

## Orient Express

Orient Express was everything it was rumored to be - opulent, classy, plush and carpets, satin wood and sparkling glass, the attention of the personnel subtle and efficient. Mitzi was shown to her own compartment next to Iossif's one. Her luggage was already there. The professor suggested they meet at the restaurant at six, and she gladly accepted the reprieve. They needed to talk, since his out-of-the-blue marriage proposal they had not exchanged a word in private. For the first time since she had accepted to be his wife, Mitzi had few minutes alone. She closed her eyes and her memory played like a film at a frightening cadence the last week - the growing certainty that a precise afternoon had resulted in a child, the confrontation with Mikhail, the anguish before the attempt to talk to her parents, the pain of their adamant repudiation as if she was worth nothing in their eyes, the instinctive flight to Dora's home where she had always felt safe and loved, the proposal and its acceptance, the hasty trousseau and the wedding outfit creation, the fairytale wedding and the classy reception, the boarding of the famous train. It did not seem real; it was the stuff of the glamorous movies and sentimental novels. Mitzi opened her eyes and looked at the rose on her finger and the wedding band next to it. The stamen glinted, as if winking at her. The young woman thought that she amazingly had faced the music already, thinking of her bridal waltz. She had felt so secure in Iossif's arms, so protected from the events and elements, as never before. May be Dora's blind trust in the man was contagious like influenza? Mitzi pressed her palm to her flat tummy and whispered to the life inside 'Whatever happens, you will have a decent name and if we are both lucky - a loving father for a while. I hope we will be lucky and I promise you I will do whatever takes to make it happen...'

When Mitzi entered the restaurant clad in her most modest dark blue dress still wearing the pearls that he had given her before the wedding, her spine straight, her jet-black hair in a simple roll low on her nape, Iossif stood up and smiled at her. She was so different physically from Anna, her robust health and future motherhood shimmering like an aura around her. The same spirit though was there, he could recognize the purpose in her stride, the squaring of her shoulders, the angle of her chin. Mitzi was a soldier, and he had

chosen well. She needed reassurance, a space to spread her wings, but she had them and she would fly and he grew more and more determined to help her.

Mitzi took the seat opposite from him and smiled, 'It is as beautiful as the gossips about it. Is the food as good?'

Iossif glided his hand over the table cloth, 'Last time I tried it it certainly was. Do you like anything in particular?'

'After the boarding house, I think I can eat a crocodile unpeeled, but honestly I hope the chef here does not stoke on crocodiles.'

'Rest assured, I have not seen reptiles on the menu. Mitzi, there are so many things we don't know about each other. How about starting getting acquainted? You are in disadvantage, I admit, as I have lived rather long, as your father reminded me yesterday.'

'I am sorry!' Mitzi's eyes filled, 'It is not fair to you to get all these on my behalf...'

'Well, don't even worry about that, my skin is much tougher than it looks. Let me first clear some points, but even before I do that, would you like to tell this gentleman standing next to us what is your preference for the meal or you will rely on my choice?'

'Your choice,' Mitzi swallowed, trying to bat back the tears. She was not surprised by her father's eruption, but if his presence at the wedding were any indication, things had been patched up. Or may be not, if one counted her mother's resentful glares during the ceremony and the lunch, and her father's stubborn insistence to look at anything but his daughter. It should not have hurt so much, but it did.

'You will get over it, child,' Iossif offered as if he had read her mind. As it was still early for dinner according to the code of the train, they were almost alone in the restaurant car, a trio of happy-looking noisy German burgers occupying a table at the opposite end. Then Iossif sighed and decided to plunge ahead.

'Mitzi, are you up for a serious talk or you are tired and we should postpone it?'

'If you do not mind, I would rather get it over with!'

'My thought exactly! First, about your parents - I do not intent to socialize with them unless you would like so, and even then I will refrain as much as I can. You will not need their financial support and I frankly doubt they will offer much on the side of the moral encouragement. Still, it remains your choice. Just to be sure

that you are aware of all the facts, it was not me who persuaded your parents to come to the wedding, but the presence of Kimon, who had sent them flowers.' Iossif caught Mitzi's eyes and the disbelief in them, so he shook his head 'Yes, my dear, I asked him to do that and then your father called me to discuss it. I am afraid it was not exactly a cordial chat.

Next on the list: I hope you will not be offended, but as a British queen said: "If they open my heart, they will find one name there." It is not Calais in mine, it is Anna, my first wife. We had few precious years together and unfortunately she died at childbirth. Some people say it was long ago, but for me it is like yesterday. I have never thought of replacing her and I don't think of it now. Here!'

Iossif reached his handkerchief out towards Mitzi and when she looked at him in surprise, blotted the tears from her cheeks. She did not know she was crying, and she did not know who she was crying for.

'I was serious to offer you to become my widow though - according to Boris, I have up to six months to live or less. As I told Lambri, I am not happy with the people who I originally designated to manage my legacy. I prefer to leave it in your hands rather than it being torn to pieces and mangled at the process. The reasonable question "Why me?" is almost written over you, I can see it. Because I am used to trust my gut feeling about people. First, I hope you will hold grudge towards Mr. Tashev long enough to fight his world that is coming to rule. I may be old, but I can see it, and I don't like how it is going. Second, as my wife, you will inherit everything and nobody could touch my estate without going into a serious trouble himself. Oh, yes, there will be vultures, but I have made provisions for that. Tomorrow we will sit down and I will give you the details, but the overall idea is that you will control everything that I own after my death and you and the little one will be provided for life. Who knows, I may live even long enough to meet the little fella. But that does not matter much to the financial part of the marriage, nor to the point that the child will have my name. *Pater is est quem nuptiae demonstrant*, after today there will be no one to dispute who you are married to. As soon as we return, I will announce that we are expecting and do my best to quell all the gossips as long as I am around. I am afraid after that you are on your own until you find a decent man to love and cherish. You are young, child, and I would like after I am gone you to continue with your life, not to be a poster widow. There is no need to do that. I have no family; respectively there will be no gossiping aunts and no surly sisters. Hopefully you will develop also a thick skin and immunity to gossips, the money will cover most of the remaining troubles. And I will be really glad if you return to university, to finish the semester. I will

arrange about the absence up to now, and as a private student after the baby is born. You have potential and mind is a terrible thing to waste, I hope Lambri will help you with the arrangements after that.'

Sometime during his speech Mitzi had stopped crying. She was sitting across the table in a concentration bordering to reverence, hardly breathing. Her blue eyes had turned into smoldering pyres and Iossif marveled their intense beauty. The young woman was undoubtedly handsome, but the soul was the spark that illuminated her features. She would be an ally who never let her partners down, but she would be an equally dangerous adversary. The old man suddenly felt sorry for Tashev. He was a fool, an arrant fool to have been in her good graces and to have lost that. It was irrevocable, and not because of their marriage - Mitzi was like a mountain river in spring, she would force her way if needed but would not return. "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned,"- that might have been a cliché but held its truth none the less. Iossif decided to opt for the safety for the moment and pointed at their rapidly cooling meal 'We do not want to offend the chef, do we?'

The splendid statue across the table blinked, then her lips formed the word "no" and she instantly had her fork and knife ready for an attack on the innocent fillet. Iossif's eyes filled with joy - it was a journey he would thoroughly enjoy even if it proved to be his last. He silently prayed for a little time to be able to transfer to her several memories, few thoughts and if lucky - some experience. He realized that Anna had unwillingly taken with her the enjoyment of sharing with a like mind. Not the intellectual debate, but the actual sharing of a thought or feeling so intimate that they would disintegrate in a public space, not the pillow talk, but that sudden revelation that came in a moment close to eternity. It was not even the thought that should be shared, more the state of mind, the unity of souls. Mitzi's father had a point - Iossif was old enough to be her grandfather. But the souls had no age and the body was just a vessel. Sometimes the two came in unison, but sometimes they did not and it did not prevent the union anyway. It was different and had its own rewards and pitfalls, like the lack of time. Iossif did not care - he was living on a borrowed time anyway and Anna would be waiting for him on the other side, whenever it would be. Yet before that he had a mission to accomplish, a foundation to strengthen and a fortress to equip. That called for strength and the best start was a perfectly roasted lamb chops meal with a nice company and solid sleep after. He raised his fork and smiled.

Istanbul at eight in the morning was very busy city. The carriage was caught in the traffic of horse carts, carriages of various sizes and fashions, luxury cars, street peddlers pushing grocery stalls, shop assistants carrying trays with small tea or coffee cups to the nearby stores, pedestrians of all ages, a kaleidoscope of European suits and Oriental robes, fleetingly mixing together. After a good night sleep, the world was a better place. The couple dropped their luggage at Buyuk Londra and left immediately for a breakfast at the shore of Bosphorus. On Taxim Square the sun shone but next to the water few patches of fog were still lingering, lazily swept away by the omnipresent breeze. The carriage deposited them in front of a famous cafe with marble terrace overlooking the strait bustling with small and big boats and already noisy from the ship men's constant shouting. The waiter in his black suit welcomed them like long lost relatives and his enthusiasm was genuine and infectious. As Iossif had communicated their destinations to the carriage drivers only by the names of the places, Mitzi was prepared to translate for her husband only to be surprised by the fluency of his Turkish. He had never mention it during the lectures, nor she had heard about it from her colleagues at the university. On a second thought, she could hear some archaic words interspersing his sentences and wondered whether it was a deliberate trick to impress the waiter, or those were the remnants of an old memory about the language picked at another time. Of course, it should have been at another time, she reprimanded herself, but there was so much that was mystery in the man across the table. Iossif smiled indulgent and asked whether she had a sweet tooth. A whole jaw of them, she assured him, as anyone who had spent some time in Istanbul. Anything in particular? Everything in particular, as long as it was sweet and there was nothing on the menu that was not, she could bet on that. Honesty should have its rewards, Iossif said, and ordered for her a selection of everything the cafe had on the menu, under the ecstatic comments of the waiter, who had already served their coffees and tall glasses of cold water. Would madam like some sugar in her orange juice? Mitzi batted her lashes and smiled at the man 'Thank you, I will try to do with what is on my plate!' but waited until he departed until she added, 'I think I will have enough to turn the Mediterranean Sea sweet with the remaining one after, anyway.'

She was even more amazing than he had predicted, Iossif thought. How had he missed that vitality, that incandescent humor at his lectures? Granted, his classes were elephantine, he was immensely popular and gathered crowds of all kind of people, but he should have been able to spot it somehow. He remembered her wiping the blackboard one day, when the old cleaner who was in charge had been absent. Iossif had

come earlier to do it himself only to find her washing the cloth in a bucket of cold water. The young lady was clearing the remnants of the previous professor's scrolls with military precision in stark contrast with the flowing rusty copper dress that she had been wearing. He should have paid attention - she had been the only one to come to the rescue of two old guys, as she had probably seen him and the cleaner. He remembered her parents and a cloud passed over his face. The pair of snobs had no idea who she was and were not at least interested to find out. Did she have any siblings? None had shown at the wedding in tow of the parents, nor she had mentioned any. He was sure that she was the only child and yet the Altinovs had thrown her away like water they had their floor washed with. Iossif silently thanked Anna for that dream that had disturbed him in the veridical morning four days ago to the point of a bleeding nose. If not for that, he would not have shown at Lambri's home asking for ice and would have missed the chance to do something right. His guarding angel, she was always on his shoulder and that could explain his long years on the Earth. Now she would care for two and soon for three if he was still around when the baby came. But before he joined her, he would spoil Mitzi rotten, for the children and the grandchildren he and Anna never had, bound her to their legacy with all means possible, teasing her student's natural curiosity to extend far beyond the confining frame her family had imposed, teaching her everything that she would like to learn.

At that moment, Mitzi speared another morsel of her bird's nest roll. Her hand passed through a ray of sunshine which had found its way through the last wisps of the fog. The rose caught it and shot fire around. Like in his dream. Iossif put down his cup of coffee. No, not everything, there were things better remaining unsaid, not a lot, but they were distraught, painful ones and the future mother could do without their darkness. They had happened so long ago and the people who knew about them were almost all dead now. He was the last link and the memory should join him in the grave. Iossif looked at the sky as if searching for the hawk of his dream. The bird was nowhere to be seen. Anyway, better start the spoiling faster. He looked at the young woman chewing with gusto the last morsel. 'How about planning our sightseeing? Nothing too taxing, I believe...'

'You do not feel well?' Mitzi was instantly alarmed.

'Not me, my dear, between the two of us, you are the one who carries a baby, so we should pace it around you.'

'Oh, but I am healthy as a horse and I have to walk all that I have just eaten, so whatever is good for you is good for me.'

'Would you like to visit your school?'

'It would be marvelous! I never thought I would be able to see it again.'

'Do you prefer to go alone?'

The young woman looked wounded and lossif hated that he had asked the question so tactlessly. 'Let me rephrase it - do you think that it will be easier to gossip with the nuns if I am not present?'

'No, I am here with you and unless you have something to do that does not involve me, I would rather go with you.' She smiled bravely 'I want to show off a husband!'

'Deal! I do have some personal business to attend, but I will come with you to the college. How about we leave it for tomorrow and roam today Saint Sofia instead?'

'With greatest pleasure!' her eyes lit back and that made lossif a much happier man.

They roamed, lossif assuming his teaching stance and pointing at details, telling tales of the times forgotten, fascinating his young wife with his knowledge, but never stooping down to only the mere historical facts. The mosque that she had seen so many times during her college days was a new experience, from the ancient worshipping at the same place to the Christianity to Islam, ever evolving and never growing old, a painful reminder of the passage of time while defying it. Mitzi was enchanted again, like the first time she had stood under the enormous dome years ago. Yet it was different, it was an experience shared, she could sense that lossif was enjoying it also and was glad about it. A street photographer approached them and offered to snap a photo of them both in front of the mosque promising that it would be delivered to their hotel. They posed, lossif's arm around her shoulder and smiled until the photographer released them. According to the distant ring of church bells, it was midday. It was time for lunch and his afternoon nap, lossif announced. Should Mitzi feel comfortable to go shopping, he could arrange for a hotel servant to go with her. Mitzi looked so surprised at the offer that lossif laughed, 'It was not an indecent proposal, you know! Young ladies are known to go shopping from time to time - as far as the rumors go, they were supposed to do it all the time.'

'Are the young ladies allowed to refuse to do that?' she quipped.

'And do what instead?'

'Write some postcards? If you like, I may do yours also if you give me the addresses.'

'Thank you for offering it. It is a good idea. You can sign for both of us a polite note to every professor of the university that you remember, except the group around my esteemed colleague Professor Velev, I am not known to socialize with them. And if you leave me a line under your notes to Mihailovs and Boris, I will write two words myself.'

The cards were all written after lunch and Mitzi had time to catch few winks herself. The dinner was scheduled for seven and she had arranged her red dress to be pressed by the hotel cleaning service. Her room was one of the few with balconies overlooking the square and the fabulous panorama beyond, so after she woke up she sat at the balcony for few minutes. Several of her classmates lived in Istanbul, but for some unknown reason the young woman did not want to contact them. It was her honeymoon and no matter how sudden or odd it was, she wanted no other memories to dilute lossif's presence. And what a presence it was! When he was talking, Mitzi was losing her perception of time. Events from thousands of years ago were unfolding before her like she was their contemporary, the present becoming an illusion. Oh, sure Istanbul had no age itself, it was like its famous wall, an ancient column, a piece of freeze, a capitel here, a mosaic there, all interspersed among the bricks that have seen fire and water. She remembered a door on the wall that she had seen, the door actually opening into nothing, as it was somewhere good ten yards above the ground. There was no trace of a balcony past or present, there were no windows next to it, but its solid structure and polished black handle somehow suggested that it had been in use. Was the ground retreating from the door or the door was steadily climbing up the wall up into the sky? She would never know. Its loneliness was so beautiful and so hopeless... May be she should ask the professor, he would know.

lossif made few phone calls and was obviously satisfied with the results, as he was humming some old tune when he descended to the bar to wait for Mitzi. Buyuk Londra was a fashionable place and there were few empty tables. He decided to sit at the bar and ordered his sparkling water. Few minutes later he did not need to turn to know who had entered. The sudden hush in the conversations made him aware of Mitzi's presence. When he did turn, he grinned with that ancient male pride saying : "That is my girl!" since the time

when a young lady had entered a cave clad in lion's hide to the watchful gaze of her father. The young lady at the door was not exactly wrapped in the skin of a dead animal, but she was ravishing none the less. Her slender figure was draped in dramatic scarlet, same color as her flat pillbox hat, but her shoes and the huge bow emphasizing her thin waist were glossy black like her hair held in a low pony tail. The young woman did not wear any jewelry. The reflected sparks in the eyes of the entire male population of the bar could illuminate the street outside. Mitzi however seemed completely oblivious to the attention bestowed on her. The young woman's eyes were fixed on him with something in their depths which Iossif deciphered to his utter amazement as silent request for approval. A tidal wave of hatred swept through him - for the person who had crushed her spirit to the point that she would be insecure when the envy of every person in the room was palpable and with good reason. After a split second he schooled his features into the most encouraging smile he could master and stood up to meet her half way. He gallantly kissed her hand under the scowls of the men and relieved sighs of the women and tried to sound as casual as possible 'Mitzi, I have to abduct you immediately! I am not so young to fight a horde of gentlemen who would like to pay you their respect more closely and their wives who would gladly tear you in small pieces with their bare manicured hands. Let us head out of here while they are in awe!' He offered her his arm and she snickered and took it. The look of gratitude in her eyes was still tearing in his mind while he helped her step in the carriage that was driving them to one of the talk of the town sea food restaurants at the other end of the city.

The food was superb, the wine excellent and even Mitzi enjoyed her two spoonful's of it. The conversation was light, turning around some of the architectural marvels they have seen together earlier, then skipping over some school anecdotes, then to the plans for the week. It was somewhat unusual for the professor to be a center of such concentrated attention, although he understood that he had less to do with it than his lovely companion. Her attention was shared between him and the food before them, her healthy appetite at odds with her lissome frame. Looking at her, he found where all the food went - Mitzi was positively radiant, she was like a generator of pure energy, an aura of goodness around her, unperturbed by the glances cast by occupants of the nearby tables. While she was devouring her white fish under mayonnaise, he discretely had a quick look around the restaurant. The public was sophisticated, evidently wealthy, dressed in the latest fashion. If not for the lilting tones of the Turkish language around, they could have been sitting at the

Riviera or in London. The one difference that came to his mind was that the jewels of the ladies were more opulent compared to London or Monaco, exception made for the Russian emigrants there and the remaining fabulous pieces that they wore. Mitzi was a contrast from that wave; she did not wear a single adornment apart from her engagement ring and wedding band. Iossif came to the conclusion that she probably did not have anything of real value to match them and made a note to himself. It was Istanbul, the best place to hunt for something exclusive and he was positive he knew the right place. His properties at the Turkish capital were generating steady income and he could afford to be exclusive, more than that, they were invited the next evening to dine with the family of his agent. That meant early start, so he looked pointedly at the maître d'hôtel, and he hurried with the list of desserts towards them.

The trip to the college where Mitzi and Dora had graduated was pleasant but relatively short. The teachers had fond memories of both young women and would have loved to gossip but they also had classes to teach and were politely brief. If anyone had any questions about the age difference between Mitzi and her handsome husband, they were too perfectly groomed to show it in any way. Some of them had their secret doubts that the tireless prankster Miss Altinova might have been pulling wool over their eyes, although Iossif's reputation made it less likely. They sent their best wishes to Dora and upon hearing that she had caught Mitzi's bridal bouquet, expressed their hopes that she would choose the same route for a honeymoon and visit them soon. The school routine was quickly restored.

'Nobody will believe that we had been here if we don't go shopping!' insisted Iossif, while the carriage was gliding towards the Grand Bazaar.

'But we sent postcards!'

'But we are expected to bring presents! Rahat loukum, koss halva, blue beads, you know!'

Mitzi could not prevent the bubbles of laughter from escaping from her throat. 'Rahat loukum I understand, I will try not to eat all the koss halva on the trip back, but why do we need blue beads is beyond me! None of the people I know has a horse to decorate....'

'Blue beads are not for horses, they are for protecting the bearer from evil eyes as you are well aware!'

The young woman grew somber. She remembered Dora and her parents' haunted look that had hardly left their faces recently, the occasional stench from Mikhail's clothes when he was coming to pick her up directly from work, Boris' face that was growing longer and longer from lack of sleep, the proclamations in the newspapers about traitors and the new order. There were not enough beads in Istanbul for everyone even if they took every blue speckle of glass that was adorning the horses in the city also. She sighed.

Shopaholics did not need to die to go to Heaven - for them it would be enough to move to the Grand Bazaar and never leave its covered streets. Cobblestones were polished by centuries of merchants, servants and buyers meandering its lanes. It had its own grocery shops, its security, its restaurants and thousands of shops for every whim and budget, where a man could spend as little as few small coins for the blue glass charms sold per weight to as much as hundred thousand pounds on old diamonds. Rare medieval books were reverently opened on their velvet covers, priceless rugs were decorating the walls of rug shops or rolled out before the connoisseurs. The copper was throwing reddish glow from the grapes of coffee pots to the tiny hammered coffee cups on the round copper trays carried by from shop to shop by assistants while the owners were sitting and discussing everyday matters like time had no importance at all. May be it did not have in Istanbul, at least not within the perimeter of Grand Bazaar.

When they passed by the fourth place selling blue beads without stopping, Mitzi understood that lossif had something else to shop for, as he was leading her directly to the heart of the covered trade city. The old part of the Grand Bazaar was much quieter place as the casual shoppers were much less here. Occasional tourist may wander in it by mistake and spend hours gazing at the treasures in the shop displays. Countless generations of merchants had been accumulating thousands and thousands of artifacts of mind-blowing value, even if one counted only the sheer weight of the precious metals and stones alone. But these were not mere piles of gold and silver, these were jewels that had belonged to kings and queens, gifts of foreign merchants to their wealthy patrons in one of the mightiest cities of all times, adornments of Arabian horses and their fiery riders, sparkles of a gratitude or guilty conscience, love tokens to beautiful women and offerings to dangerous gods, toys fit for princes and dolls resembling princesses themselves, boxes of rare woods hiding in their locked compartments secrets of far away lands, palimpsests where the wisdom of the

newer eras was trying to supersede the wisdom of the times long gone by, chalices engraved with names that no living soul could remember, cut crystal vials still holding few drops of unknown liquids that may be a panacea or poison. If Scheherazade was asked to recall the story of every object there in even few short sentences, the thousand and one nights would be but a humble beginning. Mitzi thanked her lucky stars that she had put her most comfortable flat shoes for the journey as she could hardly follow Iossif in his determined gait. She slipped on a cobblestone and almost lost her balance, but Iossif swiftly steadied her and did not let off her elbow until they reached their destination.

The shop they entered occupied a relatively small space and its front was as dusty as the next one. The owner who greeted them was as ancient as the shop itself or at least gave that impression. His assistant, a young lad around sixteen, brought for the guests two ebony chairs with intricate mother-of-pearl inlays which looked remotely medieval and probably were. The owner joined them and a big copper tray emerged from thin air with three cups of steaming coffee and three glasses of ice water. The one before Mitzi contained a spoon with a white soft sugar candy wrapped around it. As it was customary, Iossif and the merchant started a leisure discussion about the weather completely ignoring the young woman. She was not offended as these were traditions built in centuries and the passage of few emancipated generations had not made a dent in them. Mitzi did not show that she understood their conversation but she also doubted that the merchant would be interested to know such details. He was concentrated solely on Iossif. The conversation was flowing around the growing difficulty to obtain decent merchandise for selective clients, the complains that the present day jewelers were incompetent slobs, the stone dealers were cutting throats with their exorbitant prices, the war had damaged the connections that were established since the grandfather of the grandfather of the present merchant was sailing to Venice and Rabat in search for the unique. To the uninformed observer, the talk seemed to be getting nowhere, but Mitzi was aware that it was like a prologue to the actual discussion, like an overture to a ballet, and the steps were as elaborate and set up as the famous pa's. The noise of the bazaar was somewhat muffled by the thick stone walls around the old chapter and she would have loved to wander around like in the old times when she and Dora were coming to look for hours and create stories about an object that had caught their attention. Dora was at home hundreds of miles away though and she was here with the professor who she still could not make herself call husband.

The young woman carefully peeled off her gloves to take her cup of coffee, as otherwise the merchant would be offended by what would be considered refusal of his hospitality. Even in the dimmed light of the Old Bazaar her wedding ring glittered and she smiled at it, thus missing the shot of flames in their host's eyes. The professor missed neither that nor the sudden flare of the merchant's nostrils, the instant strengthening of his spine - the old man had somehow recognized the ring. His curiosity was zinging in the air around. But how was it possible, the ring had been in lossif's safe for over fifty years and his father had told him it was bought for his mother before he was born... The ring was undeniably beautiful and unique, but the merchant had been dealing with beautiful unique pieces for over sixty years and one more jewel would hardly make him that agitated.

There could not be two such rings, the merchant was sure of that. And the drawing in his father's books together with the tiny note on the side was describing exactly the jewel on the young lady's finger. Yusuf had been his customer for ages but he did not know who the young woman with him was. He remembered that Yusuf was a widower and had never mentioned children, but that did not mean that he had not had any. The beauty across could be his granddaughter. If the wedding band next to the ring was to be trusted, she was married woman, so what was she doing in Istanbul with her grandfather instead of with her husband? May be lossif was bequeathing his local properties to her and she had come to learn more about it, on the road grandpa making a turn to treat her to an expensive trinket. He had not introduced her when they came, but it was never too late. The old man looked at his client and nodded.

'I seem to have forgotten the name of the flower that adorns your journey...'

'I seem to have failed to introduce to you my wife Mrs. Maria Spassova - oh, and by the way, she does speak Turkish fairly well.'

'May Allah bless you with thousand years and as many children, Yusuf, but you should have said something about it! How inconsiderate of me, I should be allowed to make amends for not offering my best wishes sooner. So is this a honeymoon trip? How nice to have chosen our city for it! Congratulations, Mrs. Spassova!'

Mitzi thanked him politely and was surprised at his request to have a look at her wedding ring. As lossif nodded in confirmation, she assumed that the jewelry merchant was interested in it as a part of his trade.

She extended her hand to him and he put his magnifying glass before his eye to have a closer look. A minute went on in silence before the old man pulled away, the faded blue of his eyes alight. He turned to Iossif and said 'It is highly unusual but I would have sworn that this ring was sold to a gentleman called Rushdu Bey some eighty years ago by my father, Allah grant him mercy. Up to his last day my father regretted selling it to him, but when he tried to talk about it, Rushdu Bey got uncommonly upset and refused to discuss it at all. My dad tried several times and even if they were friends, he never succeeded to learn what happened to the ring. How come that it ended up with you?'

Iossif's face was void of all expressions. 'Rushdu Bey gave it to me long ago.'

The silence that followed told the merchant that he had failed where his father had not succeeded either. He sighed, 'Dad was right then, the ring did mean a plea for a silence and I see it is respected beyond expectations. Dear madam, I wish you all the blessings that it carries - you know, of course, that the dew represents fertility and spiritual life, far from me to be the last one to confirm it. Ah, but as you already have that, what shall your humble servant be able to help you with this time, Yusuf?' If the merchant had seen that the color had drained from Mrs. Spassova's face, he did not show a slightest indication of it.

Iossif mused, 'How about something that represents the dark fire of a beautiful woman and something that says as eloquent as you can "wind in your sails"?''

The merchant smoothed his beard. He could see the enchanted eyes of the young wife before him and he was old enough to understand the farewell of a wish for a wind in her sails. Fortunately or unfortunately, she knew about it also and was not happy, he guessed, looking at her distraught face, yet she loved her husband and was doing her best to put a brave facade. Nobody could trick Yusuf though, the old man thought, and not for the lack of trying. He had seen too many tricks in his long life and pulled some important ones himself. Yusuf looked remarkably like an old portrait of Rushdu Bey, or might be merchant's imagination was paying him tricks now that he knew to whom the ring had gone from the bey's hands. He better stop speculating and start looking for that dark fire, the day was growing old also. The old man lifted a hand and his assistant immediately approached.

The number of discarded boxes grew higher and higher. Several times they had to stop the perusal for the assistant to clear up the table of the jewels that Iossif did not find to his liking. He had set aside just one box,

containing a set of Bohemian garnet necklace with matching earrings and a brooch, but had sniffed at the lack of bracelets to match. The assistant was getting hot under the collar; it had been an eternity since he was bringing packages that had not been opened for years. His fingers were getting black from the fine dust that was covering some of them and he was looking for a break to go and wash his hands. The afternoon prayer time was fast approaching, and he thought that they would have somehow to tell that to the customer.

The customer did not need a reminder about the time but he still was not happy with the choices offered. Beyond any doubt, the jewels were magnificent, but they were not fitting for what he had in mind. May be it was already taxing for Mitzi to sit so long, they could always come the next day. He shifted and at that moment the merchant's face lit up:

'Ahmed, my boy,' he called his assistant, 'go to Dzhah Bey and if he is not with customers, ask him to bring the autumn apples, he knows what it is.'

'Autumn apples?' inquired Iossif, puzzled.

'No, they are not real apples, you will see. Why, oh why did I not think about them earlier! It would have saved us so much grief in order for you to enjoy a tour around our fabulous city instead of looking through dusty stuff with an old man! It is such a lovely day outside and you are stuffed here with me and my old stones...'

Dzhah Bey was not with customers and came personally with Ahmed to bring the requested fare. He greeted elaborately his colleague and his guests then took his time to open the little package that he held. On the velvet cloth that it was previously wrapped in laid a necklace. The word incomparable was suitable to describe it, as it was one of a kind in a particular way. The necklace was made of several coral segments of the perfect scarlet, cut and polished to resemble real tree branches held together by intricate gold chains of only few links each, so the effect was of one continuous branch, unevenly curved. At several of the protruding smaller branches there were golden apple leaves attached. A closer inspection revealed that the leaves were not made of gold, but of translucent enamel which colors varied from greenish gold to copper orange. From the three central segments hung three matching yellow pearls the size of small cherries,

stubbornly accurate in their apple roles, up to the dents at their bottoms. Two slightly bigger enamel leaves earrings completed the jewel.

Creating the necklace would have been a task of Herculean proportions, as the yellow pearls were rare enough to come upon and even harder to match. A lazy smile spread over Iossif's face - after stealing the golden apples, Hercules was sent to overpower Cerberus and it was his last task. Very well, he thought, before that they had a bargain to strike. At the end he bought both the garnets and the autumn apples under the dramatic vows of the two merchants that he was getting them almost for free and his equally dramatic claims that he would be a pauper if he kept buying their fare after so many years. That was a ritual as old as the Old Bazaar and even older, both parties enjoying it immensely and perfectly well aware that he would pay a fair price and they would profit from the deals. Customers with such pockets were becoming scarce in the years after the war, but a customer who could excel and revel in the art of bargaining, was priceless. Mitzi was fascinated as she had never had such powers to bargain, nor she had had the money to do it. To her astonishment, with every round the old men seemed to have stricken another year of their ages, their gestures more expressive, their voices more convincingly clear. Time measurement was an impossible chore in Istanbul...

The week slipped by far faster than it should have been. Sunday afternoon Mitzi and Iossif were sitting in the comfort of the Orient Express lounge again. The rhythm of the car's wheels was reflecting in the circles of the half-full glass of cognac on the polished mahogany table. The conversation was part memories of the people they had met, part discussions over places they had visited, but even the occasional pauses felt good. The groom and the bride had established a rapport that could not be explained, but was there to last. Mitzi felt more at ease at asking questions and Iossif joked that she should lift her hand only in class, otherwise a simple clearing of throat would be sufficient. He had found an inquisitive mind behind the beautiful exterior and was pleased that he could transfer knowledge with such an ease. She was like a parched land grateful for few drops of rain to be able to flourish. The nature had blessed her with an easy pregnancy, her condition not bothering her at all, no morning sickness, no headaches. He hoped for her sake it would continue like that as the professor in him was already calculating how to arrange schedules for

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her to take extra credits before the baby was due. He was influential enough to pull strings at the university and could tutor her privately on few of the subjects. For the rest he was sure he would find an understanding among the professors and more than one assistant eager to work extra. He thought about hiring a nanny, may be Martha could recommend someone, there was still time for that. First he had to talk to Boris to recommend a good doctor for the follow up and the birth, a man who would be discreet about dates and ran a decent birthplace. The schedule on Monday was heavy, but he could slip and have a lunch with him. No, the first day was bound to be full to the brim with speculative glances and indecent jokes, he better stay within the walls of Alma Mater and fight. He was looking forward to it.