

Tau

'Bathroom to the right, your room is on the second floor to the left and the fridge has to be closed with Velcro otherwise the door hangs. This is all you may need as house tour for now, I will show you the rest later. Go wash the dust and come, you have a towel on the bed,' Stavros was sitting at the table and waiting for him.

Tanas washed, changed into jeans and a white T-shirt and went to the front porch barefoot. He sat and tried to smile, 'How did you know that I am coming?'

'A small bird came and told me. It was about time, although I had put you somewhere in the beginning of September. That means that you came to ask something before something else will happen. Go ahead!'

Stavros poured two spoonful's of clear ouzo in each glass and poured ice water on it. The mixture immediately turned into a white cloud and the glasses started getting sweaty. The old man took his one and toasted his guest and they drunk few sips in silence. Tanas felt how the everyday chores slid out of his mind. That left exposed the ugly white-hot cutting edges of few questions that remained important. He speared a bite from the grilled tchiroz, chewed its salty-sour texture and stood up. He brought Valkuda's present and opened it on the table. Stavros bended to see better in the dimming light and then jerked back as if stung.

'Where did you get this from?'

'My future sister-in-law gave it to me as a house-warming gift!'

'She did not!'

'She did. That is why I came here...'

'Listen, if you got Tane's knife as a present, you better start from afar!'

And Tanas did. He told him about his grandfather's will and Dimitar getting all, including Valkuda with her ten years contract of well paid slavery, his attempt to please his father by getting the ring, his failure, the trip to Brashlyan, his father's death, the file that Valkuda had found, the money, the letter with the silk belt, his strange dream of his grandmother, the purchase of the attic and Mrs. Hlebarova, the accountant and her

revelations, his making up with Andon, the house-warming party and the morning ride. Stavros listened, occasionally asking a question or two when Tanas was losing the thread. When the guest finished it was dark and the growing moon was hanging above them. There were light bugs flying around and the crickets were playing something ancient on their tiny violins. Tanas drained his glass and got another two spoonful's of ouzo with water. Stavros stood up and brought ice, for the water in the pitcher had warmed up. Then he sat heavily.

'So it all comes up to Tane's girl marrying your brother that is eating you alive... Why didn't you do something about it?'

'Like what, carve my heart and give it to her on a plate? May be that is why she gave me the knife!'

'I knew Tane and I know this knife. There was no way anyone would have got it from his grip while he was alive. If she is anything like him now and I am sure she is, you could not have pried it from her while she breathed either. I am not sure she did not carve her heart and gave you the knife after. You did not say you knew her grandfather though.'

'I did, he taught me to ride a motorcycle and what to do with knives. This is a present from him as well,' Tanas pulled his own knife from his ankle strap and handed it to Stavros. He looked at it and weighed it in his hand before returning it to the tall man.

'He gave you a thrower, he thought you better be at a distance. Tane was great man and he saw many things the others missed. But she is a girl and that may get her confused. Does she know where to find you?'

'No, I left a message with Mrs. Hlebarova only.'

'Then go and tell her, if she is your woman she will come.'

'She is getting married on Wednesday at midday; she will not spoil the fun of the others. And she is obsessed with the idea of taking care of Dimitar.'

'Tane was like her, he would go across a mountain if he thought that was the right thing. He always saw that the right thing was done, no matter how dangerous or unpopular it might have been. He could listen with his heart, Tane. That is how I came to know him.'

'And it was when?'

'The year he came to work for your grandfather, that makes it forty-eight, the summer. The communists kept bringing Greek kids and women here and send them further - some to Romania, some to Poland, some ended up at Kazakhstan. Those were murky years, Tanas, a lot of tears and even more blood was spilled. Dad kept smuggling them back whenever he could, and I was helping him with the boat. He never took a penny for that. Those people were penniless anyway. He said that if one can do a good thing and chooses not to do it, it is a bigger sin than acting evil under pressure. Those were desperate people, behind them there were graveyards and in front of them graveyards loomed, but the graveyards behind were at least familiar and there was still a chance that someone may pick up the kids and let them grow Greek and Orthodox. You see the cove, it is isolated and if they made it to here their journey was not wasted. The sea should be real bad for Dad to refuse a trip. As you may guess, we were sold to the authorities, by one of the neighbors who wanted the house and the vineyard. There was a trap and Dad and I got caught. I was thirteen at that time and he was well above forty. We were brought to Varna for some reason with a dossier that we were smuggling spies into the country and all the usual crap; that was a sure firing squad for both. Mom came to search for us, as someone who knew told her where we were. The highest authority on the subject was your grandfather and she tried to get to him, but there was his security. She was practically thrown at the feet of Tane, who was coming to work. He pulled her up and asked what happened and he was the only one who would listen to her. She offered him a bribe, her engagement ring, as it was the only valuable thing she had. He refused, said it may come handy later, put her to wait on a bench at the Sea Garden and went to talk to your grandfather. I wish I knew what he told him, for Dad and I were summoned to his office in record time. Tane cut Dad's ropes and mine with the akkulak that is on the table. He spoke to Dad alone for few minutes, then your grandfather spoke with him and then he called his assistant and the boss of the secret service under him. Your grandfather icily said that while the services kept catching petty poachers instead of real criminals the level of security would remain under sea level, instructed that Dad and I were released as we have served the jail time for few kilos of illegal turbot already or else.

I believe nobody wanted to find out what was "else" in your grandfather's mind. We were given papers and set free. I remember how your grandfather waved at Dad and me. I doubt he remembered us, may be we have been few of the thousands that went through his study. We were lucky though. We have met Tane.

He saved us again. Tane thought that if we were to return in Vassiliko immediately, the local guys would kill us either way. As we had not spent enough time in jail, we could be considered collaborationists and traitors, so the underground people would kill us. If they did not, then the scorned secret service people would do it.

'Get somewhere in hiding as far away from the sea as possible, stay there a year or two and then go back. The times change, they will forget about you by then, the human memory is short!' he said. Now I see he had been right about hiding. We ended up in Plovdiv, I went to work for a man who made bells, although there were not many orders. He could do other stuff as well and little by little I learned the tricks of his trade. In the spring of fifty-one Dad said he would go back to the sea even if it killed him and we came back, managed to get the house and the vineyard back. Dad's barge had sank and he worked with other fishermen and it was hard for him, he was not young any more. I faked my documents and enlisted as a ship's boy, saw the world, came back whenever I could and sent them money. They died a month apart while I was in Singapore, I think, but the local doctor kept them frozen and I buried them together when I came back, that was in sixty-four.

Tane however was not right on one account - people do not forget. There were several attempts to get over this place. It is the best vineyard around. I kept coming and kicking the asses out. I thought that when I would be back permanently it would stop. No way! I came and started making bells and it was not bad at the beginning, until the neighbor who had sold us initially started calling the cops. He had some cousin in the militia unit, and they kept coming to tell me to stop peal around after hours. One day they just came and put me in the nuthouse telling the doctor that I was a madman who thought he could make bells and was tormenting everyone around. It took me four months to get out of there, as there was nobody to vouch for me, my clients had no idea where I was. I offered to make a bell and described the process in details and the doctors finally got it that they had the wrong man. But once a madman, always a madman, it was easier to get me there. I learned some tricks again. See Gantcho the rooster - he warns me when someone crosses the boundary. I learned to hide and sometimes I was successful and sometimes not. I learned also to scare them to death, so they kept to themselves most of the time.

I made it a rule - when any of the neighbors die or move, I buy his land, no matter how expensive. Usually it is not that much, as I told you, my madman reputation is sterling and nobody wants a common border with a proven loco.' Stavros gulped half a glass of water.

'What about that barren land that I had to cross to come here? It is a real decent chunk and immediately next to you. Could the owners do something with that haunted house there or at least sell it to you?'

'It is mine. It was also the house of the guy who sold us. So I decided that I don't want him for a neighbor, that is all, you remember the Second Jungle Book, "The wild gourd would grow where they had worshipped their God, and the sooner they saved themselves, the better." Let's say, I planted the gourds with relish!'

Stavros chuckled, poured himself another measure of two spoonful's of ouzo and toppled it with water. 'Do you want wild spearmint with it?'

'No, thank you. Stavros, what happened after that?'

'You want to ask whether I met Tane... I did. Sometimes my ships went to Varna and I tried to track him, which was not easy, as he had retired and was hiding among his beehives. When I came back permanently I went on a search in earnest. I wanted to thank him for saving my skin and for all the years he gave to my parents. He was very surprised that someone remembered him. We sat at his shack there and drank half the bottle of ouzo I brought. I see, you want to know what happened with the other half. He taught me how to make a watermelon with ouzo, do you know how? No? I will show you tomorrow, it takes time and patience. We sat and talked and I asked him whether he was afraid to live there alone. It was a relatively safe time yet man was alone with no neighbors in sight and a lot of honey. He took out the knife you brought and said that until he can hold it, he was afraid of only one thing - that he would die before having finished his mission as he did not have grandkids and the years were rolling by. Valkuda was born few years later and he forgot everything else. She had been here few times with him and her grandmother, but she does not remember, she was very little. Then his wife died, Vale started school and he did not come back, even for vacations. They were busy with training he said. He kept dreaming of a grandson, not because he did not love her, the opposite, he never wished to dump everything on her. He had nobody else and this knife goes only to the person with the same blood as his. That is why I am surprised that she gave it to you, no offense, but it is not even hers, it belongs to her sons. And trust me, she will have sons, this girl, she has flame inside, and I believe she had branded you already. Look, if you are not going back to tell her that, the

night is going late and some sleep will do both of us some good. If you wake before me, the food is in the fridge, the sea is down there and if the weather is nice, we may go fishing.'

Tanas returned from his morning swim to find Stavros preparing a gargantuan gardener's omelet with every vegetable his garden patch had sprouted. The rickety table was set with two plates, two forks, two worn out glasses and a sweaty jug of airan. Tanas washed the salt off and sat at the table in a prim T-shirt and trunks. Stavros shot him a side look.

'Am I breaching the etiquette in some way?' Tanas was conscious of the reprove.

'Well, you need some sun on that city skin of yours and it is the best time to get it in the morning. You put that T-shirt around ten. I am wearing one as I am cooking, but it is off as soon as I finish.'

Tanas pulled his shirt off and neatly folded it. Some things were ingrained.

'I was sailing for a while with a Russian guy and they say that whatever girl you see in your sleep on the first night at a new place that is your destiny. Who did you dream of?'

Tanas did not answer, so Stavros turned from his beaten outdoor stove and looked at him. 'Wrong question... What was she doing then?'

'Walking this very meadow with two boys around five and they had her eyes. And she was pregnant again!'

'Again?'

'I dreamed about her the day I moved to the attic. She was pregnant in that dream also. Pregnant women are bad sign, as you know. One of my people was ill the next day and I had to work the Sunday.'

'Something tells me that your idea of a bad sign has less to do with working that you are willing me to believe, you know. Why don't you jump on that noise maker of yours and go tell her about it?'

'And if she is pregnant for real?'

'Do you care?'

'No, not at all, I am going to love the little mite anyway. But it will hurt his mommy and I can't do that to her. No, I am not going anywhere. These are just dreams. Come on, may I have a piece of that omelet, I am starving!'

'Apart from that, you are dodging the issue, but there is no point in pressing it. Let it be, let's eat first.'

Choosing a right water melon was more than looking for the size, Stavros told him. One had to look at the drying stem, the tiny dot on the bottom and the clear sound when one flicked it. As his host had been attentive, the green spheres did not have "sore spots" from lying on the same side. Each one of the mid-size cannon balls had its own bed of straw and the old man solicitously inspected them one by one before deciding on their lunch dessert and supper special treat. Tanas had to kneel repeatedly to listen to the tone of the prospective candidate.

'A dull sound is not good - neither for a watermelon, nor for a bell!'

When they brought the two watermelons, Tanas was given the task to decide which one is better. He listened carefully twice and then picked the dark green one. Stavros repeated the ritual and a jubilant smile illuminated his face.

'You have the right ear, sonny!'

'For watermelons? I am delighted I would never buy a green one now! Do you give out diplomas or I have to pass a master class first?'

'I am serious, Tanas. You have a perfect ear and I can't tell you how rare it is. A bell master needs to be able to hear what the others cannot. Listen, I am getting old and like Tane I don't want what I know to die with me. Stay for a while and I will teach you how to make bells, real bells, the one people would come to you for. It is a dying skill and a demanding one. The bells need strength and patience and endurance, and you better have good ears for it. You are perfect for that.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because I am old and have seen a lot. When they brought you to the nuthouse, I knew you were not mad. But you were not yourself either. You kept telling me "Dad this" and "Dad that" and "Dad thinks" and "Dad wants". You were nowhere in the picture. Vampires are different and your dad had sucked you dry. It is not unexpected that he wanted you dead - you were a shell walking anyway. He was about to latch on your brother and you were in the way. Here your guardian angel failed you miserably. She should have seen it coming. Tane should have seen it coming and may be he did as he taught you some survival skills. But none of them probably had ever met the absolute evil that your father had been. It happened to the best of parents and to the best of children also. Such people are put on the Earth to remind us that we should never trust blindly, that we should think and see for ourselves and don't base our judgment on what one tells us to

believe. People thought your grandfather was an evil man and to some extent he was. But he was not only an evil man as I see you have discovered. His son was his punishment, he took away the woman he loved, took away the son he so desperately wanted as he was not that son, took away you, his future, his hope. Your grandfather fought so hard for Dimitar as he was the last one left for him. You are young and you don't know the pain to fight for the last thing you have in your life. It can get a man from his deathbed if needed. You have no idea how sick Tane was when Vale was born. She gave him a lease of life and he got himself together and pulled until she was on her two feet firmly in place. But she was spread too thin. If she was only guarding your grandfather from the ring, she might have had time to think about what was wrong. But she was sent after you to that university of yours and her quick brain got swept into the figures and management and all. Later your grandfather used the brain as given, like he had always accepted Tane for granted. To some extent it was so as Tane was his shadow and was bound to follow him or whoever was considered the highest threat to the ring. That is why they both missed your father. They were trained to recognize a different kind of danger. That is why she stays with Dimitar - she can sense his resonance with the ring. What she does not know is that he can control it - he told you that he had returned it to Konstantin. She should be looking at another person to guard the ring from. You are not that person, you yourself do not crave the power over others. You are a messenger, Tanas, whether you know it or not. That is why I am offering you to learn to make bells. You don't need to tell me that right now. Think it over while we do the ouzo watermelon and let it go, for Heaven's sake, you are going to squish it! It is a good watermelon to go that way.'

Tanas shook and look around. He was cradling the poor green ball tight to his chest. He put his ear to it and flicked. The fruit sang a note that was encouraging like a bell peal on Sunday morning. He let it go.

'Now what?'

The old man brought an opened bottle of ouzo, a glass and a syringe with a long thin needle. He poured half a glass of ouzo and filled the syringe expertly. He inserted the needle up to the hilt in the watermelon and slowly pressed the plunger until the barrel was empty. Stavros withdrew the needle and handed the syringe to Tanas.

'You do it. Remember, it needs to be done slowly as otherwise the ouzo will not be absorbed.'

The watermelon gradually swallowed the entire glass then one more. Nothing leaked. Stavros put the green cannon ball in a basin with some cold water, positioned the basin so that the breeze could reach it and put a towel with its ends in the water over the melon. The cooler was ready and he announced that it is a lunch time.

Tanas insisted that it was his turn to cook and drove his elder friend to seaside bistro he pointed as a good source of fish and chips and they even had a beer each. It was relaxing - the sea lapping at their feet, the old canopy bleached by the sun and the salt, several holes preventing it from flapping ("I had to improve the construction, it was like a parachute!" the owner proudly told them). The shack was away from the beaten path but popular by the word of mouth and crowded all the time. The clients who could not find a table were allowed to sit around on the condition that they pick their garbage after or would not be served again. Stavros assured his young companion that the owner had a memory that a face recognition system could only dream of - he had refused to serve a man who had not picked after himself two years before. The man had argued that a lot of water had gone under the bridge since then and was politely advised to go under that same bridge and do something despicable. Nobody had seen him again at Vassiliko, sure he had taken the advice; the owner had chortled from the microscopic kitchen while preparing his favorite dish "Five on a Stick". Sprats were speared through their eye sockets on a toothpick, dipped in flour for an instant, tossed in boiling oil and served in few seconds in a delicious, crunchy heap. A client could either munch them one by one or wolf them five at a time and then chew on the stick while selecting the next five to go. Or both. Or look at someone doing it while pondering what to order. Life was full of tempting choices.

They slept through the afternoon heat, Tanas with a clear conscience as he had called Mila and was assured that there was no crisis on the horizon. He woke up before Stavros and went shopping for food. He came back and offered to cut a salad, but the old man shooed him away to have a swim. The host sat cutting the tomatoes and cucumbers, went to pick some fresh parsley from the back of the shack and was crying over giant head of red onion when his guest emerged with two enormous fish which a fisherman had sent to the old man with best regards. The fresh catch was immediately cleaned and tossed on the grill. Stavros cut the watermelon in small cubes and handed a fork to Tanas.

'Sit down and gobble it while it is cold, it is not much fun later.'

The red pieces were deliciously cool, sweet ripe watermelon with a taste of ouzo. The heat was fast retreating like it was always at the seaside and it was helped by the icy delight. The two men talked about all and nothing, the last crop of pumpkins, the new sorts of pole-less tomatoes that gardeners had to crawl to pick up, the prognosis of the fishing season and the wine campaign. The fish's charred skin was cracking under the fork and the meat was falling apart. When on his plate only the skeleton remained, Tanas gathered his courage and said, 'Smerch loves apples. I love chocolate cakes, my brother's fiancée and your watermelon with ouzo.' He stopped uncertain what should come next.

'That is a good start. I think you need to correct the second point though. She is making a mistake and you are not helping. Call her and tell her that!'

'I will think about it, OK!'

'Fair enough, but your thinking time is running out. Don't put off everything for the last minute, see, or otherwise someone else will ride your bike, figuratively speaking. Your statement had a question in it, why don't you ask it?'

'I was wondering, what does the tau stand for on Tane's knife? His surname is Martinov, why tau. And the fish, what does the fish stand for?'

'These were two questions, my boy, and we can sit at this table until you are as old as I am now and we would not have said a hundredth of what it may mean. Let it be, you have time and so do I. Bring that knife of yours.'

Tanas unpacked the akkulak on the table. Stavros looked at it but did not touch it.

'Now a small memory exercise. Any chance you know Valkuda's patronym?'

'Todorova, her father was Todor.'

'Good, now the harder part. What was Tane's patronym? Todorov again, as his father was also Todor. That explains it. Tane hoped that there would be a grandson and Valkuda was named after her grandmother, not him. But the expected Tane never came, effectively cutting the line. There had been Tane – Todor – Tane – Todor for ages; I doubt anyone can tell you for how long. The wootz steel that this knife is made from is from the ore of a mine which was exhausted by the beginning of the eighteenth century the latest. I think the knife was made before it. I am not a specialist in Arabic. You may find someone to read it and read the marks if

you like. Something tells me that the handle is the same age as the knife and the tau was done for the original owner. He had been a Christian and had asked it to be shown on his knife. Hence he had added the fish. But if you look at the knife you will see that it cannot be seen when one is holding it, so the message was not for the people around. It was a reminder for the owner, it was the eternal seal of the covenant he had entered into by taking the knife.

Tau is the symbol of the cross, but not only. Long before the Christianity Tau was the letter that was associated with the Sun god Tammuz, the annual death and life cycle that the old tribes worshipped in Babylon. He was a god who dealt with shepherds and fishermen, much like Jesus. A shepherd like Tane's ancestors was part of his flock, whether he recognized it or not. We the fishermen are from the same flock. Think about it - out of twelve apostles, four were fishermen, every third! Mind you, the evangelists made a point to mention their profession, so it is important! Jesus promised them that they would fish for the souls not for the fish. And Jesus may have been a carpenter himself but was good at catching fish; remember the hundred fifty-three caught on the other side of the boat?

The Bible says God's angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous like the fishermen who collect the good fish in baskets, but throw the bad away. Martinovs would not wait for the angels to come at the end of times, they were here to gather the good and throw the bad, and that was their cross in life. Fishing is a hard and merciless job, you can trust me on this, and so was theirs. They see more than the others and pay for it, as there is no bill left unpaid and balance not settled. Look at that fish, it faces the tau, tail towards the blade, it is going away from the blood that the knife had spilled and will spill no doubt. This fish is swimming upstream, it has been ages that it persists of doing what was not expected from it, it is a real independent fish, you know.

But I am veering away I think. The summary - all Valkuda's ancestors were named with a "T" at the beginning of their names to remind them of the life and death, of their covenant to protect and be different, to save the good and impede the bad. She should not have been in the line, neither by gender, nor by name, but was put in it out of desperation. Yes, it seems that a great turbulence had come to our world if a woman was called to save us. You see, Tanas, you don't know as much as she does, but you got the knife and you have the right letter, so you are obliged now to transfer it the same way, and you better learn fast.

You need her, go and get her, sonny, as this knife means more than you will ever be able to read, but she had to tell you that.'

'She will be telling it to my brother as of Wednesday midday.'

'I don't know about that. I will believe it when I see it, but not a minute earlier. He does not know what he is getting into, it seems to me that he got everything a tad too easy. I have faith in Vale, she ought to see it. May be that Brashlyan will help, some very wise people live there, by the way. Grandma Elka is one fantastic lady, God had broken the mold after He made her.'

'Elka Kaloyanova? She died on Easter together with her husband, the same time as my grandfather. Dimitar is a friend of their grandson, he told him.'

'Sad, very sad. But then the sea has a new Gate Keeper...'

What is that about the Gate Keeper?'

'It is a long story and this watermelon is getting me sleepy. How about telling it tomorrow?' Stavros yawned and Tanas let a sigh.

'You are some Scheherazade, you know! But if you don't want to talk about it now, I will go and look at the stars and go to bed a little later, is it OK?'

'No night swims, that is the rule!'

'Scouts' word, I won't!'

'You have never been a scout!'

'No, but I just don't have other words for it yet. I will stay out of the water, I promise!'

Tanas cleared the table, took a blanket and went to look at the sky. There were not that many stars visible as there was the Moon and it was growing also. Tanas laid on the thick blanket, chewed on a grass stalk and thought about the irony - the stars were glowing with their own light, but the reflecting-only Moon was overpowering them as it was close. The voice of the sea mixed with the song of the crickets in a lullaby and he drifted in a dreamless sleep.

Gantcho the rooster was pecking a worm very close to him and Tanas woke up. The sun was up and so was Stavros toasting bread. The tall man worked the kinks from the al fresco night and went to set the table.

'I will let you frolic in the sea for a while but then I hope you will help with washing the barrels. The berries are ready and that wine is not going to make itself,' that was the old sailor's program for the day and they followed it with a "Five on a Stick" break around two.

At the early evening Tanas was genuinely tired. He had cut wood for the fire, rolled around the small barrels full with cold water until they were stark clean, changed the water from cold to boiling hot with some herbs that Stavros had tossed in the cauldron, brought the hot stones to toss into the barrels full of brew, turned them to dry, coughed from the sulfur strips that were smoking the germs out. When he thought it was time to sit down, he was handed a small basket and together with Stavros went to collect the raspberries from the sprawling bushes which were supported by several lines of wire hanging between concrete pillars. They brought baskets after baskets of the red drops smelling of sunshine and poured them in the enameled tubs and the berries seemed to sprout and ripen behind their backs when the men turned. Stavros was elated, he was used to do it alone and it was getting harder with the years. The long drought had not affected his crop as he had been around to water the garden at the right time, the morning dew had aided and Lady Fate had sent him a helper. He looked at the tall man. His bare legs, arms and chest were scratched by the bushes and here and there a drop of blood had seeped through the broken skin. Stavros though with fear about the other wound which would open if Tane's girl would not show up until the next evening. Tanas was obstinate and they both could end in such a tangled mess. But the choice was essentially his. If she was truly his girl, she would come, he was right. Stavros was worried about the timing only. He could get hold of the priest in Brashlyan, but it could end up doing more harm than good. The old fisherman had to take some precautions though. Damn, he wished he had more barrels.

Father Ivan had invited Dimitar and Valkuda together with their best man Konstantin and Rada as a future matron of honor to come to the church to talk about the wedding. They were sitting in the ancient chairs in his office and the Father was talking about responsibilities and commitments and mutual support and being one and understanding the other. Valkuda was listening through the haze in her brain. She was tired of running and being supportive and getting no help and no understanding. It was getting clearer that either Dimitar would learn to accept her as what she was - which was hard to believe, or she will continue to bend and run and accommodate him. She was groomed to be flexible but for the first time the young woman was

having doubts where the flexibility ended and where the destruction began. Valkuda looked at the icon of Christ on the cross and thought that he also had had doubts but essentially had fulfilled the will of his Father. She should follow the example, she should go through and somehow it would settle. Dimitar was a nice man and she had loved him for so long, she was just tired and a good sleep should make everything right. The bride looked at the small pearl apple in the fangs of her serpent ring. Knowledge, he had offered her knowledge, but knowledge was destructive as well as tempting. She needed sleep. What had Mrs. Hlebarova said - Tane was the one to challenge the old way while cherishing them, and that even Saint Francis of Assisi had misinterpreted God's words and that Tanas would carry her knife. Valkuda needed time to sort all that in her head but time was in short supply. Father Ivan was saying that he would expect them to be in front of the church a quarter of an hour before midday the following day. She better call it a night soon.

Tanas had pressed raspberry juice until his hands were red up to the elbows, decanted it, mixed the sugar in and stirred for it to dissolve. Stavros said that the mass would be left to ferment for a while and he was free to get his evening swim, but the young man was too worn out for that. He got a quick shower and set the table, cut the industrial amount of vegetables his host had prepared for a vegetable medley and then cut the salad. He half expected Stavros to put the ouzo on the table, but instead of it a dusty bottle appeared.

'The new wine should be able to meet the old one, and I may need the bottle as well. You did a splendid job today,' insisted the old man and opened the porcelain stopper that were in vogue when Tanas Sr. was born.

The wine was worth the work, Tanas thought, it had the last year sun rays in it that made the deep red glow into the fading light. It tasted of raspberries and earth and grass, of everything that one may want of a summer, and it was heavy and sweet and went down smoothly. Stavros kept praising it and got some liquor chocolates to go with it. Tanas felt his lids getting heavier. A day work under the sun should not do that to him, he had to get in form, he thought.

'I know I promised you the story about the Sea Gate Keeper, but I think you are tired...'

'No, I should be fine, if the story does not involve rolling barrels around! Go ahead!'

'Well, here is the short version then. Once upon a time at a place called Nikea the icons were prohibited and a lot of saints' images were destroyed. A widow lived there with her young son and she had a beautiful icon

of God's Mother to whom she prayed. A soldier came to destroy the painting and sliced through the cheek of the image with his sword. The wound bled and the man fell to his knees and prayed. He agreed to give the woman the night to save the icon and she went to the sea and let it on the waves, telling it that it should save itself. The heavy icon did not sink but floated over the waves vertically. The son became a monk at Athos and told his brethren about the miraculous painting. The tale was known for more than two centuries before the icon came under a fiery pillar next to a monastery there. Nobody could approach it before Mary came in the dream of a wise old man, Gregory the Georgian. God's Mother told him that She would like to give her icon and protection to the monastery. The Greg character had to go upon water and reach the icon himself. So he did, brought the holy image out of the waves, washed it in clear sweet water from a brook that emerged at the place the icon landed, and put it in the altar. But the icon was not there the next morning. After a lengthy search it was found above the doors of the monastery. The monks put it back at the altar and the following night it was on the doors again. The move repeated for several nights until the wise Greg had another dream in which the Virgin told him that she did not want to be protected by them but would rather protect them and the entire Athos for all the time while her icon was kept there. It is there until now and is called Panagia Portaitissa which means God's Mother the Gate Keeper.

But Athos's miracle of the emerging icon was exactly a thousand years ago, in February 999, and before that the icon had been wandering for two centuries without anyone knowing where it had been. One would not think that for two hundred years it would just wander over the sea waves without doing something good. When you get back to Brashlyan, you can ask Elka's grandson about the two brooks inside his house. There are two, yeah, one cold and one hot, both clear like a teardrop. They don't dry in the worst of droughts and had saved the village many times. But the brooks are, let say, side effects. They had sprang to the place where the icon landed. At that time the house was shabby hut at the seaside. The icon was pulled out of the waves by a maiden and she prayed to God's Mother to give her a husband as she was all alone. The Virgin told her that She would do that and the marriage would be a happy one, but her daughter should be called to guard the sea. Both good and bad things would come from it and go into it and she should be the one to guard it when the Virgin would go to take care of other people. And it was a covenant for all times, the first girl born into the next generation had to stay in the village and guard the sea. As compensation, the Virgin promised to send a good husband to her. And it had been like that ever since. Granny Elka was the last one

of them. She showed me the two brooks and the copy of the icon in the church in Brashlyan, it is over the door again. But she had a son and two grandsons, if I remember correctly and was concerned that the times had shifted so badly that a girl had not been born since she was the only child of her mother. So it is this Konstantin that guards the door to the sea then or...' Stavros suddenly stopped and looked startled.

Tanas was curious, 'And how do you know so well the church in Brashlyan, by the way?'

'Well, it is another story but it is getting real late and you will need all your strength tomorrow, sonny. Would you mind if I take your two knives, I want to see something?'

'Stavros, I will not do anything stupid, I promise.'

'I did not say that you would, sonny, it is just the curiosity of an old man about an old tale, indulge it, you will get them tomorrow intact, I promise...'

Tanas did not have the energy to argue. He groggily brought Tane's knife, untied his strap and handed both to Stavros. His pillow was getting mythic appeal.

In the darkness outside the old man waited for the young one to get asleep. Then he brought one more glass, a plate and a fork, dragged another chair and placed the two knives on the table. He poured half a glass of ouzo into the third glass, put a piece of the tchiroz on the plate and sat patiently. If he had been right, it should not take long.

'There are things that don't change here,' his night guest chuckled, one sweeping gesture encompassing the settings.

'You know better. How about the table decoration?'

The green-eyed man sighed. 'I knew it was not fair to her. She is a girl and a confused one at that. But there was nobody else...'

'And this one up here is as obstinate as her,' Stavros sighed also.

'They need some pushing and shoving from aside, but it will be fine at the end, you will see.'

By the way, the Tau that is on the knife stands for the weighing of the heart that he had been talking of carving. The ancient people said it would be done after we die, but how about a control weighing in between, the feather of Maat does not change with time? She had not done that yet, but I have a hope in

her. That heart is in the right place, now the head has to follow. Time has changed and I did not manage to change fast enough, so she is paying the price now. I should have taught her to follow her instincts more rather than the instructions of time immemorial.

He may believe it or not, but she was right to put him a tau, to "set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof." He did turn the way I always hoped he would, but there was little time for them both to adjust to the "tov", to the good that will be theirs. If my ancient friend Baruch were somewhere close, he would have told you that is an allusion of the contact of the eyes and the contact of the mouth, not what you mean; it is about the spirit and creation.

I have to go as there is work to be done; you keep this one safe...'

'I will do my best...'

The guests were already gathered in the small church for the second wedding in as many months there. Father Ivan was going the last round to be sure that everything was in the right place. The villagers were exchanging smiles at him being so fussy about some posies and dripping candles with the people who had come to join their secluded community for a while. Outside Konstantin was looking at his watch, holding Rada's hand while ruminating at some memories from his recent wedding. Tantche was trying to cut a thread hanging loose from Valkuda's white gown, but gave up and stood right in time to hear the groom teasing that they could have done without a white dress, even one so spectacular on the lady who had made him jealous of every man past, present and future that had been in her life. Everyone giggled but the blondie wanted to kick Dimitar in a right spot. She turned to enter the church and missed the main move of the hour.