

## **Riste and an Old Story**

Vassili Nikolayevich had found for Iossif a rare treat - he had said it was an old book, beautifully illustrated by hand, but the vendor wanted his money before midday. The call could not have come at more inconvenient time – the professor was almost at the door going to battle at the university for not to allow closing of some programs. At the current stage of affairs, every vote counted and every well-hung tongue would find its use. He could not miss it, but he did not want the book to slip either. If it was coming with a personal recommendation from Vassili, it was no doubt beyond ordinary. He thought about sending Mitzi but she was upstairs with some mild cold and he decided against it. Martha had already gone for her round to the shops. That left Riste who by that time should have been either in the kitchen or in the study waiting for Mitzi to come down. It was bitterly cold outside so Iossif thought first about the kitchen, but looked at his watch and went to the study. The young lad was reading in an armchair next to the stoked fire. He had grown almost a head taller since the previous summer and as Iossif had guessed, he was coming closer and closer to being tall and beautiful. The lad had become a permanent picture in Iossif's household - if he was not following Mitzi like a shadow, he could be found reading somewhere or helping Martha with the house chores. The professor had met his mother who had come one day, a nice woman whose beauty had been eroded by years of hardship, but whose blue eyes, so astonishing like her son's ones, had sparkled mutinously at the mention of card play. Riste had tried to intervene saying that bad luck might not be hereditary and the sparkles had turned into two ice daggers. She had bitten her lip and after a few seconds of thought had given her permission under the strict limits of not playing for money with Iossif.

Riste's father had been a completely different kettle of fish - his dark brooding eyes had met Iossif with open animosity, looking enviously at his visitor's tailored suit and trendy coat. He had informed the professor in no uncertain terms that he considered the education of his son a frivolous matter and that Riste would be better without all that gibberish about banks in his empty head. Iossif was surprised how different Riste was from the men in his family, he had turned after the mother rather than the father and his two elder brothers. There was a stark difference between the very poor but clean and neat house and its mistress, and the

appearance of the men. However Iossif had extracted a permit for Riste to apply for school exams as a private pupil and had immediately set the machine in motion in fear that the loving parent may withdraw his consent on a whim. It had been in February and Riste had passed two exams in literature and Bulgarian language and was conquering mathematics under Mitzi's tutelage. That was a good thing, as it kept her mind off her still not fully restored health. Whenever she was not feeling well, she slept and Iossif was pulling his card decks to play few rounds. It was amazing how Riste was learning it. He had been concentrating like his life depended on the outcome, pausing to think, asking when he did not understand something, but most of the time playing with his gut, as he had told the pleasantly surprised tutor. Given that these were simple games with little combinatorics and he had only started learning the tricks, it was not that startling, yet the professor could see the growing of a mighty opponent on the green cloth. He should be happy that Riste's mom had forbidden them to play with each other for money, he chuckled. When the lad's mustache would be fully grown, he would be dangerous to sit with at the same card playing table.

'Riste, I need you to do something for me right now, please!' Iossif said softly as not to startle the boy, who put his page marker in his book and put it down on the table.

'I need you to go to Vassili Nikolayevich in his office and give him this envelope. In it there is money for a book that he may or may not give you in return. Whatever he decides, it is fine with me; just ask him to call me either way in the early evening. I am going now to the university, tell Mrs. Vassileva not to wake Mitzi if she does not get up herself, please', the professor handed him an envelope with the address on the front. Riste put on his coat, wrapped his cache-nez like Iossif and left with him.

There was no sign over the door or the front window which was draped, but the address corresponded. There was no bell either, so after a quick knock Riste pulled down the massive handle. The door opened on its well oiled hinges and the young man entered dimly lit room. He knew he was going to see a merchant, but the premises did not look like a shop and there was nobody in. Immediately the inside door leading to the house opened and an elderly gentleman entered blinking from a brightly lit room behind.

'Vassili Nikolayevich?' politely inquired Riste.

The scene that followed was beyond reasonable description. The elder man started crossing himself wildly, repeating something in Russian that Riste had not mastered yet, and after few more crosses he dropped on

his knees in front of the lad. It took guts not to run from the man who continued to whisper something with dry lips, continued to cross himself and stare at Riste as if he was a vision and he was afraid the lad would disappear. 'May be Vassili Nikolayevich has some strange relatives that the professor has forgotten to tell me about,' was the first coherent thought that Riste had and he raised his voice: 'Vassili Nikolayevich!'

A young woman, almost a girl, ran into the room and stopped in her tracks at the picture of the elder man standing on his knees in front of Riste. 'What did you do to him?' she screamed at the man standing and run towards them.

'Papa, papa!' She hugged the elder man and started checking for wounds all over him, but her father pulled her down and whispered, 'Don't you see who this is?! He had come himself to us, we should greet him properly! On your knees, child!'

'Dad, it is probably the messenger that Professor Spassov said will be coming, Dad!' she turned to the young man, who was staying motionless and the only thought in his head was to get out from that madhouse, 'Are you?'

'I am looking for Vassili Nikolayevich,' Riste decided that the girl may not be so hopeless.

'Well, this is my father, but why is he on his knees?' At least she spoke Bulgarian.

'I have no idea! He just dropped like that and was saying something that I did not understand... I need to give him an envelope and he may give me a book or nor, so Professor Spassov said!' And he probably knew the strange way the merchant greeted his customers, that was why he had warned him that the book may or may not be available. Riste did not take out the envelope though.

'Papa, what happened?' asked the girl, this time in Bulgarian.

In few pregnant moments the elder man lifted his hand and shyly touched the back of Riste's palm, as if trying to assure himself that the lad was real. Vassili Nikolayevich used his daughter's shoulder to lift himself up and looked at the blue eyes. The wildness in his gaze was gone. He sighed heavily and said in Bulgarian, 'I apologize, young man, for the way I greeted you. Rest assured that it was a mistake, my eyes are not what they have been, I hope you will excuse the old fool. So Iossif sent you to me!'

'Yes, sir, here is the envelope he asked me to give you. Shall I wait for the book or not? Professor Spassov said that it is not necessary to bring it with me, but he asked you to call him anyway in the early evening!' Riste was still wary.

'I will definitely do that, rest assured. I will give you the book; give me a minute to pack it properly. When you bring it home to the professor, don't unwrap it before it had time to adjust. It is fragile paper, but lossif knows that, I am sorry.'

'He will be at the university until the evening, so thank you for your advice!' Riste would first talk to the professor before he opened anything coming from this so-called shop, he would make sure of that!

'Verushka, bring me the package on my other desk and a lot of newspapers, my dear!' Vassili Nikolayevich had guessed the thoughts of his young messenger. Packing took extraordinary amount of time, as he was stealing glances at the lad after every twist of a newspaper, every knot of the sisal string. Despite his previous excuses his eyes were in perfect order. What the eyes saw though was not comprehensible. The lad's eyes were blue instead of gray, but that was the only difference. The posture, the height, the lines of the nose and the brows, the oval of the face, even the hint of a mustache were the same. Who was lossif's messenger? Why had not lossif told him about the boy before? Who else knew about the young lad? Who were his parents? What was he doing in Sofia of all places? He looked like seventeen, maximum eighteen to the old merchant. He was calculating feverishly and came to nothing. He needed to talk to lossif and the sooner the better; he would not sleep if he did not find out. Vassili Nikolayevich offered the package to the young lad who was looking at Vera. She was standing at the door, unwilling to leave her elderly father alone, yet tactful enough not to show it. Under Riste's blue gaze, she blushed and pretended to be interested in the first thing that came in front of her eyes which happened to be a Limoges playing card box. 'Do you play cards?' Riste came a step closer and looked at the King of Hearts' mirror image. Charlemagne was depicted with a brown hair and mustaches, which was not usual, but the young man took it as a good sign.

'I don't play cards!' said the Vera, looking at the box. 'But I would love to learn one day!' The hearts of both men skipped a beat due to completely different reasons.

Riste grinned, took the package, primly said goodbye and left jumping over the holes in the pavement. Vassili Nikolayevich dropped in his chair, looked at his daughter who he had just seen flirting for a first time, and asked, 'Verushka, I know it is probably late, but can you prepare some of lossif's favorites for tonight? I need to entice him to come. Borscht we have, will you make his cream puffs and rastegai, my little? Your old father needs help in this.'

'Papa, is everything normal, you were looking as if you have seen a ghost...'

'May be I have, little one, and may be I haven't, we will see to it tonight!'

Even the two lectures that she had sat through had tired Mitzi to the point that she asked to be excused from the impromptu dinner at Vassili Nikolayevich, but urged Iossif to go alone if he so wished. Her husband had come elated from the small victory at the University and was eager to celebrate it. Martha offered to stay late or even to sleep over and Iossif left full of curiosity. Riste had filled him about the odd behavior of his old friend, which was in complete dissonance with everything that the professor knew about him for over thirty years. The merchant was composed even when during the last war a bomb had landed two houses away from his shop which made Riste's account all the more mind-boggling. On top of it came the invitation for a dinner out of the blue and the professor was ready to bet a hefty sum that the main topic of discussion would not be rare illustrations.

Vassili Nikolayevich had sent his two sons abroad at the first mention of the word "revolution" in the newspapers, long before the Red Army had come. He had said "as far as possible" and "let an ocean be between you and them" which the young men had taken literally and were writing postcards from Canada, insisting that it was enough of a distance and they liked it. They have written that there was a pretty big Russian community long established, as well as a compact Bulgarian group and they felt fine. The old merchant was stalling with sending Vera to them despite the increasing volatility in Bulgaria - she was his baby and after the death of her mother few years ago, the girl had taken over caring for the house and themselves. Her father felt guilty that she was almost a prisoner in their own home - as she had been home schooled, she did not have many friends, few of the neighboring young ladies were gone either to their finishing schools abroad or left altogether. She never complained, read a lot and had a real gift with languages. Her father was afraid that her social inexperience may play a bad trick on them both but did not see any way out of it for the moment. The quick encounter with Riste in the morning was a warning bell. He wished it was his only concern about the young man.

The table was set with finest china and the silverware was spotless. For the few moments after her father's low-toned voice had announced that there will be three of them only for dinner, Vera managed to rearrange the table with three sets only. Mrs. Spassova present or not, the girl was determined to find out what had made her father behave the way he did. He had entrenched himself in his private study for the afternoon and all one could hear was his impatient steps and rustling of papers. Vera seated herself between the two men and served the sour cream for the borsht, the black bread and the garlic cloves.

'Verushka, you are an excellent cook and your father knows how to use it to his advantage. Vassili, that rastegai tells me with its wide open mouth that you are about to ask something very interesting.'

'What would you like first - the rastegai or the question?'

'Rastegai, of course, as I am going to eat while you pour what is on your heart!'

'Iossif, I hope you will not choke to death on it!'

'Then why were you asking?' Iossif was passing his plate to Vera.

'It is about your messenger.'

Oh, Riste! Did he not behave properly? He had been our best corner shoe polisher and had done me some odd services. After the incident with Mitzi I hired him permanently to help her while she recuperates. A very nice lad, I can assure you!

'Do you know who his parents are?'

'Yes, father is a drunkard with a gambling problem, mother is a nice woman wasted in poverty and care for the four of them - Riste has two elder brothers. But why are you asking, did he cause any trouble?'

Verushka, this smells divine!'

'No, no, not at all. I believe I startled him a lot.'

'He mentioned something along those lines, but rest assured, he will bounce back.'

'He might be, I may not. Iossif, does he look like his mother and father?'

'Come to think of it, he has his mother's eyes, but is not like his father or brothers!'

'I knew it! I knew it!' Vassili banged on the table with such a force that the china clinked. He did not pay attention. 'Iossif, don't you find that he looks like someone else?'

'Not that I recall, at least not someone I know! Vassili, how about stopping the riddles and getting it out?'

'That is so because you have never seen a picture of him without the beard! Verushka, bring me, please the package on my table!'

The girl brought a slim package in fine paper and handed it to her father. He reverently opened it and gave Iossif across the table an old black and white photo, frayed at the edges. From the photo Riste was looking at someone to the left of the camera, dressed in a Russian military uniform with the sash and the Star of The Order of St. Andrew the First Called. The lad on the photo was barely old enough to shave - may be sixteen, hardly even seventeen and if not for the uniform, Iossif could have sworn that it was an image of his shoe polisher. The professor looked down at the inscription. There, back on white, it was written:

*'His Imperial Highness The Tsarevitch of Russia'*

and the year: 1884. Future last Emperor Nickolas II of Russia had been sixteen when the photo was taken. Iossif slowly put the card down on the table and Vera looked at it. She sobbed and put her napkin to her mouth.

'Now you understand why I knelt, don't you! The Serbian Church had canonized the last Emperor as a saint in 1938. I had no doubt that it was my last day. I was humbled by the thought that I was blessed to be taken away by the saint himself. Moreover, he knew my name! Iossif, you have seen only pictures of the Emperor sporting a beard and mustaches, right? That is why you did not make the connection, but I had prayed to him when my kids were going and he had protected them.'

'Vassili, I know that it is not possible yet he is a carbon copy, that is not a mere play of genes. Listen, one thing is for sure; his mother knows if he was a changeling. He does not look like his father, that is for sure.'

'May be not a changeling, Iossif. Vera, close your ears!'

'I know what you mean. Yet, they are dead since 1918, all of them!'

'May be not all of them, Iossif, there had been rumors that the Tsarevich and one of the girls escaped!'

'And they hide in a minuscule village next to a balneology center high in the mountain?'

'How else will you explain that otherwise? Iossif, you said yourself it cannot be a mere play of genes!'

'I don't know who his forefathers actually are, but he is the devil in disguise when he plays cards. He will very soon beat me at it!' Iossif tried to diffuse the tension in the room.

Vassili Nikolayevich howled; 'Now that is better than a birth certificate and genealogy tree! All the ancestors of His Majesty were card players, starting with his great-grandma Ekaterina II. If he is the last of the

Romanovs, he has generations of play in his blood! Cards are dangerous stuff, it is not for me to tell you. In fact part of the money that you paid for the forget-me-knots went to pay an astronomical card debt. The guy left the country after it, so he may have been even more in the pit that I knew.'

Suddenly his face became red. Vera jumped and ran for his medication while Iossif was holding his friend's hand and patting it, 'Vassili, get calm, it may not be what you think, it is a play of nature, calm down!'

The merchant drank his drops with a glass of water and then looked at Iossif, 'I am a fool, a complete fool, a blind old fool! How did I not see it before! That guy, he looked like him, but he had curly black hair and black eyes, and he was not tall at all. Vera, you know where my personal book is, go and bring it!'

'Do you have pictures of all your clients?'

'No, this is a record of his date of birth!'

'But what does his date of birth prove, Vassili, you are not making sense!'

'Wait!' The merchant was leafing through the last few pages, 'Here he is, Naiden Vassilev, born on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1895 in Sofa. Nine months back, that will be October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1894. That is...'

'The day the Emperor Alexander III died. Sofia was in mourning about the son of our beloved Tsar-Liberator, and I think he even had a title of the Tsar of Bulgarians,' finished Iossif. 'Vassili, that does not prove anything! Well, look, he was born nine months after the death of Alexander III, fine, but the man you said did not look like the Emperor and how on Earth he would meet Riste's mother? Be reasonable!'

'Iossif, my work had made me anything but reasonable when it comes to coincidences. This Naiden - and you know that this name means he was adopted, by some reason keeps all his life jewels that could belong only to a queen! He told me that his mother told him he was adopted shortly before she died a year ago. Her husband and she had helped a young woman in labor and the kid was born in their home. The woman never said her name, but asked if they wanted to adopt the child, as she was not married and would anyway leave him. The couple was childless and overjoyed. The woman they considered a poor French nanny who had just arrived in Bulgaria to hide her pregnancy, left them the box to support the child, as she said, and vanished from the face of the Earth. All they knew was that she was speaking French, was short, had black curly hair and a comely face. For many years they thought that the jewels were fake as they had no reason to believe a maid would possess something that valuable and kept them as a memento of Naiden's birth mother. His father died three years ago and when mom decided that she was on the road to follow him, she



told her adopted son the entire story. He had gambled a lot and in a whim decided to find out if the trinkets had not increased in price. The jeweler who first saw the stones - in fact he saw just the tiara, referred him to me immediately and there you came into the picture. It is one of my fastest sales for such a treasure. Several months later you send me the boy who I would have never met in the street! Now, tell me, where is the reason in that?'

The professor was puzzled. His old friend was right - nothing made sense piece by piece, but put together they came rather logical. An illegitimate child was nothing unheard of in the Russian imperial circles, but not the first-born male and not left in a land far away. The forget-me-not set was fit for a queen; Vassili was right on this account also. But Iossif could not recall even a gossip about a French maid and the very introvert Tsarevich. Quite to the contrary, the rumors were that his parents were genuinely upset about his lack of interest in the fair part of the mankind to the point that they encouraged his interest in ballet and opera in a hope that he would "pick up" a dancer or actress or singer. May be there were still some old Russian gossipmongers around Sofia who would be ready to spill their knowledge about the then future Emperor? He suggested it to Vassili Nikolayevich, who waved his hands in very animated refusal.

'Iossif, everyone who sees him will recognize him on the spot! And from there on he will be hunted like a deer, both from the people who hated the Emperor and the ones who worshipped His Majesty, not to mention the comrades! He will be dead before you can say his name twice! His life is on the tip of your tongue!'

A gasp reminded the two old men that in the heat of their debate they have forgotten that they were not alone. Vera was sitting between them, her face the same colour as the bone china on the table.

'Verushka, that means your mouth will be locked also!' quickly added her father.

'So what do you suggest we do, as I am sure it is not to forget about it?' inquired Iossif.

'Well, even if he is not who I think he is, we cannot leave him as what he is now, I will never forgive myself! While we discretely snoop around, I suggest we teach him Russian at least. You said he was your shoe polisher? That does not suggest a lot of education yet the guy seemed pretty well groomed to me.'

'You know, he is the most unusual shoe cleaner you can imagine. His fellows call him "The Academic" as he was always reading in between polishing shoes. My housekeeper started getting him an occasional cup of milk and a cookie last winter, when he first emerged at the corner, then he became my official shoe polisher,

run some errands like bringing packages here and there. He had finished only the first three grades. I managed to blackmail his father to let him continue his education as a private pupil. The drunkard told me that those were stupidities that I was putting in his son's head, but if I was willing to pay for them, it was my loss and he did not care. Now Riste is going through the school curriculum. He has no problem with his Bulgarian language and literature exams, Mitzi is helping him with math. I am doing whatever I can to speed the process of exams before his old man changes whatever is not pickled of his mind. Riste has brains, he should not be wasted. Whenever he is not following Mitzi outside, he is reading, reading, reading. I wish my students read half as much!

'Ah, lossif, I should have known you are two steps ahead as always! It will be my pleasure to teach him Russian whenever you can spare him, may be also some history if you don't mind, we will see after that. We have to think also where to get him out of here...'

'Wait, wait, wait, first we discuss a lengthy education program then you say we have to get him out of here.'

'My dear friend, you are too intelligent to not understand where Bulgaria is going. The people who can, are running away, or have already run away. Do you think that the communism comrade Dimitrov will establish will be better than the communism of the Soviets who taught him? People who forget are bound to suffer it again, say the wise books. May be for you and me it is too late, but we have to save the children. My lads are away and soon Vera is going to join them. Her passport is ready and she knows that if I drop dead tomorrow she is to leave the country on the day of my funeral with no more than she can carry herself.'

'But Vera is a minor!'

'Not on her passport.'

'Vassili, who will remain to fight them then, if we all flee?'

'Well, not everyone will flee. There are many people who will stay, decent people who by one reason or another do not want to or cannot leave. I am talking about myself. We were hardly accepted as immigrants here without the Soviets, do you think we stand any chance with them? There were already many arrests that I have heard of, manufactured accusations about the non-existent plots, spying, stuff like that. Mind you, there is still some liberty and hope left. What will be after that - I don't want to see it, lossif, I am rather old to flee and rather tired to fight.'

'Allow me to disagree, Vassili, about too tired to fight. Until we go six feet under, it is never too late to fight, and may be even that is not so much of a problem, if properly organized.'

The conversation hung in the air until Vera stood up and said in her best imitation of her mother's hostess manners, 'It will be my pleasure to serve your tea in the sitting room if you are ready for your glass of something stronger than wine!'

Laughingly, the two men stood and went to the adjoining room. They sat in the deep armchairs with a glass of port each and stirred away from the previous theme as if afraid that it might cut a reef between them. Vera brought the hot samovar and cups, sugar and jam and left them alone. Iossif and Vassili Nikolayevich drank their tea conversing over the book that Iossif had purchased and soon their laughter echoed in the dining room, where Vera sat alone at the table staring at the old photograph.

May be he should try the charm first, Iossif thought. He asked Riste to invite his mother to discuss his progress in both studies and cards and the young man promised to come with her the next morning. Mitzi was still unwell so when Riste left for the university, Iossif sat by himself in his sitting room. He took out the box with the set of forget-me-nots and took out every bit of jewel. Then he lifted the box. No, it was not heavy enough for a secret compartment, neither it rattled. He was about to put the second tier back at its place when he saw something that he had missed during the previous inspection. The bottom level was tightly set, but on the side of the hinges there was a barely noticeable corner of a ribbon like the ones used to lift the second tier. Iossif went to his study and returned with a magnifying glass and a small pack of fine instruments. The tiny corner was effortlessly pulled to reveal that it was in fact a loop that allowed the bottom velvet layer to be lifted. There laid a little envelope.

'Dear little angel M.,

I wish I could find a way for us to be together, but we both know that it is impossible as of yesterday. I love you more than the life itself but responsibility comes before what I love, as my life does not belong to me. I will always thank God for the comfort you bestowed upon me tonight. I hope you will rest assured that the love in your eyes will shine over my path forever, short or long, but bitter without you. When you wear these forget-me-nots while dancing I will always see the tears that you bravely swallowed to give me the most

unforgettable night. When you wake up, I will be gone, for what we have is too precious and too fragile to withstand the light of this day. I will remember you smiling. I dare hope that you will not forget me but will forgive me for what I will unwillingly do!

N.'

Iossif doubted that the letter had ever been read by the addressee. He was probably the first person to open it since the date it was written. His friend Vassili had been right in its calculations. Nine months before the birth of Mr. Naiden Vassilev was October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1894, and so was the date of the love note. That left two questions opened: Why would a French maid read Russian and how did Mr. Vassilev meet Riste's mother? At least one of the questions could be answered by the next day if the young lad's mom decided to open her heart. Then he would go to Vassili and find out what he knew about the maid.

It was very early in the morning when Riste arrived with his mother, but the professor was in his study and Martha had prepared a nice breakfast for all of them there. Iossif was oozing charm; he did tell his guest about her son's phenomenal success with the studies and exams and expressed his sincere hopes that nothing would prevent Riste from continuing until he passed everything. Mitzi had an early lecture and Riste kissed his mom goodbye to accompany Mrs. Spassova, who did her fair share to charm the older woman. When they were left alone, Iossif jokingly turned to the subject of playing cards and thanked Riste's mom that she had forbidden her son to play for money, as the boy was becoming pretty good. Her eyes turned cold again and Iossif asked why. At first, he thought she would refuse to tell him. There was a pause, she took a small handkerchief and pressed it to her face. Then the two steel daggers of her eyes nailed Iossif to his place.

"Professor, I know that you will not harm my boy. You are caring for him like his father did not. I am not talking about my husband and I am sure you have guessed it. Riste's father was a man who came to our village for lung treatment. I have dreamed for a while to run away from there, just grab the children and run away from my abusive husband and his even more abusive family. I thought I fell in love with Naiden. I am not quite sure it was love or I fell for the idea that he felt something for me and would help me escape. Maybe he did feel something, but he was playing cards, sometimes with my husband, sometimes with the other

men in the village, sometimes with the other patients. He left unexpectedly without a word and the same night my husband beat me to vent his frustration that the man had gone with a debt and no address to trace. Then for making up, he bedded me, which he had not done in months. So when I understood that I was pregnant, I prayed to God that the kid was his, not the fruit of my one slip of infidelity. The more Riste grows, the more it is evident that my prayers were not answered. When you mentioned that you wanted to teach him cards, it opened the wound again. I have never forgiven myself for the stupid mistake I made and I am paying my price. But I don't want Riste to slip into it. Please, now that you know why I was so much against, I hope you will understand.'

'I did not want to upset you and I appreciate your honesty. Riste is a special person and I am committed to do what is best for him. He helped saving my wife and I am extremely grateful for his assistance. Hopefully your husband will not get any ideas about his education, as I said Riste is progressing fairly well. We were planning a trip abroad and I would like to take him with us, do you think that his father will make a lot of objections? Riste will need also a baptismal certificate to get a passport...'

'I will do what I can with my husband, but it is not a lot, I don't have a voice there. Riste does not have a birth certificate, the village church burned before we left and all the books burned with it.'

'So we will have him baptized and get one here. Does he have any other documents?'

'No, we lost everything in the move.'

'That may be even to his advantage. I will see to it!' Iossif smiled at the woman. She looked like a faded water-color painting if not for the vivid blue of her eyes. Riste's mother had been disappointed one too many times, yet somewhere deep under the ashes there were the fire-breathing coals that warmed her battered soul. Iossif wondered how the well educated beautiful woman that she had been had ended up marrying the bully that her husband was. Fate could be cruel, he knew, he remembered his own mother who never uttered a word about her origin while breaking her back in an obscure village high in the mountains. If she had broken and married one of her suitors, she would be a likeness of the woman standing in front of him. He felt suddenly old and tired of many secrets, of the reality that defied the most intricate of fairytales. The professor made a mental note to ask Riste about his mother's side of the family, whatever he knew about.

The precious box was returned to the safe without the note, which was packed in Iossif's inside pocket. He had planned an early supper at Vassili Nikolayevich and Mitzi was coming with him. He left her some time to freshen up after the university and went to visit Lambri for a quick update about Dora; he did not want to use the phone. Nada was in her room, Maritsa informed him and led him to Lambri's study. The tall man was concentrated on a foliant and his grave face lit up when he saw his friend.

'Someone to save my aching back! I had lost count of the time! Where shall we sit?'

'Anywhere, I am on a short visit anyway, going to overindulge at Vassili. How is Dora?'

Lambri carefully closed the door before answering.

'Not as well as I would like. Boris is concerned that her kidneys are giving up but it is too late to operate. He is afraid that we may lose the baby or her or most probably both at that point. Nada does not know though, I hope you know what to do and that Mitzi will not know if possible. I know how close the two of them are and if Dora decides to tell her, it is her choice, but I would like to keep Nada in the dark as long as possible. We cannot do anything anyway, just pray, and we do it anyway.'

'Do you think that if we send her out of the country someone may do something? Through Bourgas, or on land, I will provide documents.'

'No, Elka and Boris are adamant that she cannot travel either way, she will not survive the blasted road there to start with. I appreciate it, Iossif, but our hands are tied behind our backs! And she wants the baby so much!'

'How about if we bring a doctor to her?'

'Boris is planning to be there for the birth, he will take a month off, but that means a lot of people will go to the good Lord if he is not here. She will not trust anyone else, we cannot get just any doctor and drag him or her to Brashlyan and keep him there for three months. Everything is in God's hands! You know, I regret so much that I did not insist that she go to Switzerland or Vienna, or anywhere but here, where it is so easy to put two and two together and trace the baby back to Todor. What if the mite is a copy of his father just like Todor had been so much alike his dad? Who will protect them if we could not save the father? I am a goner, it is a question of time when they will snatch me, Vesselin has four exams to pass and then he will be able to help her, I hope I will have time to do that at least!'

Iossif was looking at his longtime friend and Mitzi's phrase swam in his heart "If I can save one soul for the one I lost, all the stains will be worth it!" May be it will be worth the try?

'Lambri, what if Dora gives the baby for adoption?'

'Don't you even dare to suggest it!' Lambri interrupted him vehemently. Iossif lifted his hand.

"Wait! Listen to me for a second! I don't mean to give it away, but to let Mitzi and me adopt the mite formally! Dora will be the godmother and will be integral part of the baby's life. She and Mitzi live in each other pockets all the time, it will not make anyone suspicious. But formally the child will be Spassov or Spassova, nobody will know about where the little one came from. We will go to visit Dora and will "find" the baby at a church, at a monastery, at a hospital, wherever! As soon as the baby and Dora can travel, I will whisk them to Switzerland or France or somewhere close on the grounds that Mitzi is frantic not to lose the little one as our own one. Dora will come with us to recuperate and help as a godmother, then there is the summer break and by the fall all will be clear. We will fake the date on the birth certificate, will write as late as we can and hide the little one until everyone forgets. Lambri, this is a way out, may be not ideal one, but better than Dora coming here with a baby in her arms nine months after Todor's death and the kid being daddy's copy. You are right, there are many people who can make fast calculations and put two and two together. No matter how good you hide them, they will come out one day and it will be more and more dangerous. Please, think about it! I am almost sure that I can talk Mitzi into it. Together we can save the mite and Dora if God says so! Lambri, talk to her, talk to Nada, it is a way out! Even if I die, they will still be protected by my name, Mitzi can adopt even alone, she will have the means - and she is out of suspicion as everyone knows what happened to her. Please, think about it!'

Lambri was thunderstruck. That was a solution, but his heart bled - his first grandchild would have neither the name of his father, nor that of his mother, but of a stranger. No, of a man who genuinely cared. Iossif. Spassov. If God had entrusted his son to another Iossif and that man had cared for the child until he had been ready to become His Father's son, Dora should be able to do it for the sake of the little one. Iossif was right, nobody would pay much attention to a young Spassov but a young Mihailov without a father's name in his certificate was a target even for the name alone. Their first concern should be to save the little one; the name could be straightened when the situation got normal again.

'It is generous beyond belief, lossif! I will be talking to Konstantin next week; he will go to Sozopol and call from there!'

'Are you sure it is wise to talk about it over the phone, they are under surveillance! Wait, I will take Mitzi to the seaside for few days in Bourgas and we will get to Brashlyan to see Dora, which will be logical! And it is better if she gets it from us if not from you directly!'

Lambri sighed, he was afraid to get to Brashlyan himself as it might give some people ideas to go there as well. Nada was not well either and the road was not easy even in summer. Vesselin was reading for his final exams and it was imperative to pass them with honors, and if not that, there would be a follow-up on him. Mitzi was a free agent, lossif due to his age was considered harmless, he did not have a tail for sure. Lambri hoped Dora would think about it and see that it was for the baby's safety. He should write her a letter and give it to Mitzi, he told lossif. The old man looked away, then back to his host.

'I know that you are republican but think, even Queen Ioanna gripped at the first chance to save Simeon and Maria Louisa, no, not the king and the princess, but her boy and girl, and she was right to run! Look what happened in Russia, those were people of no mercy, not even the children were spared! Although Vassili insists that the Tsarevitch and one of the girls escaped...'

'No, nobody escapes the bastards, if they killed the parents why would they let a child alive? It is so sad, the entire life of that man was devoted to his country and that is what he got as a thank you note! I still remember him entering his balcony at Mariinski Theater at that time usually with his cousins, rarely with the Empress, but that was only to be expected.'

'Why was to be expected?' lossif belatedly remembered that his friend had graduated from Saint Petersburg University in 1902. That was it, he knew the gossips and was not Russian!

'Why, but she was his wife and what wife would go to watch the woman who had once held the heart of her husband and was probably holding it forever? Malya Kshesinskaya, the ballet prima, the one and only love of her Nicky, no matter what the historians wrote about his happy family life with Alix! Of course, he was too much of a decent man to humiliate the Empress with her, but Malya was still calling him "Nicky" instead of "Your Imperial Majesty" and she danced in her own costumes with her own jewels that were not less expensive than the imperial ones! She had been devastated after he married Alexandra Fyodorovna a week after his father's death, moreover there was the year of state mourning and there were no dances. So she



went to France, but came back after even more dazzling, married one of the Emperor's cousins and the entire Piter was discussing whether her son was the son of her husband, or of her father-in-law, as the boy was a spitting image of the older prince. Why, she escaped after the revolution and as far as I have heard - back to France and has a dance school there. But these are old gossips; you can ask Vassili if it was so. He might remember, even if he is a Muscovite.'

Vera had outdone herself and the table was regal even by the most demanding standards. She was thunderstruck by the age of Mrs. Spassova, who she expected to be slightly younger than Iossif. Living in her isolated world, she had not heard a word about the scandal and was looking at the young woman warily. Was it possible that the gorgeous socialite was holding a spell on her young page? Vera compared her pale blond hair in a simple braid and her blue eyes void of any make-up to the stylish black mane and periwinkle expertly made eyes of the guest. The long hours of solitude were not in vain - Vera had learned to read the subtle signs of the body language. No, despite being charming and attentive to her father, the woman was mesmerized by only one man - her husband. Few men were lucky to be understood by their spouses and even fewer were loved to such distraction. Vera's parents were one of these lucky couples and she knew the signs. But Iossif thought of her as a child and treated her as a child and it was right, albeit sad. Yet they made a perfect pair.

'Verushka, will you bring me the photo we are discussing to show it to Mitzi?' her father seemed to be repeating his request and Vera jumped, blinking sheepishly to be caught daydreaming. She brought the photo of the young Tsarevich and gave it to Mitzi. The young woman covered her mouth to stop the surprised cry.

'That is what I had in mind. But I see my friend Iossif is smiling secretly, that tells me you have something up the sleeve.'

'No, not up the sleeve this time. I have something in my pocket. It came from Mitzi's wedding present box. I found that the bottom level could be lifted and voilà, this note came and I am sure I was the first to read it ever.' Iossif took out the love note and gave it to Vassili. The old merchant pumped his fist in the air.

'I was right about the date, I was right! Now who was the maid with initial "M" who was a little angel?'

'Well, tonight I visited Lambri and as you know he graduated in Saint Peterburg but he said you should remember her even being a Muscovite!' the tease in Iossif's voice was undisguised.

'Sure I remember every French maid in Piter, which was all I had to do. Spit it, Iossif!'

'No, not that low, not a maid and not French. A Mariinski ballet prima with unpronounceable name!'

'Matilda Kshesinskaya! Of course! But when? No, wait, yes, the mourning and she went to Monte Carlo, I saw her there. It was a mourning year and there was nothing to do in Moscow at that time, so I went with Mom to the Riviera for few months at the end. It was one of her few performances and everyone was complaining that she had lost her form from not performing or rehearsing. The public was expecting her to be getting better for the season. Damn, black curly hair, dark eyes, short! She fits like a glove! That Naiden was so much like her!'

'It is getting better - Riste's mom mentioned that she met some Naiden around the time Riste was born but he run away without her due to a card debt to her husband and half the village. So I bow before you - you were right, Vassili, it all made sense. Now the question is what we are going to do with him...'

'Well, he needs to learn Russian, that is for sure. I am going to teach him myself and he can practice with you, me and Vera. I hope you will continue to arrange his exams...'

'Vassili, I was thinking about something else that you mentioned last time. He does not have a passport; he does not have any documents in fact. Everything burned down together with the village church when they fled. I told his mother that we may baptize him again and get him a proper set of documents. He is tall, looks older than his age. We can easily put another two years on the certificate and get him a passport. Let it be ready in the drawer. You know how difficult it is to get passports now and it will be increasingly more so, better have it done.'

'You are right, we will do that. You are going to be a godfather?'

'Mitzi will be a godmother, it can be explained easily as he saved her life.'

'This Tuesday?'

'You are not wasting time! Mitzi, we can do it at home in the morning, I will arrange for the exarch to come. Or better not, it is too high profile, we may get the priest of the Russian Church, what do you think, Vassili?'

'No, the guy changed recently, I don't trust him. Find someone else who will not ask much questions.'

'Fine, I will arrange it and will let you know. Next, the lessons. How often do you like him to come?'

'As often as you can spear him. Mitzi, it is up to you, in fact.'

'How about if we announce that it is me taking lessons in Russian iconography from you - everyone in Sofia knows by now that I am not seeing the light of the day without Riste as a shadow. And while you teach him Russian, Verushka may be so kind to teach me how to prepare this delicious cake, what was the name, "Charlemagne"?''

'Napoleon!' Vera burst laughing. She liked Mrs. Spassova more and more. And she would get to see Riste also. And cook. And her daddy had not seemed that vigorous since her brothers left to cross the ocean. She liked that very much.