the lives of three generations of Tanassovs at least and as I see is about to ruin the fourth! May be it is nice to have power but look how much good it did to all of us! Dimitar got it right because he did not want it, you see, he was not controlled by the fairytale. Yes, he saved your life, but have you thought that he might not need to do that if not for the ring again? That is what I came to Brashlyan for, yes, so I am in the pile with everyone else. I could have sat quietly in Varna and continued to drink myself to death, but you would have been safe if not for the crazy ambition. That ring is as much poison as it is worth it, it has blood in its trail, rivers of blood, hundreds, may be thousands of lives wasted, don't waste one more!' He was holding her shoulders in a dead grip.

The young woman whispered, 'It is too late; I am getting married on Wednesday!'

'You are not married yet, and I am not coming to witness a virgin's sacrifice to the ancient gods, I am not going to the bloody Brashlyan, you hear me! The times have changed, people have changed, wake up! It is your choice and your life, and damn it, my life also, you have all this on the tip of your tongue! I have just been to hell and back but I am not going to listen to you saying "I do!" to my brother!' Tanas was trying to release her but his fingers were not listening.

The Amazon lifted a hand and put it on his lips to silence him, 'Thank you, I doubt I can do it if you are there!' She nudged the horse and rode away.

'Come to think of it, I have been feeding you apples regularly and you did that to me!' Tanas was handing another slice to Smerch. The stallion took it and looked at him unrepentant. He had tried to unsaddle his rider but to his chagrin had not succeeded. He should not have done it, but he was angry with Tanas for shaking his favorite girl so badly. She had cried all the way to the stables and it was not good. She had come early and brought him a colossal red apple and then rode without that stupid thing the trainer insisted he needed to carry people. It felt good, she knew how to do it, and she loved the fast pace. Riding with her was a delight and the big guy had made her cry. Smerch would have bitten him if the big guy had not been

miserable himself. Maybe misery was contagious among humans? He had been waiting for one of them to come all week and instead of riding the big guy was mopping. Smerch took another slice, munched it and showed him the saddle. Enough was enough.

Tanas rode until both Smerch and he could go no more, then brushed the horse himself, left a twenty with the stable boy for apples and drove home. He called Dimitar and told him that after careful consideration he was not sure he would be welcomed in Brashlyan so he would better not show. His brother protested somewhat meekly which cemented Tanas' decision.

'I hope you are not speeding too much with that wedding anyway!'

'No, it is fine, we know each other for so long, it will work, you will see. Not all marriages are disasters like Father's.'

Tanas was not sure that his brother knew a thing about Valkuda but if both the groom and the bride wanted to make it work, it should, he tried to tell himself. The prospective cheered him even less.

The afternoon was going to be sweltering and the air conditioner was struggling to keep his attic from turning into furnace. Tanas was sitting in his swivel chair. In front of him on the desk Tane's knife was lying on its cotton wrap. It was unique as the man who had wielded it last - a relatively narrow blade with the moiré of the typical Damascus, a long inscription in Arabic and few stamps that indicated the name of the master who had forged it and the place where that had happened. The handle was made of stag's antler, polished to silky smoothness by decades of use. It opened into two "ears" at the back instead of a pommel to prevent it from slipping. The three pins looked like they were part of the flowing handle, not a seam where they bit the material. The butter-smooth yellow of the antler lovingly enveloped the full tang and made it look benign until one saw the fuller running on both sides of the blade allowing the blood to drain even before the owner had pulled it out of the victim. The ancient master had forged blade and tang together to give the knife better balance. It was suspiciously lightweight but it was deceptive - Tanas had seen the same knife go through a raw bone without visible effort. It was an akkulak, the white-handled shepherd's knife that Tane's ancestors had never parted with, carrying it in their belts or in the thick cloth tied with black woolen laces that was protecting their lower legs. The knife could emerge in a flash and its cover was hardly used. It was

tended fondly, not a speckle of the blood that it had seen in the elegant flows of the Arabic script. Tanas did not have a silk handkerchief but was confident that the blade would slice through it with ease.

'You never give your dog and your knife as a gift!' he could hear Tane. He had forgotten to include a woman, but may be it had been too obvious for the old man. Tanas wished he knew what Tane would say about Valkuda being presented to his brother like a due payment. But Tane was dead and could not talk and he was stuck with his knife and his own misery. He stared at the knife again. There was a small letter "tau" and a miniature fish next to it made of what were probably bronze needles inserted into the stag antler. Tane's family name was Martinov, right? So where the tau came from and why with a fish if Tane's ancestors had lived in the mountains for all Tanas knew? He needed to know. He needed to do something because if he stood there for one more minute he would explode.