

## Options

At Stamenov's study Tanas was weighing his options. He could send Tashev and his two remaining bodyguards to bury Todor and stay to go over his cell alone. But up to that moment Tashev had messed almost everything and Tanas hated such surprises. It would take an hour to the most and he had Stamenov's keys anyway. He tossed the ring on his palm and look at the polished numbered pieces. It would be reasonable to go to the cemetery, then return to search at leisure. He turned to the Chief Guard, 'At what time do you finish your shift?'

'Eight o'clock, Mr. Tanassov, after the morning check.'

'Do you have any other duties until then if there are no emergencies?'

'No, sir!'

'Then I expect to find you here in this cabinet an hour from now. You are not to let anybody, I repeat, ANYBODY, in this wing until I come back. Who else has keys of this wing?'

'Nobody, sir, just Mr. Stamenov. I have keys only of the front two doors, the rest he kept himself.'

'You do not have keys from the cells?'

'No, sir. Mr. Stamenov oversaw this wing himself. I was not even aware that there are inmates in it.'

'One inmate and he is gone. Who cleans this wing?'

'I don't know, sir, nobody enters here except Mr. Stamenov. There are no scheduled maintenance here that I know of, as it is just his study that is used, and only by him.'

Tanas went to the big filing cabinets at the wall and tugged on the drawers. Everything was locked and Tanas was positive that the array of small keys on the ring corresponded to each individual lock. One of the good features of the old-school men like Stamenov was that they were predictable and dependable, one could count on their sense of order instilled since first grade by the stern school system, honed by the military and perfectly polished by their university professors, he mused. Their lives were all labeled and numbered, he was sure that all the files would be neatly arranged at the common alphabetical order, all data

neatly typed, signed and sealed. There was no rush to get through them before they disposed of Todor's body.

'Let's go!' he waved at Tashev and the two bodyguards before turning towards the Chief Guard, 'I would be very grateful if you find the time to clean up Mr. Stamenov's desk, just put all the papers in the wastebasket, that will be sufficient, I will have a look at them after that.'

After Tanas thoroughly searched Todor's clothes for the ring to no avail, the two bodyguards hauled it into the trunk of Tashev's trophy Mercedes and the four grim men left the prison yard. Tashev was driving himself, and wanted desperately to light a cigarette, but knew better. Tanas might be a descendant of generations of tobacco merchants, but he did not touch the stuff himself. Everyone who worked with him quickly learnt: the boss did not encourage their smoke breaks and in his offices the ashtrays were for the very important people who could ignore the message of his wrinkling nose. As those were few people indeed, the ashtrays were invariably clean. Tashev pretended to look at the side street traffic and stole a glance of Tanas. It was almost one in the morning, he had just arrived after crossing the country lengthwise and trading a broken train for a car ride under the storm, he had seen two people dead in half an hour, but his face was clean shaven under the dark hat, his shirt spotless white under the black suit and his hands relaxed in his lap, as if he had come out of his barber's shop only a minute ago.

'Hopefully the cemetery plot is arranged,' calmly remarked Tanas without looking away from the road still glistening from the rain. He had sensed the tension in Tashev and did not want to discourage it. Little alertness was not inadequate. The storm had gone away as swiftly as it had come, but the streets were wet and Tashev took care to avoid the potholes. Orlandovtsi was not far and it was not worth for few extra minutes to get stuck in a rut.

In front of the morgue the guard jumped at the sound of the opening door. The two doctors were solemn as the angels of death in the church of his childhood and equally silent. Boris led the group up to his private office at the first floor. He sat at his polished desk and started writing the death protocol, occasionally turning to Poshtov with a Latin term that Sotir did not understand. The office was comfortably appointed, the two visitors' armchairs more suitable for gents' club than a hospital, the small table between them occupied by a

big vase containing a fresh bouquet of flowers from a grateful patient, the bookshelves lining one of the walls glinting with their polished glass doors behind which expensive medical atlases and heavy volumes were lined with humbling precision. The desk was adorned only by a reading lamp and a heavy inkwell with some figurines on the top. The room inspired confidence. Sotir started to relax again. He was tired, although he had slept half the previous day. If he was lucky, Tashev had not left any instructions for him at the prison, so after depositing the doctor he could go home and sleep. He tried to blink the nervousness away.

The man behind the desk was watching him over his pen. He stood up deliberately slowly and the movement jerked Sotir into alertness.

'I think I need some reinforcement!' Boris sighed. 'Choose yours - I have cognac, plum brandy with some herbs, apricot brandy without anything, and I think that is it. Sir?' he turned to Sotir.

'The boss does not allow us to drink on duty,' the voice of the young man trailed somewhat unconvincingly. He did need that reinforcement.

'I am not offering to empty the entire bar, just a shot. It is not that you drive around dead people every night, I think your boss will not mind.'

"If only you knew how often I do that!" Sotir thought but managed to keep his thought to himself. He ventured:

'If you think it is permissible, then I will have a little of the plum brandy, please.'

'Dr. Poshtov, for you?' the elder doctor caught the shimmer of hint in his colleague's voice and thought better than to refuse. 'Some cognac will be appreciated.'

Boris went to the wall behind them, took a key from his pocket and opened the door of what looked like a heavy vault rather than a bar. He pulled the bottles and three glasses, which he put on the table, then poured the drinks. He went to return the bottles to the vault and muttered about insufficient space while adjusting something. Then he handed the glass to Sotir first. For a stickler to the etiquette as Boris was well known, it was a breach, thought Poshtov, who was the eldest in the room. A second later Boris stood between him and Sotir and handed him his glass while unnecessary steadying his hand with both his palms. Poshtov felt the kiss of another piece of glass to his skin and saw a small ampoule with white powder in it. 'Steady, Doctor, it is good stuff, don't drop it!' quipped Boris.

Poshtov slid the ampoule in his trousers' pocket and clutched the glass.

Boris turned and took his own one. 'I hope you find it adequate!' he intoned and sat back behind his desk. Poshtov saw that while Sotir's glass was almost full as was his own, Boris had poured himself just a little. He sipped carefully, as Sotir swallowed few big gulps. Boris lifted his glass to his lips, but from where Poshtov sat, the content did not seem to diminish.

The elder doctor knew what was in the ampoule. It contained a dose of cyanide enough to save a life, but equally sufficient to extinguish it instantly without pain. The man behind the desk had just risked his life to give him an option to live or to die with dignity. He had stolen the choice from his captors with one minuscule gesture that meant so much. Poshtov regretted that he did not have to meet Boris under more favorable circumstances, always kept at a distance by their full schedules, families, other obligations. He sent his silent thanks to the dead man who had given him his last chance to try to save whatever was salvageable of his life and to the live man before him for the reassurance that whatever was possible would be done. The searing heat of the alcohol in his throat was getting mellow while travelling down and Poshtov understood the meaning of the last glass of booze the condemned people asked for. He felt warm and comfortable, lifted his glass in a silent toast and got another sip.

It was useless to protract, Boris thought, better send Poshtov back without causing raised brows. The protocol was done, the carbon copy for the prison was legible enough and he would type the official death certificate in the morning. He asked his two night visitors to sign it without making fuss of reading it, as Sotir would probably not understand much anyway and Poshtov knew the contents. Then he saw them off to the entrance, where Stamenov's car was still parked, instructed Sotir to send someone to retrieve the body as soon as possible, briefly said goodbye but stayed until the car departed. The arms of the white enameled clock on the wall of the entrance hall showed four in the morning. No use to go home, he thought, went to verify that the morgue was locked, found the nurse in charge and asked her to wake him up at six sharp if nothing extraordinary happened. The elder nun shook her head, but knew that it was wasted effort to try convincing him that he was burning the candle at both ends. Her quick prayer was for at least two hours of quiet time for him.

Tashev car's bright lights illuminated the small hut of the cemetery guard. Instantly, the door opened and two men came out, holding a shotgun each, ready to fire. The moment their vision got accustomed to the brightness and they recognized their night visitors, the men lowered the guns. One of them went into the hut and came back carrying a simple coffin and some ropes. The other lit a lantern and came towards the car. Tashev opened the trunk. Tane and the other bodyguard pulled out Todor's body. The graveyard guards put the ropes on the cobblestones and put the coffin on them. The four guards somehow put the body in the coffin, but it was short for the tall man and the lid was not closing over his feet. Tanas' lips were a thin line of displeasure and Tashev felt cold sweat trickling down his spine despite the hot humidity of the night and his uniform jacket. Why hadn't they got a big coffin, he had told them that it was for a man, he thought, then remembered that Todor was very tall, taller than the average men. It was late and the faster they finished, the better.

'Get going!' the security chief urged. The four guards took an end of a rope each and started carefully up the slight hill. The coffin was swinging between them like a cradle hung under a tree on a windy day, but they managed to get in step quickly. The front graveyard guard was carrying the lantern. Tashev and Tanas followed closely, faster at first as far as the lights of the car reached and more carefully in the dim moonlight after. Nobody spoke. The night noises of the town did not reach there, but the night creatures were filling the air with enthusiastic chirps and grinds, with the occasional note of a screeching rope.

Soon the small group reached a new plot, still several lines of recent graves only, some bearing few wilted bouquets of flowers and occasional cross, some just graves, unmarked, but evidently filled, as small mounds of soil were forming a neat picture. Immediately after there was an empty grave, a little water shimmering on the bottom after the rain. The labored breathing of the four carriers was overwhelming the subtle music of the night critters. They put the coffin next to the grave and waited for instructions.

Tashev approached and tried to close the lid but it was a wasted effort. The lid slid to the side again. In the flickering light of the lantern, Todor's face seemed to move. Next instant an unlikely pair was bending above it. Tanas and Tane almost simultaneously squatted next to the coffin.

Tanas was a second faster. He slid his hand over Todor's mouth as if the bumpy ride through the town could have put the breath back in the tall body. Tane touched Todor's forehead and arranged back the few

strands that had fallen over the dead man's face. Then he stood up a little, withdrew from his pocket a wallet and took a small coin. He replaced the wallet, then pulled out his impressive knife that he had never been seen without. He squatted again, looked at Tanas, who slowly withdrew his hand. The bodyguard used his knife to pry open the dead man's mouth a fraction, then slid the small coin between Todor's lips and pulled the knife.

'I need a piece of cloth, anything!' he asked the completely overthrown group, still squatting, knife in hand. The men took a step back. It was a bad omen to put something personal in someone else's coffin - it was considered a direct delivery to the dead.

'There is a handkerchief in his right pocket!' Tanas' voice was barely recognizable. Tane slid the lid a bit more, found the handkerchief and covered Todor's face with it. Then he replaced the lid as much as he could and looked around. 'Now we can put him down, come on!'

The silent guards grabbed the ropes and lowered the coffin into the grave. With a splash it was there. The graveyard guards pulled expertly the mud-covered ropes and left them aside. From the nearby bushes two shovels were produced, but the men waited. Tanas took a handful of drenched soil and threw it over the coffin. The shovels were big and the clods of muddy soil were filling the new grave quickly. Soon the mound was not different from the rest.

The silent group returned to the car. Tanas and Tashev's bodyguards took their places right away, while Tashev opened his wallet and some bills changed hands. One could have mistaken the two graveyard guards for mutes, but once they entered the hut, the one with the lantern turned to his peer and muttered, 'You recognized him?'

'Todorov, no doubt! But now we better forget it or we will be making him company the moment we squeak about it. These are big games and we are small people...'

The car was gliding back to the prison. Soon after it entered the sparsely lit streets, Tanas spoke without turning, 'Tane, why did you do that with the coin?'

The bodyguard shifted, then sighed, 'Grandma was doing it at our village. She was saying that if one did not have a coin to pay for the passage, he was bound to be stuck and may come back. And the cloth - the eyes

of the dead people have to be covered, if not, they may find where the living ones are and disturb them. Not that I believe in all this, but one may never be too cautious. I would not want to meet him if he turns into vampire, this one! He was frightening enough alive...'

Tashev gripped the steering wheel tighter. He had never heard Tane express an opinion, the silent man hardly uttered an entire sentence at a time. Tashev thought how many things he did not know about the people on whom his security depended. He'd better check again.

He'd better check again this bodyguard, thought Tanas. The reticent, quick-thinking man with a solemn expression, ethereal patience and startlingly bright green eyes despite his dark hair and brows was more than the eyes were seeing. Tanas had met him first a year and a half ago, but did not pay much attention to him, as Tashev had an ever changing sets of bodyguards, the more paranoiac he became, the more often his hounds changed. That did not concern Tanas as long as the work was done. Tane's continuous presence, especially tonight meant that he was one of Tashev's most trusted people as far as dirty jobs were concerned. It was a good policy to know who his people trusted. It was even better to know it when these trusted ones made his skin crawl. Tanas filed the thought and tried to relax. It was not an easy task as his mind kept springing the image of dead Todor with a knife between his teeth, face animated by the flames of an invisible lantern, flicks of which made the knife burn. He knew Todor as a formidable adversary and regretted that he had to be taken from the political scene, but he had been too independent to be an ally and too much relying on the aid of his foreign protectors. He had had to go. And he was a fool for not knowing what he had in his power! The rage shook Tanas violently, he had worked so hard to get the ring and it had gone again! There was always the minuscule possibility that Todor had given it to Stamenov to give it to his family, but Tanas doubted that the old prison director had been close to his most famous inmate to serve as a messenger. Todor had no idea he was meeting his Creator that night, he had been confident that his American and British allies would pull him out, so he had had no reason to part with the ring. So it may have been just left in the cell. That was it. Todor had taken the ring before going to sleep and Tashev had gotten him without giving him the chance to put it back on. Tanas was confident that a simple search would retrieve it. He regretted alerting everyone present at the gallows about it, but they had not paid attention. And even if they did, they did not have a slightest idea why he needed the ring. Stamenov was dead, Poshtov was

---

almost dead and very soon would be completely dead, Tashev and the bodyguards were not educated enough to get a whiff about it. The ring was safe and Tanas intended to make it work, whatever it took to do it.