

New Look Dangers

It would be risky, but Iossif's gut feeling was that it would be well worth it. He had played a casual poker with Kimon and had dared him to bet an invitation to the government ball for the Liberation Day. As it did not cost him a thing, Kimon had not even paid much attention how he lost. He sent the VIP card with relish - the professor had become a hermit since his marriage and bringing him back to public eye should be considered social obligation. The ball would be sumptuous; the new rulers needed their pomp as much as the old ones. Iossif was a continuity piece, as long as he was around. The professor had promised to bring his wife also despite her recent brush with death.

She was coming down the stairs dressed in the best New Look the money could buy. Despite the opulence of the black dress, Iossif evaluated it for what it really was - a battle fatigue. The black glossy sheet that was hugging Mitzi's impossibly slim and graceful lines was muffled by the overlay of finest shimmering organza in delicate pleats. It left one of her shoulders bare and coalesced into a giant ribbon on her waist, secured by the red garnet brooch that matched the stoked flames in her necklace and earrings. Mitzi was pale and that made the contrast between her skin and jet black curls flowing down her straight spine even more pronounced. Her expertly made face had its accents - the eyeliner framed her blue eyes and her lips were a darker shade of red to match the garnets, same as her nail polish which she had forfeited since their wedding.

'War paint! Does it mean that there will be blood all over the floor before the evening is over, my dear?'

'I will do my best to please, my lord!' Mitzi lifted her chin.

Iossif smiled then looked at her serious, 'Mitzi, I want you to know that whatever you decide to do, I will back you up, no matter how outrageous it might be. If you want to carve his heart I will provide a knife!'

'No, he will not go away that easily, although I might be tempted. I appreciate it though!'

They were fashionably late for everyone in the ballroom to see their entry - and they were indeed a remarkable couple, Kimon had to acknowledge. Iossif was tall and his black suit was tailored to show to his best advantage the youthful figure the octogenarian professor sported. Few had doubts that the child that his wife had lost had been his and even fewer had doubts that one day or another the culprit would be found and punished accordingly. Mitzi was the dream of every man in the room as well as the nightmare of every woman around - willowy in flattering black with few outrageously expensive red accents and her signature high heels that helped the young lady hold her ground next to her towering husband. Iossif had possessively tucked her hand in his and was working the hall with the ease of a shark circling a gang of careless swimmers. That was the first official function for the new Mrs. Spassova if one did not count the stifled academic dinner on December 8th, and one had to admit, she had a style different from the Miss Altinova Sofia knew before. Behind her now stayed the wealth of her husband and his influence far exceeding the academic circles. Kimon looked after them when they approached the conductor and Iossif exchanged few words with the man. He finished the tune his orchestra was carrying and said something to their delight as Kimon could see few exchanging amused glances.

The baton was fluently lifted and few light bars trailed and gathered momentum. "An der schönen blauen Donau" started and emptied the dancing floor as most of the guests present were not taught the elaborate steps of the waltz. Iossif formally led his wife to the center of the floor, bowed and she curtsied to him. Their dance was a repetition of their wedding waltz, Kimon thought, same graceful, effortless flow getting faster and faster with each bar without them to mix a step or get out of beat. The tempo slowed and then got fast again and they glided as if the time had stopped. No other pair dared to get onto the vast expanse of polished parquet and even the casual conversations slowed down and eventually died while the couple was smiling into each other eyes. After the final accords the spectators burst in applause and yells 'More, more!' Iossif looked at Mitzi who was not even winded and smiled mischievously. He led her to the conductor again and muttered something that made Mitzi laugh. The couple went back center stage and bowed and curtsied once more. A new waltz was flowing out when the door opened and the chief of the secret services Mikhail Tashev entered followed by his ever present bodyguards.

Iossif saw the man first and whispered in Mitzi's ear, 'Smile broadly, my dear, he is up for a show!'

The professor led her for a fiery slow, seductively intimate version of the classic dance. Few matrons spilled a tear or two. More than few men gnashed their teeth or got a hiss from their better halves to damn close their gaping mouths right that second. Tashev's lips thinned into a bloodless line and he asked to nobody in particular, 'What is this music, by the way?'

'Why, "Viennese Blood"', an old dame next to him sighed, 'a real love song!'

The closing bars left the dancing couple standing right in front of him. He had no time to retreat.

'Not bad for an old mummy like me, what would you say, Colonel?' Iossif tilted his head.

'One could almost forget that you are not a dance instructor, Professor!' some smart aleck chimed from the crowd.

'You never know when rusty skills will come handy, young man, you never know. But we are here to celebrate a great victory and I hope now that we have ceased to occupy the dance floor, more people will enjoy the modern stuff. How about a glass of champagne, my dear?' Iossif turned to Mitzi. She made a small *moue* and tucked her hand through his.

'Anytime, but then we may think of going for a round, will we?'

'Of course darling!'

Tashev was livid, the little bitch was flouncing her ancient husband to spite him. He could see how the crowd parted to make them space to pass and it reminded him of his boss. The Black Cardinal had been invited to Sofia's ball and he had half promised to attend with his wife. There was bound to be someone to murmur in his ear about Mitzi, now that she had stolen the show with that dirty dance trick. The professor did not look quite as old as he was; he had swollen one of his marble columns or what. Mikhail had to make sure that they would be out of there before Tanas' arrival. The boss had not been happy with him recently - Tashev had missed few night raids and few people who should have not slid away had managed to get out of the country. His hand did not want to heal stubbornly, the cursed wound would open again and again and he thought that he should probably see a doctor and have it stitched. Mikhail hoped that the slim bandage he wore would hold for the evening if he evaded the handshakes. He started circling around to find his prey.

Sometimes his height was distinct advantage, Iossif smiled in his mustache, as he was able to follow the moves of the red-clad colonel without much efforts. The circles were getting closer as the time trickled by. The old man had heard the rumors that the big shot from Varna was coming. Tashev would probably try to get them out before his arrival as Mitzi was bound to draw attention of any hot-blooded male, single, married, widower. Iossif was contemplating what would be the best action - meet the boss himself and ask for help in the "investigation" about the killer's attempt on his wife and unborn child, or something more dramatic. He looked at Mitzi and saw her patting her bow and the garnet brooch that was fixing it. His eyes widened, she had thought it over!

'Is tango what we will be waiting for?' he murmured in her ear.

'Absolutely, the longer the better!' Mitzi felt how a great deal of tension left her shoulders. It was going to be fine; Iossif was there for her as he had promised. She smiled at him and he unhurriedly led her closer to the dance floor.

It was exactly as he had planned, Tashev thought, she would be close enough to be snatched for a short dance and he would make sure that she would leave fast enough after that. The orchestra started on a popular tango bars and he stood next to the black-clad couple.

'I hope you will permit to steal your lovely wife for a dance, Professor!'

'But of course, young man, of course, as long as you take care of her!'

'Beyond any doubt, Professor!' Tashev was surprised that Mitzi did not make a scene but considered it his lucky day.

They slid into the dancing crowd and he hissed for only her to hear, 'Nice black, what is it, mourning for the bastard that will not be born?'

'There is one bastard here, but if he thinks that he is winning he better think twice. And keep your filthy hand off my bow!'

'Vain as ever. Where shall I put my right hand for it to be to your liking?'

'Your sweaty palm will leave a spot; put it on the brooch at least!'

'Better now?' Tashev adjusted his palm right on top of it and pressed.

'Not much, but at least my dress will not need to go to the cleaners before the end of the night. I thought you could dance at least tango better, no twirls, nothing.'

'How can you be so shallow? And all in front of your husband, he should be mortified!'

'You invited me, didn't you?' Mitzi did an unexpected twist and his bandage flew away ripped by the prongs of her brooch.

'Stupid cow! You could have warned me!' Tashev felt his temper rising, but could not let her in the middle of the dancing, they would draw a crowd.

'You could have warned me also, could you not? You are a killer, Mikhail, and your end will be the one of the killers!'

'You are threatening me?'

'I am letting you know. There is nothing that I need from you, absolutely nothing, and you are not worth even to be killed, or otherwise there would have been someone to do it by now. Death is not reason why someone will not come back to claim you, even our child you killed! Thank you for the dance, by the way!'

The orchestra had paused and the dancers were returning to the tables. Tashev led Mitzi to the place where Iossif was making a group of people double with laughter. The old man looked at Mitzi and his hand flew to his heart.

'Almighty God, are you injured? Colonel, what happened, this is blood on her dress! Mitzi, are you all right? Are you injured? Call a doctor!'

The group around looked in horror at Mitzi's bow. Just around the garnet brooch drops of blood were gliding down the cloth like nightmarish morning dew in the garden of Death. The drops looked like they were emanating from the brooch itself, as if the giant flower was pinned into the flesh hidden under the black sheath.

Iossif glared at the man. 'You are supposed to take care of our security and you cannot take care of my wife in the middle of a dance floor! What happened?' his voice was overpowering the spirited debates around.

'No, no, it is not what you think, I cut my hand few days ago and the bandage probably fell.' Tashev was brick red.

'Let me see!' the professor's voice boomed. He snatched Tashev's hand and sighed. 'Really bad cut, you should take care of it! I apologize, but with what happened to Mitzi not so long ago, I am understandably

beyond myself with worry about her. Mitzi, my dear, this new fashion is a killer, look what your dress did to the Colonel!’

Mitzi had a fleeting glance at the cross-like wound and swayed. Iossif tossed Tashev’s hand and steadied her.

‘We are going home, my dear, that is it, too many emotions for you today! Let us pass please, my wife needs fresh air! Let us pass, gentlemen!’

The coach which rattled Mitzi and Iossif home passed by another one coming from the train station. For a second the eyes of the two men in the carriages met. Iossif had a ephemeral feeling that he had seen the man before, no, not the picture, but the life man, long long ago, like almost in another life. But of course, it was only a feeling; the face of the Black Cardinal had never been a secret. If the Fate had a sense of humor and he was sure the lady had one, Mr. Tanassov would know about the incident with the bloody hand pretty soon. It was well worth a dress cleaning, he chuckled to Mitzi.

Professor Spassov’s prediction came true. Few minutes into Tanas’ visit several people who were not exactly enamored with Colonel Tashev managed to express their outrage at his behavior although he had not technically done much more than dance with his former fiancée who had ditched him for a much older guy. Out of their combined comments Tanas was not interested in more than one detail - the cut on his protégé’s hand. His feeling was not easy about it, he had not been informed about any on the job incident in recent past that would leave a serious wound. That left the explanation of a squabble - highly unlikely, given the fact that Tashev was getting increasingly paranoid and never went anywhere without his hounds, or a domestic problem - also unlikely, as he had no family to speak of. The police director had to see that wound, he just had to. Tanas left his wife with some musicians she knew and went on a search for Mikhail.

The Chief of security services was having passionate discussion with two army officers. Tanas emerged at the right position to shake hands with the military men first, then offered his hand to Tashev.

‘I am sorry, I cut my hand few days ago and my bandage flew out after too much dancing!’ there was a napkin pressed in the man’s palm.

'May be it is a no-nonsense wound then, let me see!' Tanas grabbed Mikhail's hand with lightning speed and pulled the makeshift compress. 'You should go to a doctor to stitch it, it is serious. You are lucky it is not infected, but you should take care of it as soon as possible, like tomorrow!'

It was a common knowledge how fastidious Tanas was about cleanliness and he hoped his comment would be taken for an expression of it. But he knew what he had seen. Someone had marked his security chief with the same sign that Tane had shown him in that foggy November night in Varna. "Carrion, not even worth killing", the bodyguard had said through his clenched teeth. Someone had gone to the extreme risk to do that. And that someone had had enough reason not to kill Tashev, who had been in the man's mercy. That meant several things - first, the security around the security boss was lax; second, he had been caught unprepared; and third, he had done something beyond the despicable to warrant the mark. Tanas had no need for dead man walking in his ranks. The only thing he wanted to know was what exactly had been the crime that had pushed a man to mark Tashev as dead. If it was a revenge for a man or woman killed, the marksman would have killed him, evidently he had had very close access. But he had let him walk around. There should have been a motive for that. Tanas' guards were invisible in the crowd. He asked Tashev, 'My guys are new to Sofia; can I borrow someone of yours to show them the local stuff for few minutes? I see Tane, I know him.'

'Of course, it is safe here; I should not have brought them probably!' Tashev signaled the man to approach and repeated Tanas' request.

Tane was well aware that there was no such thing as unprepared guards around Tanas, so the Cardinal wanted information personally. The bodyguard had seen the napkin scene and knew that the big boss had recognized the mark. The two of them stopped in a small vestibule next to the kitchen and faced each other.

'Tane, who put the cross on him?' Tanas cut directly.

'I don't know, I came in the morning and it had been during the night shift. He claims he cut his hand on a water glass that broke.'

What happened out of the ordinary in the days before that?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary on the job, all was as it was planned.'

'But?' Tanas had heard the hesitation in the man's voice.

'Few days before his former girlfriend who jilted him to marry an ancient professor was left beaten blue in front of her home. She lost the baby some rumored was the boss's one.' Tane was looking straight into the dark orbs of the older man. He saw the tide of revulsion in them and knew that Mikhail Tashev had danced his final dance.

'Did she file a complaint?'

'She was half in the grave herself but pulled out, although the doctors say she will not have children anymore. She was the one that he was dancing with when he lost the bandage tonight.'

'I see. Tane, what do you think about moving to Varna around, let say, end of the summer? I would like you to be closer to me and further from here. I will arrange it if you agree.'

'Yes, I will come.'

It was despicable crime, the marksman was right. Children should not answer for their fathers, Tanas thought with shudder, as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in his face. Killing a political rival was nothing new, but beating a pregnant woman half to death was other thing. She had not filed a complaint which meant she knew who the attacker was and that she would get no justice. Yet someone had executed it for her - and in a way few knew. Tanas had heard the splash Mitzi's wedding had made, gossips traveled fast intercity also, but was under the impression that her husband was in his late eighties which precluded climbing windows at night. Art history professors did not do that even in their thirties, he mused, respectively Mitzi's husband was a well connected art professor. And what if the child had actually been his, what would Tanas do in his shoes? Kill the bastard and be done with him? Or let him rot alive? The man had probably paid more for letting him walk around for everyone to see his mark first; it was far more dangerous to allow for Tashev to recognize his attacker. But it had been almost three weeks and Tashev had not as much as peeped about the "water glass incident". He was scared about it and that explained his absence from the night raids that had gone wrong.

Tanas recalled the comments about the incident with blood-splattered dress. He was not a man to believe in coincidences - it had been premeditated on her part. If the woman had that much guts to get out of her deathbed after losing a child to come and dance with the entire idea of making waves around, she was one special lady. Tanas had never met her, but the reports were putting her as exquisitely beautiful and clever.

That meant that Tashev was also a stupid man to let her slip in the first place and twice more such as not letting go with certain decorum when his loss was evident. Tanas had no need for stupid men in his ranks either, although the clever ones were getting scarce. He looked at the silent bodyguard and smiled politely, 'It was very enlightening to talk about accommodation security in Sofia, Tane, especially the central hotels. Thank you!'

The green eyes flashed with that odd sense of understanding that Tanas had seen in them back in November. He had been a solitary figure his entire life until he had met the green-eyed Euterpe in the ball room, but whatever was concerning his business, he continued not to bring home to her. He had fought his battles alone and kept the credit for the victories and failures entirely his own. For a first time he had seen the power of a network as elusive as it was secure, as secretive as it was merciless, as effective as it was concealed. There were degrees of separation between a knife-wielding peasant who paid someone's tax to the Death's ship owner and a dandy university professor, who could be his great-grandfather, but they were linked intrinsically and for both of them the system worked, its victim not even aware of it. Tanas unexpectedly wanted to be a part of those links, to stop being the lonely wolf, but strict to himself as he had ever been, he realized that he would not fit in that silent law beyond the law where the rules were human yet beyond the understanding of the general crowd. Maybe it was for good as few people could withstand its requirements to the soul, if they had one, and human soul should not be stretched beyond its limits. Some things were better seen from aside or never seen at all. Tanas nodded at the bodyguard to go.

Tane shook his black curls and a strained smile crept over his lips. His net had caught the big fish and he should be careful if he wanted to save the small ones around. He lightly touched his ancient knife and felt the tangy smell of a sea breeze. An illusion, he knew, but a pleasant one nevertheless. He should start packing.