

Silence of the Abyss

Nobody called her back, Nada thought, nobody of the people who had been coming to her husband for loads of small and bigger favors and had still some influence called back. Few have scrambled through the shades of the night through the secrecy of the komshuluk to express their regrets that they could not do a thing and she better stop bugging the authorities. The University did not call to find out why the professor would not attend to the scheduled exams as if he had never been there. The man who had been Vesselin's diploma thesis mentor disappeared right after the meeting on June 2nd and Nada had to encourage his frantic wife not to do stupid things. The woman had cracked, scooped their three children and left the country the night after. 'One lamb is too much for a sacrifice!' she had told Nada who had seen them off at the train station. The new man who replaced unexpectedly Tashev started proving his merit to his masters with mass arrests of the remaining "enemies of the people" or just people who had had the bad idea to protest against an arrest or requisition or the bad luck to have something a new boss might like. Getting a passport was impossible with the amount of restrictions imposed.

The young maid took a job at the Chocolate Factory but was coming every evening after work to stay for few hours with Nada. There was not much to be done around the house, which was silent as a tomb, Nada huddled in Lambri's study next to the phone that remained silent, but the girl insisted that she ate properly and walked with her leaning on her hand. A postcard came from Istanbul signed by Dora and Mitzi sending love to everyone, then one from Athens, then one from Sicily, and after Nada cried over them, Maritsa arranged them on the old desk propped on some books. Iossif had rented a small villa at a little-known artistic community at the French Riviera somewhat aside from the noise of the big resorts. Under the adoring care of the two young women baby Tea flourished. Her toothless grin and the tender care of Boris were doing miracles to Dora's health. Wrapped in their tiny bubble of happiness they were oblivious to the shattering of their world back for few more days.

The professor came back from his visit to the postal office in the village looking tired and went directly to the shaded study where he was working on his latest manuscript. Boris sent the ladies for a short promenade and sneaked to him - he was a doctor enough to distinguish a fatigue from despair. The old man looked at him and motioned towards the chair in front of him.

'Mrs. Vassileva said that Mucii and Vesselin have disappeared and Nada cannot reach anyone, Maritsa had told Riste. She is trying to pull her out as often as she can, God bless her faithful soul! I ordered a call to Kimon but his new secretary refused to put me through. I will try again tomorrow. Bore, I don't think I want Dora to return there for the moment! It is worse than we thought and she is not that sturdy yet. Nada is an old battle horse, but she needs help. What shall we do, what do you think?'

'I am going back anyway in two days. You stay here as long as you can, I will send you money!'

'I have money, more than enough for now. I will be getting royalties and can get an advance against a new book if needed, will do some lecturing if this is a problem, but I have stashed enough, don't worry. What shall we tell the girls?'

'Nothing! Hide the news as long as you can. A worry will not help anyone and they will need their strength for Tea and for the battle to come. If Nada had not telegraphed by now, she will not write and I will be there and start the search my way. How long can you stay here?'

'Forever if needed. There is no family that needs me in Sofia as you know. Martha takes care of the house and Riste is helping her, he stays with her there. But one way or another Dora will learn and you know her, she will be packing the same day. Mitzi will not hold Tea away from her and will follow. We will take it from there. Now if you need help...'

'No, you are doing more than enough, lossif, for Tea and for the girls, it is incredible!'

'Don't you dare to mention my age, boy! That is what I told Mother Superior in Brashlyan, when the young men die, we the grandfathers have to pick up the swords. Tashev disappeared also, by the way. I understand your raised brows, but I am glad, that gives me hope that the red people are at each other throats and will have less time to kill the rest.'

Mitzi tucked the happy baby in her cot and went to join lossif in the little yard under the sprawling vine. Boris asked for their permission to take Dora for a glass of lemonade at the local bistro at the seaside and

professor laughed, insisting that they were married and could do without chaperons. The doctor and the young woman walked along the seaside in the slight breeze that was dispersing the day's heat. The bistro was a colorful place with simple fare and even simpler ambiance, except for the band playing jazz. Before they reached it though Dora stopped and tugged at his hand. 'Boris, why did you marry me? Because you thought I would die?'

'No! I married you because I am selfish and I want you to live! I know it is too soon, may be it was not fair to you, you loved Todor for so long and now you have Tea to love, so there is not much space for me there but I still foolishly hope...' Boris clamped his mouth and closed his eyes.

It washed over Dora like a tidal wave - his kiss the night Tea was born, his confession that he had been scared, the travels to Brashlyan and all the newly acquired medical expertise, the hour he had carved out for her with Todor by gambling his own life, the arrangement for his friend to flee which Todor had stubbornly refused, the moisture in his eyes when she had whirled in his office with the news of the betrothal which she had taken for tears of joy, the flowers and the chocolates and the hope in Janetta's eyes, his letters to Switzerland twice a week at least full of newspaper clips about Todor, the tone of the letters much different from the happy banter in their correspondence from the college in Istanbul, the gold bracelet he had presented at her eighteenth birthday, joking about the "pulsera de pedir" and that he would be glad if she would take it for what it really was. He had waited for years for her to awaken and see the love in his eyes for what it really was, and she had happily missed the signs time and again, tormenting him by pouring her heartache for another man, his dear friend; going to him with her scare when Todor was arrested and ultimately showing him that matrimonial inscription his friend had done few minutes before he had been killed. Boris had gone to hell and back anchored by only a hope that might be some day she would become wise enough to understand his feelings. And he thought that it was not fair to her! May be it were the hormones still making her shaky, but she knew that their marriage would not remain on paper only. She should learn to love him if needed, they were friends and allies. Dora lifted her hands and caressed the dark head. His eyes opened and he tried to read her reaction, but she pulled him closer and kissed him, a quiet kiss of promise that patched a spot on his bruised heart. He held her for a long moment just close to him before hesitantly returning the kiss like a teen on his first date.

There were rumors that the hospitals would be transferred under government control and Boris moved his library to his home barely in time before the law had been passed and his office was sealed. By some unexpected twist he was appointed director of the establishment he had inherited from his father and turned into a leading clinic instead of following the path of Poshtov who had been executed in February after witnessing and documenting the execution of fifteen other inmates before being shot himself, his death certificate the only one with the single signature of the new prison director. Boris promptly sold his enormous home and took Janetta with him for a short trip to Switzerland where he deposited the money in her name in trust and made provisions for the funds to be available to her guardian in case of his death. He went back to Sofia and moved in Dora's room at the still silent Mihailovs house. At a certain point the new rulers had realized that with the speed the "enemies of the nation" had been wiped out, there would not be enough doctors to take care of them and the arrests were slowed down among the qualified Aesculapius's servants at least. Despite Boris' efforts there was no sign of Lambri or Vesselin which meant that they were either dead or in one of the labor camps that hardly ever returned their inmates, who refused to be "reeducated". The doctor's attempts to talk about them were bouncing from an invisible glass wall. However there was another result - he was offered cash for information and after some hesitation and a long talk with Nada, he had accepted the spy job. His contacts were excellent; he had a relative freedom of movement around the country as a consultant and was the physician of several embassies. He found it mildly amusing that the several sides had evaluated his services almost at the same price. His condition was that in case of something happening to him, Janetta and Dora would be taken out of the country to Belgium or Italy and granted a citizenship. Janetta had moved to his in-laws in preparation for the school year and Nada attended the celebration instead of him with them as he was tied at the hospital.

There was a lot of work around a small baby, even a good-nature one like Tea who managed to wear off her both moms, and Iossif was glad as that made his task to keep them from the phone easier. But on September 15th Dora was resolute that she would congratulate her father as well as Janetta with the first day of school. She had been taken aback that Vesselin had not shared with her the joy of his graduation but had convinced herself that he was holding on the details for her return to surprise her and was having fun at some seaside. Dora managed to sneak very early and reached the post office alone. The telephone

operator, a nice young woman, put her through immediately and watched in horror how the happy face of her customer suddenly crumpled, she put down the receiver and started crying. The operator's hands shook while she poured a glass of water from the glass carafe and coaxed the incoherent client to drink and pull herself together. The conspirators had forgotten to teach Maritsa how to lie over the phone...

Baby Tea entered Bulgaria on the day her biological parents had married, the Union Day, in the arms of her adoptive father. Mitzi was holding a protective hand over her gaunt mom. They all arrived at the silent Sofia street in time for their path to be illuminated by the fireworks spreading reddish glow over the capital.

The morning after when the celebrating people were still asleep, Iossif took Mitzi dressed as a factory worker to the man who had sent Stoyan Debarski to him.

'You should not have come here, it is too dangerous!' cautioned them the old short man.

'I know, I need to introduce you to my wife who will take over me.'

The short man looked at her with his ancient eyes, 'It is difficult for a woman!'

'The men are getting scarce, aren't they? Can I help with something, I was away for a while...'

'...and a lot of things changed in between. Murky waters hide dark forces, it is time when one does not know who to trust and who will betray him with Judas's kiss. Human greed talks louder than even fear. That police chef who went to Brashlyan went to dig a grave, the highway robber, and fell into it. But most are careful and so you should be. I will come to you if needed.'

'I need to find my godson and his father. I will try the official way first.'

'Try it, but I doubt it will work. I will see what I can do and I will come.'

'Send my best regards to Barouche.'

'He is here no more, Barouche, but it is another story. Now go!'

Mitzi went back to her classes and Iossif headed to Kimon's new office. The man was a vice prime minister after all. The staff around was new, the security tightened and it took him an hour of waiting for the mighty guy to spare him five minutes - it was audience day anyway and the ordinary citizens were sitting around the professor, each with his own plight. Iossif wrote his name in the book, presented his identification and

entered the office. The politician was courtly, dictated his request for two missing relatives to be looked for to his secretary and asked the man to bring some water. In the space of the few seconds before his return, he hissed, 'What are you doing here, you want both of us in trouble? He is a goner, forget I can help and tell the same to his wife. Stop harassing me, lossif!'

He had gambled on the wrong man, the professor thought. He had to be more careful. lossif went to see Nada.

The old professor returned to the University and got several of his classes back. Some gossips put that to the necessity to provide for a wife and a child, but the common opinion was that the little mite had given him a new lease of life and he was looking much better than the previous year. He did it more to ensure his visibility - although it was not a shield it was still better than nothing. He started disposing of his most lucrative properties in Sofia as he had heard the news of the pending reform that would leave a dwelling per family and kept only the central non-residential rentals. The rest he turned to gold and immediately deposited in Switzerland in Mitzi's name. lossif emptied most of his accounts as well and brought his jewelry collection to his brother in Istanbul to be kept in safety. The professor continued to write his articles and send them abroad - the ancient art was not a topic to offend the new rulers but who knew what they would make of it. He needed to be sure that he would have the chance to travel and so would Mitzi and Tea. The baby was a joy; she bravely cut her first teeth with no more than a night of whimpering. Dora's milk had stopped after their arrival and Mitzi had hired for Tea a wet nurse, Maria. The poor woman had seen her husband being dragged away by a night squad while still unaware that she had been pregnant with their second child. Her meager savings had thawed while she was looking for her man as well as for a job which would allow her to take care of her small son. One of the orphanages that Nada continued to take care of had sheltered her for a while after the birth, but they could not do it for much longer. Mitzi talked to lossif and Maria moved to the spare bedroom on the second floor with the little Petko and the tiny Militsa.

During the summer Riste had passed the secondary school graduation exams under the watchful eye of Vassili Nikolayevich. The young lad's application and autobiography about his parents being poor immigrant workers, coupled with his shoe polisher/domestic servant status had propelled him into university, at the

notoriously difficult History Faculty at that. Iossif was happy for him as the boy was officially of age and his father could not stop him. Nevertheless, his scholastic success remained meticulously guarded secret as per his mother's request. All his father and brothers knew was that he was accompanying Mitzi to the university as before.

Dora and Nada kept going to different offices and writing missing person reports but there was still no news of either Lambri or Vesselin. A note came from the university claiming that the young man had been expelled as a collaborationist of an enemy of the state. It was signed by the new dean of admission and at other time and circumstances they would have joked over the typos in the document. Nada folded it carefully but did not say a word.

For their first wedding anniversary Mitzi and Iossif got an unexpected present. The previous night a dark-clad man had lightly tapped on the garden door leading to the professor's study. He had not taken his hat put low above his eyes and quickly said:

'We found your godson. They transferred him recently to another smaller camp but they lost the documents and nobody could trace him. That is good as people who cannot be traced fare better. We will try to get him out on medical grounds, but he is fine, don't worry of what will be written. I can't say when though. We will try to see if we can ambush the camp before the first snow.'

The man disappeared into the night and if not for the puddle on the floor one could think of him as imagination. Mitzi immediately slipped to Nada and stayed with her until Dora and Boris came from one of their rare social visits.

The shadow that came to Mihailovs' front door in mid-December scared Dora into a scream to which Boris ran first only to find her hugging her brother or what had remained of him under the same suit in which he had left for his studies six months earlier. Nada came slowly, leaning on her cane, and pulled him into the house. She closed the door and said, 'To the bathroom, young man, then you come to the kitchen and we will talk!'

He smiled, kissed her wet cheeks and thought that all would be well. She smiled, kissed his stubble and thought that she could cry after that as much as she wanted. He was back and she was not going to give him up without a tooth and nail fight.

Christmas would have been somber if not for Petko. The little one kept walking after Iossif and asking if they would have a Christmas tree like at the postcards that were coming from around the globe. Riste emerged one day with a fluffy fur tree. Martha went through a stack of boxes and came with a set of beautiful and delicate glass ornaments. The tree was put in a bucket of wet sand and Mitzi held Petko up to put the baubles on the top branches. Then Nada invited everyone to the Christmas Eve hot spiced wine and defiantly handed the kettle to Vesselin who could hardly stand on his feet for long. He read the prayer and blessed the wine just like Lambri had done every year before and his father before him. Even Tea got her three drops of the sweet concoction. Nada was sitting and holding her. She blessed the luck of the little morsel - the resemblance with Todor was there but masked by the russet gold soft curls and grayish-hazel eyes that were different from Dora's. And that chin was definitely the stubborn one of her grandfather! She sent a silent prayer for him to be stubborn enough to survive what God had sent their way and to see the precious young life in her arms again. Nada looked at the small assembly - people so different, coming from all tiers of the society, yet bound together by an ancient tradition. Maritsa had come running after the long day at the factory, as Christmas was not any more an official holiday. Riste had brought Vera and her father was discussing something with Iossif, the two white heads close for only them to hear the words. Mrs. Vassileva was trying to convince Petko that he could not eat all the cookies by himself. Militsa was sleeping in the arms of her mother, whose eyes were wet. Mitzi was bringing another tray of sandwiches to Vesselin seated in the opposite armchair, his suit twice as big as he was at the moment. Boris embracing Dora in front of the French door leading to the dark dead garden, looking at his former home occupied by another doctor. Was that much what she asked for - peace and happiness for all of them? Nada had fought a war and endured another, hoping that the sacrifices of her generation would pave the path for the good life of her children. Nada and Lambri had followed the God's orders, so how had they missed the dark side coming their way? No, they had not missed it, her husband had been one of the people who had signed the law that the red tide was using to imprison him and cut the lifeline of her son. At least Dora was happy with Boris,

their marriage starting like a courtesy, becoming first a union of minds and now a union of hearts. He had been a pillar of strength in those dreadful months, providing not only the bread on the table but also the encouragement and support when the two women were about to plunge into the abyss of despair. The people around Nada were the few who had withstood the acid test of betrayal, who had not bended, who had not shrugged their shoulders. Nada looked at the very few Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. Few more who had not forgotten them and had been brave enough or foolish enough to demonstrate it. Odd, most of the cards were from the province, the few from Sofia from elderly relatives who had few things to fear due to their advanced age. Plovdiv had written, two cards at that, one from Vesselin's godson with big careful letters and only a negligible spot of ink, and a separate one from his parents, who Lambri and Nada had married in 1934 which was like ages ago. One card was from Elka and Konstantin, hardly a card, a folded sheet that their son had decorated with cut-out snowflakes. Varna had followed suit, it seemed that the port city was still breathing easier than the rest of the country. Oryahovo's cousins had sent a parcel with wine and dried homemade salami, as well as a note to mention them to the relatives living in Sofia, they had no idea that Lambri was missing. Mina Poshtova had sent a picture of the Alps and a note that the children were doing great at school. There were suspicious blots in her letter. She had bravely followed Vassil's request to run as quickly as possible and when the hounds had come to gloat after his murder, they had found an empty place. Mina had resented leaving him behind, but had done exactly as he had asked her and they even had managed to smuggle her first note from Switzerland to him before he had been executed. Two of Lambri's Munich correspondents had sent cards as well and Nada had answered them with the actual situation why the esteemed professor had not been returning their calls.

On March 3rd, someone at the Parliamentary administration made a mistake to send Nada an invitation to the concert in honor of the former war combatants. Not that she was not meriting one, but the concert was a celebration of the new order and her husband was still missing which gave her the status of a "wife of a traitor". Dora and Boris were against her going there alone; she had only come out of a nasty flu and had lost weight. Vesselin had been shipped to Brashlyan few days after Christmas under the security in the number of people traveling for the holidays. He was safely ensconced in the hip deep snow there and that gave the old woman strength. She meticulously ironed her war uniform, put on her medals, took her cane

and called a cab, the invitation tucked in her pocket. The security did not know her by face as she had kept low profile for ages, one more elderly lady with a cane with the colorful ribbons of the previous war, they let her in the theater without so much as a second glance. They did not know that they would pay for it later, she thought, walking as fast as her injured leg would carry her. The old woman did not go to the balcony where her place was reserved, but went down to the first row and peeked through the door. No, the big shots had not arrived yet, she was on time. Nada leaned on the cast-iron heater under the window across from the red-padded door. Few minutes later the man she had been waiting for came down the corridor, without his security people as the concert was invitations only and the guests had been checked at the entrance. Nada stepped from her place next to the huge dark window and blocked his progress. He looked at her and she saw the guilt in his eyes. There was still something human there, she hoped.

'Todor, he did not teach you like that, your professor, did he? Lambri would be ashamed to do what you are doing even if he was with you at the beginning. Your people put him where he is now, you should bring him back, or that orders that we both wear are not worth the metal that they are made of. You are his student and he taught you that one has to do the right thing no matter how hard it may be! Remember what he taught you, Todor, as he had been just to all of you, whether son of village teacher or prime minister. What would your father say if he knew what you are doing or rather what you are not doing for your former teacher? And what for you took him, tell me, what did he do to all of you, his students, his colleagues, Todor? He fought the same wars, he wants Bulgaria to prosper, and that is what you are paying him with?' Nada lifted her cane and pointed its tip to the paled former regent and future dean of the Philosophy Faculty. He thought that she might slap him with it.

'Mrs. Mihailova!' he tried unconvincingly and backed a step.

'I don't want to listen, Todor, you put him in that labor camp, you bring him back, just like he brought you back in 1943 and I remember if you have forgotten!' Nada's eyes were two burning coals on her parchment face.

'I am going home and you either bring him or send your bloodhounds to arrest me, as I have fought with him and I am not afraid to go where he is, above ground, under ground, does not matter, I will follow him!' The old woman threw the invitation at the man's feet and passed by him carried more by sheer rage than physical strength.

Several days later Nada received a phone call from the office of the Parliament to stay home. She did not tell anything to either Dora or Boris. The old woman calmly prepared her small suitcase with few necessities in case she would be allowed to take anything with her and sat in the sitting room with a book in hand. She loved poetry and there was no reason why she should not enjoy a little more before the journey that she was sure she was about to embark on. She longed to go and see Tea one more time but it could lead the hounds to the child and she decided against. Few minutes into her reading, she heard the door bell. "O true apothecary, Thy drugs are quick," she whispered while she opened the door and gasped. Vesselin was standing in front of her, back to his good health, his black hair shining, the spark back in his eyes.

'How do they know you are coming?' was the first she managed to ask.

'Who knows that I am coming?' Vesselin looked at her baffled. 'I took the night train and there was nobody to see me off, so who called?'

'The man said that he was calling from the Parliament and I have to stay home...'

'I am glad you did for I don't have a key, but I don't think the call was about me. Mom, did something happen that I don't know about?'

'I talked to Todor Pavlov, reminded him that your father saved his skin in 1943. He is one of these who say that they have taken this power with blood and with blood only they will let it go, so I thought they are after me.' Nada trembled. 'Listen, if they do come for me, you are not doing anything, you listen, you hide, go to Iossif and he will do something! Don't argue, I may not have time to tell you this again! I am an old woman, what difference the life of an old woman makes anyway, you have a life to live, promise me, Vesselin!'

He could not say a word before the door bell rang again.

A black car with a crystal red flag on the front hood was parked in front of the house. A man in uniform was standing at the car back door and he yelled at the general direction of the house, 'The boss said to get him to you, did not say to deliver him to the door, come and get him!'

Nada was still and leaned on her cane. The burly man opened the car door and yelled again, 'I don't have the entire day to stay here!'

Vesselin made a beeline for the car. The burly guy did not expect that and moved aside. The young man bended and took his father from the back seat. Lambri was weightless, but alive and his hands, more like that of a skeleton than a living man feebly hugged his son. Vesselin turned towards the house and the guard snarled out to his back, 'The boss said to keep this treasure somewhere well hidden as it had been hard to get it!' He slammed the door and sat behind the wheel.

Lambri lived. Vesselin was carrying him like a baby around, as his father had come back weighing less than a pack of cement. Fifty-six kilograms spread over his over two meters tall frame were all that came back from the common graveyard where he had been. He could hardly talk and slept most of the time while either Vesselin, Dora or Nada kept constant vigil at his bedside. Boris was fighting the feeling of dread at his emaciated figure but Lambri was stubbornly alive. The will that had earned him his nickname "Mucii" was stoked in his dark eyes. His loved ones did most of the talking, telling him the good news and keeping the bad ones aside. Mitzi brought Tea to him and quipped that now there would be two people who would learn how to walk and the young lady could give her grandpa some lessons. He had smiled, too weak to take her in his arms but had lightly touched the golden ringlets. He had to fight for her, he did not have the right to die, he said. Iossif had slipped unnoticed through the komshuluk and had updated him about the university fights lost and won, about his plans for the summer. Maritsa came and cried all over him and then again when he thanked her about helping Nada. Lambri's return was a family secret and the young former maid was one of the few who knew he was back. Boris was additionally concerned that a slightest infection may open the grave for his father-in-law. The doctor tried to keep as far as he could from him in order not to transmit a hospital bug and asked Iossif to refrain for a while from his visits. Tea was permitted to visit any time though as the bond between the tiny tot and the grand man was unquestionable. Maybe in her mind he resembled her beloved adoptive father as she adored Iossif, or it was the blood they shared but she could sit on the big bed and babble to him for hours, playing with her toys. He was glowing back at her and day by day his previous strength started coming back. It was a long way to healing but Nada cried over his first independent trip to the bathroom as well as the first time he could shave himself again. The spring was coming and she was happy to see the people who mattered around her.

One should never send a spy on a mission without giving him full details, not only the important points. For Militsa's birthday, which fell on the day after Tea's, Dora and Mitzi decided to take out her mother for a nice morning coffee and a piece of cake. The original plan included the two young ladies as well, but at the last moment Tea started getting a little feverish due to another tooth coming. Nada offered to take care of her while the four of them indulge at the pastry shop. The man who discretely followed them had no reason to doubt who the baby's mom was, as Mitzi pushed the pram. He had been shown photos of both Mitzi and Dora and told that there would probably be a nanny present, so the third young woman was identified as the nanny. The secret service agent had recently relocated to Sofia and had no reason to be afraid that someone would recognize him. At the pastry shop he sat close enough to have a good look at the little girl who hardly left Mitzi and Dora's arms. They fed her a yogurt, they gave her the water bottle, the nanny only went to change her after some leaky incident. The three women returned straight home and the guy went to write his report, including detailed description of the mite – short and plump, straight brown hair, round face, brown eyes, snub-nosed.

The man who read the report few days later let out a long-held sigh. His former subordinate had died in vain after that graveyard incident. The child resembled neither Todor, nor his fiancée. Tanas thought with disgust mixed with pity about Mikhail who had been brought to Tsarevo tied up, in a hey-filled cart. Tane had called from there with a brief report about his condition and Tanas had instructed the security chief to be brought to the nearest mental hospital for evaluation. The doctors at Bourgas had lifted their shoulders - the man had been considered psychotic and dangerous. Given the circumstances that had triggered his snap, they had expected a very long period of recuperation if any. The case was sealed as a strictly confidential and Tashev had been put in a solitary room. The next four days he had been asleep most of the time. When the medication had been wearing off, he had fought an invisible swordsman menacingly yelling at some invisible prince until exhausted he had been falling on the floor only to start the fight again upon opening his eyes. He had been waking up even from the biggest doses of sedatives and the doctors had been afraid that if given more, he would die of overdose. Later he had refused to eat or drink, but kept crying at his imagined bodyguards to close his window. The yard director had called Tanas to ask the next of kin to decide what to do further. Tashev's mother had traveled to Bourgas. Her arrival had given the doctors an initial sliver of hope - Mikhail had stopped jumping around, had recognized her and sat down on his bed. She had given

him a glass of water which he had drunk, then turned to her and said, 'Mom, don't you see him? My son had come for me!'

Those had been his last words. After that there had been the standard announcement that such a promising party comrade had died so young, the state funeral under heavy makeup in his small home village and the dry eyes of his parents.

The boy in front of him was one of the last students answering his exam questions and Iossif was looking forward to the three months of summer break. The door opened without a knock and the dean of admission, a pushy, unpleasantly ambitious young man came in. The old professor interrupted the drone about Asia Minor and went to see what had warranted the unexpected visit.

'Good afternoon, Professor Spassov, I see you are almost finished. I was thinking if you can spare a minute after the exam but I have to leave early and came to ask you. One of the colleagues told me today that Mr. Mihailov had been back in Sofia for a while. I know you are his neighbor, I thought you would know.'

'That is correct, Mr. Mihailov had been back for a while but he is gravely ill as far as I am aware. His son-in-law is a doctor and has imposed a strict quarantine; I have not seen him recently. Do you want me to transfer a message? I can give it to his wife eventually.'

'No, no, it is fine, I got a call today as to whether he is still on the University list for a conference in Vienna, what a mistake! I will respond that he is indisposed, that is all.'

'May be it is not a mistake, the lists for such conferences are prepared years ahead.'

'Sure, sure, it is important such mistakes to be corrected on time, we cannot allow the Austrians to think that we don't know what happens to our professors.'

'I am positive they will understand, we are old people...'

'You are right, Professor, everything happens even to the young ones. I wish you a good summer!'

The man left and Iossif turned to the student, 'Very good is a good mark for you, young man?'

'Yes, Sir!' The lad was surprised, he had only started his answers and Professor Spassov was notorious for his long exams.

'Your record book, please!' Iossif signed it without sitting on his chair. The boy looked at it incredulously and ran away blessing his luck.

Iossif passed along the remaining three students, looked at their notes in preparation for the oral exam and said, 'We will bend the tradition a little - you will tell me how much you merit for your efforts and if I agree, you have it without discussion. If not, we sit and talk.'

Two "very good" and one "excellent" were granted in less than a minute. Iossif deposited the protocol with the secretary within the next five. Twenty minutes later Nada was packing Lambri's suitcase. They knew what happened to people who procrastinated. Dora and her father were on the train to Plovdiv before supper.

Lambri spent in Plovdiv almost half a year. Nada visited him as discretely as possible. Vesselin was working in a factory and trying to lay low. Of the swarms of young ladies pinning for his attention before few dared to call to say hi and even fewer wanted to be seen with him. Of his college friends the majority had joined him on Via Dolorosa and the rest he did not dare to call in case he rubbed his bad luck on them. His status was like a contagious disease and he felt like a leper, only without the bell. It was dismal feeling for a bright young man but Vesselin kept in mind where he had been and thanked his lucky stars for being alive and healthy. He was reminded painfully about it when a former student of his father risked his head to tell him that Lambri's location had been pinpointed and he better move fast. Maritsa took her minuscule vacation and brought Lambri to her parents in a hamlet which had been so poor that the authorities had not been interested in it. There was not much to put in a co-operative farm. Maid's parents were soulful, open people who did not question their daughter's decision to bring to them her former employer for indefinite term. They were outraged that the authorities could treat so despicably such an educated man. Lambri thought that the forgotten remote villages were the last bastion of Bulgaria, where "educated" was synonymous with "decent". They agreed on a code for their letters to Maritsa – the parents wrote about Lambri as her uncle and for the long cold winter Nada was reading their infrequent notes and crying over. She did not write him that he had been tried in absentia and found guilty of treason, the sentence had stripped him of all his academic distinctions and orders, his passport was annulled and his bank accounts confiscated. She thanked the provisional mind of her father-in-law who had insisted that the house be transferred to her name upon their marriage and it could not be taken away. Most of their friends were not that lucky. The sentence

also came with a mandatory intern of three years from Sofia without the right to return to the capital even for a funeral. Lambri was interned to his native town of Oryahovo and was expected to report there.

Even the smallest villages had their traitors. A local guy reported the unlikely visitor and the militiaman, young boy barely out of school, came to knock on Maritsa's door. The boy was a son of a village couple and felt bad about asking for documents. His father came within an hour and offered Lambri a safe passage to the nearest town. Staying longer would undoubtedly cause troubles to his hosts and Lambri left laden with presents for Maritsa and her sister's family. He was arrested in his home the next day and sent to Oryahovo immediately in his slippers. Nada followed the day after with the luggage after extracting from her two children an oath that they would not follow them under any circumstances. For two and a half years she and Lambri were supposed to live on her minuscule war veteran's pension. The relatives were constantly warned by the local militia that any contact with Mihailovs would be considered treason as well. The house was under surveillance so their communications were limited to few fellow "traitors" and the secret night visits with anonymous parcels with food and clothing. There were few brave hearts who still wrote letters and send parcels officially. After six months of absence Lambri's host from Plovdiv had returned evidently unreformed. He had written to his best man that his own father would be terribly annoyed if he would not have taken care of him in time of need. He and his wife even dared to go to Oryahovo personally under the excuse to celebrate a wedding anniversary, but they were an exception. The rule was the silence, the night raids, the processes or deportations without them, the concentration camps, the killings, yes, the power was taken bloodily. Not that it had been such a novelty in the history of Bulgaria, Lambri thought bitterly, he had seen the blood being let all the time, but the scale of that last bloodbath was puzzling him.

Riste finished his third university year and had gathered all his courage to ask Vassili Nikolayevich for Vera's hand in marriage. The old merchant had been frail for a while and had practically closed his business, but had continued to teach the young man the ancient secrets of his art. He did not doubt a second that his Verushka would be a happy wife. Iossif and Mitzi were the best man and matron of honor. The marriage was celebrated at the small shabby church next to Riste's home after which Riste had moved in with his wife to help with the care of her father. Vassili Nikolayevich succumbed a month after the

wedding but not before he swore Riste that he would take Vera away as soon as he could and that their luggage would be ready next to the door at all times. The old merchant's funeral drew an enormous crowd, mainly consisting of the last remnants of once numerous expatriate Russian community. Riste had taken off his hat in the church and eerie whispers whirled around - his three-day stubble made him a copy of the late Russian Emperor. Before the first lump of soil rattled on the cover of Vassili Nikolayevich's coffin in the grave next to the one of his wife, several people had approached Riste questioning his parentage. That had not escaped Iossif. He used his absolute authority to put the young couple the very same day on the Orient Express to Istanbul en route to Canada. Vassili Nikolayevich's idea about the luggage had been right - Vera's suitcase contained her family photo album and family silver, Riste's - his father-in-law's personal record book with several photos of Matilda Kseshinskaya and the young Tsarevich. That about summed up thirty-something years of immigration for Vera's family.

Maria had met a very nice man, a widower like her and after a year of courtship had married him, moving with Petko and Militsa to the remote town where her husband's profession took him. The three-year old Tea missed them immensely as her milk sister had been a second half of her in their boisterous plays under Petko's guidance. She was consoled however when at the end of the summer Elka's son Alexander came to stay with them. There was no secondary school in Brashlyan and it would not make a difference whether he would go to Bourgas or Sofia as far as he stood with someone his parents trusted. Maritsa married also, to a decent chap from her factory and enrolled at the university to study economics. She took the place of Riste as Mitzi's student in calculus and spent at Iossif's study the evenings when her husband was working. Martha's son left to study in France and she swore him on the family Bible not to return "before this bedlam is over". Her employer offered her to move permanently with them as she was going to her place only to sleep anyway. Dora was officially Tea's nanny. Boris had insisted that another pregnancy would kill her for sure or at least he would die of worry before her, so her feelings were focused on the young lady.

Mitzi graduated with honors and took the position of Iossif's assistant. The years had not slowed him much but his correspondence was monumental and he needed extra time to spend with Tea and Leko as Alexander was known. The professor kept reminding the university authorities that he was expected to die

the next day and the next international conference would be his last, so he definitely should attend. It was somehow passing through as the new regime needed visibility and Iossif was world known expert. He took Mitzi and Tea with him wherever he went abroad and introduced the women in his life to the proper people. The summers they spent in Brashlyan where Iossif thought initially about buying a house but was discouraged by Mother Superior with few choice words. The family stayed at the monastery and spent a great deal of time with Elka and Konstantin.

The years rolled by. Lambri and Nada returned to Sofia and lived as quietly as before, Lambri engrossed in his studies and she in her laces as the orphanages were turned into government establishments and she was locked out of her previous work with them. The years in deportation had eroded her health to the point that she rarely left home, but would rather sit in the yard and watch Dora play with Tea and teach her read and write. Boris continued his double or triple mission and as a reward was allowed to travel abroad with his wife, a beautiful couple seemingly without a hint of worry. Sometimes they took Janetta with them but she lived with her maternal grandparents as their home was across the street from her language school. After Eleonora's death the older couple's word had coalesced over the girl. Knowing the danger he was in, Boris choose not to change the arrangement. Janetta thought of Lambri and Nada as her other set of grandparents and given the proximity of their homes was a daily feature, and a very much loved one. Lambri spoke to her in French and German and they had funny discussions over some translations she was doing at school. Janetta loved words plays as much as he did and their joint laughter was making the house a merry place again. Vesselin married Milena, a sweet young woman who defied her family's stern warning about his status quo and eloped with him.

Iossif died in his sleep a month before Tea's eighth birthday. Despite the pressure from the university for civic only ceremony Mitzi put her foot down and her husband was buried after a full-fledged funeral service at "Sveta Nedelia". Tea was not allowed to go and stayed with Nada at home. Lambri went with a bouquet of white roses, flanked by Vesselin, Milena and Dora. They sat right behind Mitzi and despite the full to capacity church had the row for themselves as nobody dared to sit with them. Mitzi refused a position with the university as a teacher but accepted an editorial job that allowed her to be home with Tea who was

constantly occupied with some sort of activity - dance lessons, music lessons, languages. The few people who remembered her paternal grandmother as a young woman had either not seen her or never made the connection, as except for her unusual hair color, she was a carbon copy of the stern lady. However she had inherited her father's light character and her mother's family attitude towards education. When Iossif was still alive he had told her that her parents had not have the opportunity to raise her although they would have liked that very much, but Mitzi and he loved her even more for that and she had accepted it without fuss, never asking questions. She never questioned the love Mihailovs and Danailovs lavished on her, adored Janetta as an older sibling and spent countless hours in their home going there through the gardens. Their yard had become a magic kingdom where she could play under the Nada's watchful eye while Lambri was telling her the world fairytales, freely mixing history, mythology and folklore so the little girl was never bored with them. The winters were spent reading in one of the two enormous home libraries and skiing. Mitzi took her several times to Switzerland, first the summer when Janetta enrolled in prestigious young ladies school and then for the vacations around Christmas. Iossif's lifetime achievements continued to fascinate the world of antique scholars and his widow was rendered homage for her tireless work for preserving his legacy. Even if the age of Iossif's widow puzzled his admirers, her knowledge and understanding of the subject he had devoted his life to commanded their profound respect. The young woman was mesmerizing - after her year of full mourning she was back to her exquisite fashionable outfits, skillfully groomed. The inside beauty complementing her lovely face drew the male part of the population with lethal accuracy. However even the most vitriolic tongues could not fault her - she was polite and distant to all her admirers letting the town know that she had been married to the man she loved and that was forever. One of Iossif's friends, an old artist, had done a portrait of her husband, not the old man he had died, but the one he had remembered, his memory helped by Iossif's first wedding photo. Mitzi put it up next to Anna's portrait, going to great trouble to replicate the same frame and the two of them were looking at her when she read or wrote in the solitude of now her sitting room.

Tea was seventeen and had returned from a particular pleasant trip to Istanbul. There she had visited Iossif's brother, who was an ancient man with mind as sharp as razor and a heart of pure gold. His wife had died few years before, his son had eight children and they had bore a few football teams of great-

grandchildren, but in his summer house on Buyuk Ada there was always place for his brother's widow and child. He had taught her some ancient Turkish scripts and Tea was impatient to show Lambri her new skills. For the first time in her life the komshuluk had been locked. She was so shocked that she ran to her mother with terror in her heart. The horrific feeling deepened at the sight of sobbing Mitzi, her mother never cried. Mrs. Vassileva came with a glass of water and broke the news. Boris had been arrested after a dramatic set-up, Janetta had managed to escape by the skin of her teeth after being caught and held prisoner at the Bulgarian Consulate in Bern. Mihailovs' house had been under surveillance for almost a year before the authorities had collected enough evidence that the doctor had been a spy. The perfunctory trial was behind closed doors; Boris was sentenced to die in a month and executed by a firing squad immediately. His property was confiscated, although he had been wise not to have anything but his car in his name. The bailiffs who came looked at his desk and wardrobe and lifted their shoulders: "Old desk, old wardrobe, who needs that?" and left. After she saw them off Dora collapsed on the floor and cried with relief - the correspondence and his archive had been in the double back wall of the desk and his equipment in the false floor of the wardrobe.

If Mihailovs position had been shaky before, now it was abysmal. Boris had been the main provider, as Vesselin had been repeatedly thrown from whatever meager jobs he could find. Milena held a miserable job as a toy maker and he helped her with the quota that she had to complete. Dora was fired from her position at the hospital and the only stable income were the two war combatant pensions of Lambri and Nada. After Boris' death the siege of the house was lifted. Vesselin and Lambri started supplementing their income with clandestine translations that made a name to other people while they got part of the payment. It was risky and the money was scarce but they never complained and one by one people started coming back to their home. The ones that had remained openly friendly were the first, sharing not only their own sparse income but bringing trusted friends and the new generation was repeating their path and allegiance. Nada died the next autumn, after hearing the coveted "Grandma" from Tea. Mitzi and Dora had told her real story as a present for her eighteenth birthday. Lambri had opened the navel post and transferred the ring and the cross to Mitzi's safe, as well as Todor's bible where Tea's name was written as Dorotea Todorova Todorova with her real date of birth. One more person came to her birthday party - Todor's sister, the last remaining

member of once mighty family tree. The old lady brought an unusual present - an album of ancient photos - and sat with Tea in the rainy afternoon writing down on the yellow cards names and dates of births and deaths, places and favorite quotes. The old sepia copies did not have colors and Tea was suddenly facing herself in the previous century as her grandmother was looking from her wedding portrait. Mitzi showed her how to operate the secret mechanism that opened a hidden shelf at Iossif's study and put the album there next to few books of choice which Iossif never wanted displayed.

It may have been a memory of an old phrase that Boris had casually dropped that doctors were put on Earth to save life and thus oppose the killers that had stuck with Tea, but she decided to pursue a medical degree. She continued to spend her summers in Brashlyan and there she met her future husband, a carrot-haired smiling German on an archaeological expedition with his father, a famous archeologist. The father had been one of Iossif's admirers for ages, jumped on the chance to discuss his work with Mitzi and had brought his son with him. The steamy correspondence that followed between Tea and Arvin Gerald Schlosser was a family affair. Perfectly aware that all international correspondence was invariably read by the special department of National Security, they have chosen to write each other love letters in Latin. So Tea was writing her draft, going to Lambri for correction, writing the final copy and sending it. Arv was writing his answers in a draft, going to his father for verification and then sending the clean copy to her. The next summer the young man popped up at her graduation with the biggest bouquet of red roses and his grandmother's engagement ring. Mitzi orchestrated a PR campaign stressing the link between Iossif's work and the future wedding and procured the documents at record speed. Tea left for Germany but came back the next year to give birth to Rada in Sofia. Lambri came to the Maternity Hospital and brought to his great-granddaughter a baptismal cross and a book of fairytales, where across the first page he had written the longest word in Bulgarian: "don't act against the constitution", which would be probably a summary of his life work. Rada was baptized at "Sveta Nedelia" with great pomp and Mitzi threw a lavish party at Balkan before Tea and the little one left back for Munich.

Lambri saw both Tea and Rada one more time before he died two years later, when they spent the summer in Bulgaria before embarking with Arv on a long expedition to Morocco. The professor had outlived almost

everyone of the people who remembered his battles in person, he had seen the country sliding into stagnation but he had been too great an economist not to know that the cycle of development could not be stopped and the pendulum was about to start going the other way. He had seen the life of his two children wasted, together with their generation, in the murky waters of a drastic bloody state that sapped the strength. Yet he had seen as well the core that had survived, the few who had rebelled in their own way, the intellectuals, the minds, the artists and the musicians who had managed to find the Achilles heel of the regime - it did not understand that the power of thought and art was mightier than the power of bullet. Lambri never told anyone where he had been during that nine months of absence and the people who loved him learned decades later from the survivors of the concentration camp. He wanted the horrors to die with him. They did not. When the country was about to embark on the next step of its long and painful history, the abyss opened again and the rotten smell came out to suffocate the new growth with the memories of the old crimes. The history was about to be re-written again.

Tea, Arv and Rada led their nomadic life from one expedition to another, changing countries and continents, their home split between Germany and Bulgaria. It seemed never a good time for another kid and Rada got used to be the only child in the company of adults. She made instant friends with the local kids if she knew the language or learned as much as she could to play and enjoy. The girl was home schooled by her mother as Tea had insisted that there was not much for a doctor to do at the archeologists' camp and the villages they were usually stationed around were not in need of full-time physician. However those several times when her mother had saved a life in front of her had made an indelible impression on Rada who wanted to be a doctor and nothing else. She went with Tea to learn healing practices from the locals – potions being brewed, prayers being said, stones put on, baths prepared, dances and incantations, metal pouring, salves being grinded and oil infusions being steeped for days at a time. Rada was fascinated by it all. She had inherited her mother's firm belief that a good doctor would think about the body and soul in union and not try to cure one at the expense of the other.

The countries changed and the languages with them, the years went by and Rada grew as she said later "flying around". As she was not tied to the school cycle she had her vacations at times when the kids were

at school and even considered going there a fun. Like a child of a circus clown she would enroll for a month or two or three at a school where her father's expedition was situated just to be with other kids, if there was a school that taught in a language that she more or less understood. Mitzi was always there for her when Arv and Tea considered the place or subject unsuitable, which was rare. If she had to attend a conference, Rada would stay with Opa and Oma Schlosser and a bunch of cousins where she was the only girl.

The unconventional life saved her from a dismal trauma when her parents disappeared during an expedition that had gone wrong. She moved permanently with Mitzi with frequent visits to Schlossers which were even more frequent when Rada went to her finishing school. Her grandma Mitzi refused to go with her for the entire period even if she had perfect opportunity – the restitution had put back into her hands enormous funds again. But she was interested in the political process too much to be far away, she said.