

## Night Visits

The good doctor ambled heavily through the servants' door and looked wearily at the four of them gathered in the small kitchen.

'They will finish with him tonight, that is confirmed. They will wait for Tanas to come from Varna and enjoy, but not later than midnight. There will be no time for the Americans to do a thing, not with the Russians wanting his head on a plate...'

The silence that met his words was not unexpected. They all knew it was coming and the hope has been dying drop by drop, so apart from the sign of the cross that Nada made, nobody moved.

'Look, I managed to arrange something. The director of the prison, my father saved him during the Great War... He was at the hospital yesterday, brought one of the inmates... He said that it would be risky, but he would give one of us an hour to talk to Todor undisturbed. He is held in the chamber next to the gallows, there is practically nobody else there, and the killers are not going to come before half past eleven, all are expected to show up at the Liberation Day party. So the director is willing to let someone slip in and talk to Todor. Mucii, may be you can pretend you do not feel well at the party and get away to him?'

'NO!'

Everyone turned to Dora at the vehemence of her voice. She was pale apart from the two bright red spots on her cheeks, but her determined gaze could have carved stones. She looked at her father and said, 'It is too risky for you, Dad, they are not stupid and can put two and two together fast. And you know that they will follow you anyway, so it will be a wasted effort and a dangerous one for the gentleman who offered. It is too late to talk politics now anyway. I will go, nobody knows me.'

Her father held her gaze for a second, trying to read something in the depths of her hazel eyes, then he looked at his wife, into the same hazel eyes as their firstborn. These were easier to read, decades of practice and trust making the difference. He saw the love, the fear, the despair and the grim determination that his daughter refused to reveal. That reeled him back thirty-four years to a small army chapel where, then barely younger than their daughter now, Nada had said "I do!" few minutes before he boarded the train

to the front lines, not knowing whether he would ever see her again. There was the big wedding after the war, of course, the pomp and the generals and the escort, the phaetons and the flower girls, but the sacred words were then and there and he never forgot the expression of his bride's eyes. He could still see her, trembling in her uniform, still brand new, pristine white apron, not yet a spot from the mud, soot and blood that would surround them the next months on it, her only decoration a meticulously embroidered red cross. He shut his eyes to hold on to the image one second longer. When he opened them, he looked again at Dora and asked calmly, 'What will you need?'

Dora turned to Boris, 'May I borrow your old satchel and a nurse's uniform, please!'

It was four in the morning; in another half an hour the town would start moving.

At the same time, at his cell Todor was trying to find which position his tortured body could assume to hurt less. Sleep was elusive and he understood that there was not much time left. The hope that the Western Allies would make a dramatic move was so small that it was not worth even hoping. He tried to concentrate on the good things - he had had a full life, enjoyed whatever pleasure he could come upon, fought for the good cause. He refused to dwell on his failure to recognize the bad guys and that he had briefly associated with them. He had signed the law that made his own torture possible. That was his redemption, apart from the imminent death that was knocking at his door, so to speak. He had few regrets as he had been expecting it, nobody lived forever, he just wished he would live long enough see his people awakening and shrugging the cloak that was slowly but surely suffocating the country. He thought about the people who had fought before him, he thought about his father, killed on the street for what he had believed in, about his brother, who was also gunned down much younger than Todor was now, few hundred meters away from the place their father had fallen a decade earlier. He thought about the people who have fought together with him, about the unexpected allies and the unsuspected traitors, why there were so many traitors in the nation's history, he mused. Brother against brother, son against father. Bloodshed, all the time, since the beginning of the history that he knew of, twelve hundred fifty years ago. Yet somehow the nation managed to survive, only to start the deathly cycle again, and again, and again. So he prayed the new revival to be soon, that was the only prayer that he said. He did not need anything for himself anymore. The prayer eased the pain enough to lull him into a dream that was so clear, so beautiful, so full of hope.

Dora's sleep was short and undisturbed by dreams. She woke up refreshed and organized, as she had always been, her logic skills kicking into gear almost by themselves. She wore the fashionable heavily netted pillow hat which she detested, but went well with her non-decrypt blue college uniform and white silk blouse for her trip to the posh department store in the center. The vendeuses were doing their best to advertise the fine quality of the white shirt she bought, the two of them beyond themselves how it was the very latest London cut, how long it would last with proper care, etc., etc.,. They packed the garment in softly whispering tissue and she smiled her thanks. Dora came back home, forced down some light lunch and went to draw a long hot bath. The white tiles laid in intricate pattern always made her smile, her father had insisted that he had bowed to the zeal of the decorator to create "A real Roman atmosphere, Mr. Mihailov, you of all people should be able to appreciate it, classic education and style, I would say!". She draped herself in a white sheet like a toga and carefully peeked whether her brother had not stuck in the middle of the staircase reading something. Dora went straight to her mother's bedroom and knocked softly at the heavy dark door.

Nada had been ill for a long time, the Great War wound that never healed properly did not exactly stopped her when she was younger, but slowed her considerably after the birth of Vesselin. She had taken it in stride, but the years had taken their toll, especially the highs and lows of the war raging around the world until recently and the fratricide burning the scarred nation at present. Nada came from the mold of generations of tough women who had followed their men through the short periods of hard toil and the long periods of turmoil, bearing children on the road and burying their husbands sometimes before their very children were even born. The mountains they came from were harsh even in summer, an occasional snow staying there until August or sometimes later, only to be buried under the new one in mid-September. The life of the city did little to alter her lifestyle from the old homeland, she was usually up before dawn, although she did not have cattle to care for. One would have thought that being the only girl would elicit some pampering from her parents or her four much elder brothers, but although they loved her deeply, she was expected to pull her own part and she did. The same was expected from her when she married and she never questioned its wisdom - Nada felt immensely lucky that she was allowed to marry the man she loved.

The old customs died hard and she could have been a pawn in a game of alliances, but her mother has stood her ground and her father grudgingly agreed that Mr. Mihailov came from an old stock and was worth a second thought. Nada smiled at the memory and sighed. Her father's heart would have been ripped apart had he lived to see all his sacrifices blown again in the white water of the last coup-d'état. Then she heard the knock on the door and tried to pull herself up in the bed. 'Come in!' she said with as much strength as she could muster and as little wheeze as possible.

Her daughter entered, an ebullient smile on her full lips. She propped the big pillow behind her mother, then sat on the edge of her parents' carved bed. Nada returned the smile, thinking how beautiful Dora was, tall and graceful, her statuesque frame wrapped in the damp sheet like an ancient goddess. Her wheat blond hair was hidden in a turban of white fluffy cotton towel which let the perfect classic features of her face become even more prominent. Being avidly into all kind of sports, Dora seldom wore makeup, but her impossibly long eyelashes and perfectly arched brows were the envy of her college classmates. She had something of her father's pirate looks though, Nada mused, and it was becoming more and more pronounced as she matured. Every parent could have been easily proud with the good-natured, well behaved, studious child she had been. But Nada sensed something else in her, Dora was not a child anymore, there was that unbendable stubborn streak of her ancestors who was holding her spine straight at the moment, not her highly sophisticated and dreadfully expensive education at the Swiss finishing school.

Dora gave her mother few seconds to catch her breath and then softly asked, 'Mom, where do you keep my white shirt?'

Nada stifled a gasp. All Dora's clothes were in her room, so there was no mistake what she was asking for. The fine shirt that Nada had herself embroidered before Dora was even conceived was the shirt her daughter was baptized in. That shirt was to be worn twice more - on Dora's wedding day and at her funeral. Or once, if the second came before the first. Nada knew that Dora's visit to the prison that night was not a walk in the park, but never the enormity of a danger had hit her so abruptly. The only thing that made her hurt more was that Dora evidently had grasped the concept before her and had accepted it. She looked into her daughter's eyes and saw the flames that her father could not have deciphered in the wee hours of the

morning. Being a woman, Nada immediately understood their meaning. The dice was thrown and she had to accept the fate. She lightly touched her daughter's hand and said, 'Will you help me to get up, my dear!'

The older woman kept a firm grip on Dora's hand and slowly approached the dresser at the far wall, then even slower bended and opened the lowest drawer. As everything in the house, it was immaculately arranged and all the blood drained from the face of the young woman at the look of its contents. Neatly folded, there were four sets of clothes. There was a suit, shirt and tie, obviously her father's by the small etiquette with his name on the shirt, hand sewn, a trade mark of one of the finest tailor's boutiques in town, who had been taking care of all his clothing since high school. Trying at all cost to keep down the wave of rising bile, Dora guessed that the packages behind contained underwear and shoes. Next to them, wrapped in almost translucent gauze, laid a dark-blue woolen dress with a simple white lace collar and what most probably were lace cuffs. Nada was accomplished lace maker, she had picked up the art of pillow lace while touring Europe as a young wife and Dora has spent countless hours listening to the soft click-click-click of the bobbins. A pocket size cotton bag with gaily polka-dot print held lavender to ward off the moths. One more package, unmistakably pumps, and then one more, which Dora recognized as her mother's cosmetic pouch. Nada had not traveled in ages and judging by the soft fold, the contents were most probably underwear and stocking. Next to it, gingerly packed in a rice paper was Dora's shirt. Her brother's one was the final package, wrapped in the same rice paper, but held together with a narrow light blue ribbon.

'As you see, we are all ready...' wheezed Nada and took out Dora's package, then smoothly closed the drawer. She leveraged herself on Dora's arm again and smiled at her daughter. 'Now, do you need something else from here or we will get downstairs?'

Dora swallowed nervously and led her mother back to the bed.

'I will just dress, Mom, give me a minute, will you?'

'Put something practical, my dear!' said her mother, still smiling but looking much older than the woman Dora had kissed goodbye an year ago. One year...

Ten minutes later they sat at both ends of the kitchen table. The room would have been pretty silent if not for the incessant good-nature gossip flowing out of Maritsa, the little maid who was preparing the early dinner. She was talking about everything exciting that she had got from the milkman, the lady who came to sell eggs and fresh vegetables, the young guy who was polishing shoes at the corner, her sister the seamstress, with whose family she lived not far away, everyone who would talk. Soon they were well aware of which lady would wear what gown for that night ball, who had ordered something dramatic and who had just redone an old favorite, which were the most flattering tendencies of the season and who was going to be glamorous. Due to the leg wound, Nada had long stopped attending such galas, organized either by the Parliament, or the university where Lambri was teaching or his party, and only her status of a Great War veteran had saved him from the smirks of the public. She did not miss the balls a beat, but had nothing against Maritsa's indulgence into their seemingly fantasy world. Dora had not been yet of appropriate age to accompany her father before the finishing school, so she did not go either. She smiled at Maritsa who was beating the tomato soup into a smooth concoction while waxing, 'But only imagine, Miss Dora, oh, all the officers, you know, today they will put all the medals they have, and the orders with the sashes, their best uniforms, the daggers, the new boots, whoever has bought new boots, that is it, as Riste told me he had waxed not less than three pairs of really old ones as well, but he might be exaggerating, as if their orderlies will let him wax the boots for such a parade, not with his dripping nose, but his nose seems better after the summer, have you noticed, of course you have not, Mrs. Mihailova, you do not go out often enough, you should do more tea-parties, then you could have told me that Miss Mitzi will go with that national guard colonel; that she is engaged to and that is why she is ordering a gold lamé dress, as she originally thought to go in red, but it will not look good with his uniform, you know how hard is to match red and red...'

Nada smiled again at the hardship of matching red with red and shook her head. There was not a force in the Universe that could stop Maritsa in her element. Where had the timid young girl, almost a child, who had come three years ago to her home, gone? She motioned to Dora to pass her an egg and a small bowl, forming words with her lips without actually pronouncing a sound. They have perfected the game of silent speaking as it was unthinkable to disturb Lambri or Vesselin during their studies and now enjoyed it thoroughly.

Lulled by Maritsa's clear young voice, Dora was not paying attention to what Nada was doing across the table laden with all kind of staples. She was making a small loaf bread, not even bread, but a fist-sized round scone, and decorating it with impossibly small intricately waved pieces of dough. She has almost finished with the first one and kneaded some more, then put them on a iron sheet to raise. Maritsa protested that she could run to the bakery faster than Mrs. Mihailova could say "scone" and be back, but Nada reassured her that the bakery definitely was closed for the holiday, everyone thinking of the fireworks ahead. The mere crack of the word got Maritza's full attention, and she gushed how she was going to go with her sister and her sister's husband and young son to see them from the park. The maid asked Dora whether she planned to attend, long given hope that her Mistress would be persuaded to leave the house for so long for something Nada would consider frivolous. Dora smiled and pointed that as Dad was going first to the state dinner and then to the ball, she should be making Mom a company. The maid dramatically smacked her tomato-speckled plump little hand to her forehead in a genuine gesture of remorse and squeaked looking at the clock on the wall. Mr. Mihailov needed to have his supper before he had to go for the state banquet, who knew what horrible menu was prepared there, not with the former chef of the court vanishing from the face of the Earth after the last one and nobody really replacing him. Mr. Mihailov should be home by six after the university. Maritza hastily started putting boxes and bottles back in the cupboards, as Lambri was known for his pedantic views of the order, not that he had ever needed to enforce them. The respect bordering to worship that the little maid held for him was far more effective. In few minutes the kitchen was as orderly as a pharmacy on Monday morning and Maritza was setting the table for the three of them.

Nada stood up with the help of her now ever present cane and checked the scones. She went to her husband's study and withdrew a heavy-looking book. The old woman opened it to reveal a small box hidden in the carved-out volume. She took a drop of frankincense from it, then carefully replaced the box in its hiding place, put the volume back on the shelf and returned to the kitchen. Nada lifted the tiny pebble-like centerpiece of the decorated scone and pressed the drop securely into it, before putting it back. She brushed the beaten egg yolk and honey mixture over the scones and put them into the oven. Fifteen

minutes later Nada took them out perfectly baked, the tops the color of an ancient amber, and took the decorated scone on a plate with her upstairs.

It was almost seven when Lambri finally arrived, looking haggard. He gave his briefcase to Maritza, who hurried to deposit it in his study, and sighed. Then he straightened, changed his shoes for his slippers and entered the dining room to greet his family. Nada, Dora and Vesselin were sitting around table, their dishes pristine clear, the cutlery intact. They all had turned to the door before he entered, but Nada was the first to get a full view of him and she rose immediately, gripping her heavy carved chair for balance. Lambri crossed the few feet to her and silently embraced her, seeking comfort of her presence, one that had shared his life so long that they did not need the words to communicate something so important. Nada had learnt long ago not to ask questions. If he would volunteer, she would listen, if she was asked to comment, she would. But she never pushed, as she knew that he had already been living at the edge when they had met, and a human soul could not be stretched thinner than it would hold. She held him while he composed himself again, until he straightened his tall frame, breathed her name in her hair, and then let go. Lambri greeted their respectfully standing children and excused himself to wash his hands. They did not sit until he came back and then all of them sat together and waited for him to break the silence. Maritza peeked behind the kitchen door, but caught the wave of her mistress's head and retreated.

'I talked to everybody, there is no one who could do a thing, they say. Dora, are you sure you want to go?'

'Don't worry about me, Dad, please! Boris had arranged everything. I will be home probably before you.'

'I just want you to know that whatever you decide, you have my blessing, child! Do you need something?'

'Yes, Dad, would you mind opening one of the bottles that you keep in you liquor cabinet? Some red wine from the old homeland will be nice, please, Dad!'

His daughter's request caught Lambri off guard. She rarely drank, if ever, usually only the heated wine at Christmas and the occasional glass of bubbly at a birthday party. The red wine did not exactly match the salad and the light autumn supper that he expected. He was missing something, he knew it, but he was so bone tired. Fragments of conversations were colliding in his head, faces were flashing like a mad movie at a high speed. He needed some quiet time to get to the bottom of the problem, but he was already short of time, the gala was at eight and he was expected. No, he was summoned, he thought, he was like a clown in

a circus, the arena still brightly lit, but the paint already peeling from the support beams and the rain already pouring through the shredded tent. He lightly frowned and said, 'Who else would like a glass?'

'I don't want to drink now, I just asked you to open it, Dad, I may need some later.'

Lambri nodded ever slightly and raised his voice towards the kitchen, 'Maritsa, are you going to feed us, child, or you plan to starve me to a skeleton? Bring the fare or I will be late!'

While Maritza was busy serving the tomato soup and the sour cream, he went to his personal liquor cabinet and took from his watch chain a small key. That was one of the very few locked doors in the house, the other being his scarred old desk and the little writing desk that Dora got for her eighteenth birthday. Lambri withdrew a bottle from the shadows and turned it to the light to look at it. The bottle was small, its green uneven shape firmly corked and sealed with a thick coat of bee wax contained not more than three glasses of wine, and Lambri wondered whether that would be sufficient. He returned to the dining room, thanked Maritsa and told her that she should go to get ready for the fireworks. The little girl beamed at him as she was always rendered speechless in his presence and ran to the kitchen, on the way untying her white apron. Few seconds later they heard the quiet click of the servants' door lock and the hurried steps waking the old cobblestones, then all of them smiled at Maritsa's impatient shake of the wrought iron gate.

'Is this enough for you, Dora, or I shall open more?'

'More than enough, Dad, thank you!'

'I will open it after and leave it for you at the side table. Now let us eat, I need to be there at eight.'

The supper was quick with few words exchanged. Lambri was eating as it was required but could not feel the taste of a morsel. Dora was determined to force some food down as she knew the night would be long. Vesselin was always hungry, being just one year younger he was still growing and was already taller than his father's impressive height. Nada, ever a small eater, was mixing the swirls of white cream in her tomato soup. Red and white, death and life, just like the little martenitsas on the first day of spring. If only one could tie them on everything to protect it. The more she mixed, the faster the red was swallowing the white, the soup becoming just a little bit lighter shadow of red. Yet it was the white that gave it the taste, although invisible, it was the white that pleased the palate and sharpened the senses. She swallowed a spoonful.

After supper Lambri took a quick shower, carefully trimmed his moustaches and shaved, then put on the formal diner costume that Nada had pressed. He tied his white bow on his white starched shirt, fumbled as always with his cuff-links. He looked at the floor length mirror of the big wardrobe in their bedroom and for the second time that evening thought that something was missing from the picture. Before he managed to put his finger on it, there was a quiet knock on the door and Nada entered. They have been married for thirty-four years and she never failed to knock before she entered the bedroom which was as much hers as it was his. Nada was holding a few small boxes. Of course, his war medals! How could he have forgotten them, today of all days, it was the Liberation Day and he had fought for it. And he was still fighting and would fight to the end. Nada fussed a little around him adjusting the sash and brushing his jacket, murmuring something about cuts, needles, etc. under her breath, but he knew that it was more the need to be close to him rather than the necessity of her ministrations. He held her hands for a second and kissed them, 'Everything will get sorted, Nada, everything will get sorted!'

He was not quite sure who he was trying to convince.

Dora elected seeing her father off and went downstairs with him. The taxi was already waiting for him, but he suddenly remembered that he had not uncorked the bottle as he had promised. He stepped into the dining room, took the bottle from the table and looked through it at the chandelier to check if the wine was not muddled. He knew that it was a red wine, but the lightly green glass of the bottle was making it appear black. The electricity flickered and for a moment he thought he saw a flame in the wine. Tricks of light, he chided himself, took the corkscrew and opened the bottle. The wine smelled unexpectedly sweet, but he did not have time to test it, it was good, he was sure. He put the bottle and the corkscrew down and hurriedly left the room. Dora was waiting with his cache-nez although the evening was mild. He looked at her and the sense of déjà-vu washed over him. Suddenly he firmly embraced his daughter and sighed, 'Take care of yourself and remember, you have our blessing, whatever you decide to do, Dora!'

'Thank you, Dad, go or you will be late!'

The clock at the sitting room chimed eight o'clock. The evening was quickly falling over the town. Dora took a small bowl and went into the garden through the dining room French door. The garden was enclosed by

seemingly solid wall covered with ivy and occasional morning glory. The garden was once her mother's pride and joy, she thought, smiling at the happy memories. Dora walked slowly to the fig tree at the right wall. It was an old tree. It gave the impression of consisting of only knots and glass paper green leaves but its abundant small violet fruits were incredibly sweet. Dora chose some ripe figs and placed them in her bowl. When she returned to the house, Nada was waiting for her.

'You need to hurry up, child, or you will be late. Boris is expecting to meet you at nine,' she said.

'Yes, Mom, I just will prepare my bag before I get dressed.'

'I will help, 'Nada whispered, 'bring it to the kitchen, it will be easier.'

The kitchen offered some privacy as the only window was thickly curtained. Dora put the satchel on the table and examined its contents. She was a nurse's daughter and knew how to use all of the satchel's contents. There were a set of sterile needles and glass syringes in a shiny metal box lined with gauze, where several ampoules also laid next to a tiny file-like knife, another sterile box with few scalpels and clamps, bandages, gauze, cotton swabs in a small jar, a set of small vials - some of them made of dark glass, some transparent, with the names of the antiseptics and medicines in them labeled in a old-fashioned apothecary script on the neat white labels, a glass for eye baths, a few pressed square cloths napkins, meticulously folded. Dora took one of the dark vials and emptied it in the stone sink in the cold room, then rinsed it a few times and dried it with a piece of cloth. Then she went to the dining room, took the open wine bottle and decanted few spoonful into the vial. She closed it tightly and secured it at its compartment, then though for a moment and changed its place with the corner right bottle. Dora had brought the shirt she had bought that day and carefully unpacked it, taking care to remove all pins that were holding it, then folded and put it under the folded napkins. Then the young woman took the figs she had picked and placed them in a little metal box with a tight lid which she put also in the satchel. Nada was watching her in a complete silence until Dora moved to close the satchel.

'Not yet!' she said, opened the table drawer and pull out a palm-size package. She handed it to Dora and curtly said, 'Open it!'

Puzzled, the young woman obeyed. She unfolded the white fine linen square that she recognized as one of her own monogrammed handkerchiefs and looked at the small scone that her mother had baked in the afternoon. She did not dare to trust her voice.

'You know what to do with it, don't you?' asked Nada with unexpected urgency in her voice. 'Whatever the break, the ponuda is for him, don't forget, this is the last to give him, promise me you will remember! I wish I could have given it to you myself, but God has evidently other plans.'

Dora nodded, then wrapped the scone back and put it in the satchel. She hurried to get dressed in the worn nurse's uniform that hanged in her room. At the chime of eight thirty she was back down at the now almost dark dining room. The excited buzz of the town was somewhat muffled by the garden, but it was not silenced completely. The French door was opened and in the now twilight she deciphered the two tall figures standing like guards on both sides. She fiercely hugged her brother and when he bended to kiss the top of her head, quickly whispered in his ear, 'Take care of them if...'

Then she swiftly turned and hugged her mother and heard the stifled sob and the 'Let God take care of you, child!'

'Mom, I will be back before midnight!' she sighed back and slid into the growing darkness.

The back garden wall looked like a fortress, but there was a low wooden door in it, that led to the neighbors' garden. Komshuluk, as it was called, it was never allowed to be locked and her father kept the hinges and the locking mechanism well oiled. The wood has been so old and weathered, that it had almost blended with the dark wall covered with moss and countless leaves spots. Dora slid through it, and then through the next komshuluk, and then she was in the back yard of a small rented apartment block, which should have been lit, but the only post was broken at the early days of the war and nobody had bothered to repair it. Dora used the back door, passed through a narrow passage smelling of rotten cabbage and exited through the front door to the boulevard. It was bustling with people who were either coming from work, or going to work, or to some event or another, the set of trendy restaurants only few blocks away. For once Dora was grateful that the new people in the higher echelons of power paid little attention to the restoration of the street lighting, as she quickened her steps to the hospital.

Boris had just lit his cigarette in front of the hospital door when he saw her approaching. The hospital policy strictly forbade smoking and he was sticking to it. The habit also gave him few moments of reprieve from the never ending medical work, especially now that the stream of patients had been changing considerably. Before the emergencies consisted mainly of a ruptured appendicitis now and then, an occasional bad cut wound over a jar or tin of home preserves, a kid that had swallowed something that it should not, a late-night bar visitor who had slipped under a speeding phaeton... Not that these had completely stopped, but more and more often the late night ambulances were delivering men with heads cracked open, men shot from a close range and left to bleed, men with scars of weeks-long beatings left to die in front of the doors of their homes, "suicide" victims who somehow had managed to shoot at least two bullets into their heads or had managed to hang themselves despite the pain of the rope bruises around their wrists and ankles, not to mention some broken ribs... The militia men were coming sometimes, but the protocols usually ended with the verdict that the injuries were a result of domestic violence or were self-inflicted and the files were closed, so at some point Boris started just reporting the accidents without bothering to call the patrol anymore. He slept more and more often on the sofa in his cabinet, bone weary to go even home and it was twenty minutes walk only. He never knew when the next broken head would lay on his table but knew that the twenty minutes would make the difference between life and death. He respected his colleagues and his staff for their dedication, but he was the boss and he was responsible. The town was gradually succumbing into a terror, bright and seemingly healing by day and bloodier by night. Boris shook his head and looked at Dora who was standing in front of him

The uniform was worn but clean, the black robes in contrast with the white of the apron and the headscarf, easily recognizable by everyone and equally anonymous. Dora could have been anyone of the army of nurses, nuns or civilians, who were serving the town's hospitals and orphanages round the clock, silent, efficient, the unsung heroes of two wars and countless shifts. They were respected but rarely looked at a second time. Boris motioned to Dora to follow him to the triage.

The door of the brightly lit room had a lock, but he did not use it. According to the hospital rules, the personnel would first knock and wait for permission, yet it was anyway past the last round and the only people around were the night nurse at the other end of the corridor and the operation staff at the second floor, who were probably trying to catch few winks before the night flow started.

'Dora, Stamenov will be here any minute. You are Nurse Ivana Stoyanova and you are accompanying him to the prison to establish if a prisoner needs immediate hospitalization. Or so you have been told. The hospital is too busy to spare a doctor, but you are qualified to do evaluations, as you are our triage nurse. That is for the guards, if anyone dares to ask. Stamenov will be the only one to have access to the wing where Todor is. He will let you in and stay in his cabinet which is at the entrance of the corridor leading to the execution chamber. You will have exactly one hour! If all goes as planned, Stamenov will let you go before the change of guard at 11. The train from Varna should arrive at 11:15, it is ten minutes maximum to the prison, they want to finish before midnight, but the instructions they have are to wait for Tanas. There should be no surprises. Here is Ivana's personal identification, you look alike actually, you know her. Any questions?'

'Yes, what did you do with Miss Stoyanova, hid her in the cupboard?'

'Damn your sense of humor, Dora! If you need to know, she is boarding the midnight train to Bourgas to visit her suddenly ill mother. Really, her mother is ill, the tuberculosis is progressing faster despite the sea air...Poor girl, she has nobody else close, and now that...Next question!'

'What would you like me to tell Todor? And before you start, I am warning you, nothing about politics!'

Boris actually guffawed. 'Well, you are right. He needs comfort, not politics. Stamenov told me that he had refused to talk to the prison's new priest that was appointed after Father Vassil died last month, only asked for his Bible, and oh, what a miracle, they allowed us to bring him a stack of books about law and his Bible.' Boris sighed. 'You know what; tell him to swim across Styx instead of taking the boat and paying his obolus to Charon, as he will need the coin when I beat him again at backgammon in the land of asphodels! And tell him that it might be sooner or later, but I will put a good fight before, during and after the journey. I trust you to tell him exactly that from me, word for word, promise!'

Dora smiled, 'You are talking politics again, even if I told you not to, but let it be, over the head of Medusa Gergina, I will tell him exactly that!'

'Gorgon!'

'Pardon me? Ah, that is fine, remember Miss Gergina Pasheva was our Greek teacher at the college, we called her Medusa and it stuck. Don't worry, I have a perfect mark in Greek, as well as history.'

Boris and Dora talked a little about the big ball which was supposed to show the unity of the divided nation, the glittering dress of Mitzi and her abominable taste in men, Nada's health, who went where for the summer holidays and who was going to ski in Switzerland that winter, and if the light above them was not so glaring and their postures so tense, they could have been in her parents' sitting room.

The bell chimed and they both jumped. Boris went to open the door and let Stamenov in.

'All is according to the plan, Mr. Stamenov?' the doctor asked politely.

'Yes, is this the young lady coming with me?'

'Yes, that is her. Her name is Miss Ivana Stoyanova and she knows she has an hour.'

'Let us go, the round is starting at ten, so there will be less guards in the corridors now.'

Dora picked up her satchel and adjusted the cap that completely covered her hair. The uniform was the same for both the nurses and the nuns who worked for the hospital, so the severity of style was a nod to the attachment of Mother Superior to the traditional garb. Dora followed Mr. Stamenov to his car and he gallantly opened the back door for her. It was just few minutes drive, but the less people saw them the better. Boris was already occupied with the ambulance that arrived.

Stamenov was driving slowly, taking into consideration the hordes of merry people who were going to the Doctors' Park to secure a good spot to watch the fireworks. He looked at Dora in the back mirror and softly said, 'I wish I could have given you more than an hour, Miss Mihailova, but even that is rather risky... I was expecting your father.'

Dora did not move a muscle.

'Please do not think that I was planning to turn him over, nor will I turn you over, that is not the point. I just want to be sure that you are aware of the risks and you still have time to change your mind. I am not afraid for myself, but you are a young woman and your real life is only beginning, so if you decide to reconsider...'

'Thank you, Mr. Stamenov, my father and all his allies really appreciate what you are doing. Yes, the life is all in front of me. The hitch is that I have somehow to fit it in sixty minutes... Believe me, I am grateful for every second of it!'

The car stopped in front of the prison gates.

The guards who opened the doors to the inner yard were used to the director bringing doctors himself at night. As long as it was him, they would not question anything. Stamenov parked and opened the car door for Dora, then motioned her to follow him. He greeted politely the court patrol, the officer in charge reported that there had been no incidents and swiftly led his men for a second round. Dora had the feeling that she was invisible.

The director took out his sets of keys and opened first the door of the block, then the door of the floor corridor. There was no guard there as the number of Todor's cell was not known to anyone but a very limited in numbers group of people, who were paranoiac that his party may organize his escape if he were placed with the other inmates. The corridor was dimly lit, only one bulb without a shade meekly casting its yellowish light. The first door to the left was Stamenov's office, which they bypassed and walked to the third door to the right. It was solid iron door and it reminded Dora of a German novel full of medieval castles, maidens and heroes, and oddly, of an opera decors for Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg". Stamenov produced a single key and the well-oiled lock faintly clicked. The door opened equally silently despite its size and appearance. In the middle of the room Todor was standing up.

She had known him all her life, but Dora could not remember seeing him so magnificent. He was almost as tall as her father and his once dark hair was now streaked with gray, much more then the last time they have met at the memorial service on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. He was clad in his own clothes, as the prison did not carry uniforms of his size. The once most eligible bachelor and envy of every Jack-a-dandy of the capital was wearing black socks, creased black trousers and a once white shirt with some intricate patterns that Dora could not see clearly at first. But then she looked at his face and forgot to breathe. He was as calm as a Roman emperor's bust at the National History Museum, but his eyes were burning fires even in the dark.

The cell was illuminated by a single candle. It was enough to make the outlines of the only big two objects in it - to the left, a bed made of roughly hewn boards with a thin straw mat only, and a small table attached to the right wall, but it was so close that a person laying on the bed could easily reach for anything on it. At that moment, on the table there were a neatly piled stack of books, an aluminum pitcher and the candle. Todor was not shackled as his captors did not believe he could run through the ventilation window, no more than the size of a book, almost entirely closed by a heavy grid of bars and put so high in the wall that not even a man of Todor's height could see through it.

Stamenov moved aside and let the young woman in. Todor rapidly blinked, 'Dora?!'

'You have an hour!' said the director and closed the door behind her.

'You should not be here! Why did they let you come?! I was expecting your father or ....'

Dora crossed the three steps that were separating them and touched his lips with her forefinger to silence him. 'We have an hour, let us not waste it arguing, please! I brought you something.'

She put her satchel on the bed and turned again to him. He had not left his spot, not that there was much room for that, but turned to face her. Dora looked up at him, smiled and hugged him. He hugged her back. She caught the swallowed gasp of pain and tried to let go. He would not let her, her hug being the first real human contact that he had experienced for almost two months and definitely his last, so he ignored the burning and held her close. Dora willfully relaxed in his arms. Todor pressed her head to his chest and she listened for a few seconds to his rapid heartbeat. At a close range the young woman recognized the patterns on his shirt for what they actually were. Blood spots. A lot of them. Dried blood all over, almost black under the dim light of the candle, some just drops like when one pricks a finger while cross-stitching, some much bigger, but all over his shirt as far as she could see. Dora tried not to imagine how his body looked and felt like.

'Thank you for coming!' whispered Todor fervently somewhere above her. Dora turned her head to look at his face, then cradled his head in her hands and kissed him full on the lips. She had never done it before, their engagement sealed with a fatherly brush on her forehead, but she had dreamt for so long to do it, that it felt perfect. He was so stunned that for once the fierce orator, who could easily rock a parliament session

with a sentence, was rendered speechless. Dora used the moment to gently disengage herself and opened her satchel. She took out the little tin containing the figs and twisted it open.

Todor looked puzzled. She had brought him figs and he was trying to find the meaning of the gesture. His classic education pitched in with the image of a Borgia painting a fig on a branch with poison, but he rejected it immediately, an ampoule of cyanide would have been far easier to smuggle, albeit not so tempting. Everyone who even remotely knew him was well aware that he would not kill himself under any circumstances, so that was not an option. Figs. Fig leaves to cover Adam and Eve in the aftermath of the Original Sin, but she had brought fruits, not leaves.

Dora seemed to guess his question and smiled. She picked up a fig and fed him. 'I know you like figs. These are from the fig tree in our garden. You remember it, I think. Where my swing was. You remember how everyone laughed when you were rocking me on Easter when I was five? Gramps first said you should not, as it was just for the big girls and whoever pushed the swing was going to marry the girl in it. You said that as I was your favorite girl, you would risk it and do it anyway.'

Todor smiled despite himself. It was like yesterday, that Easter celebration at her parent's house, a big merry company that encompassed three generations, still seated around the large table in the garden after the feast, the remnants of it still on the finest crockery that Mr. and Mrs. Mihailov had received on their wedding day, the glasses still half full under the watchful gaze of the elder Mihailov. Todor was just back from Paris for a short break and had brought her a doll and a steam engine for Vesselin, which had fully occupied the attention of the young lad. Dora was running around and trying to get back her swing which was hung under the old fig tree. It was taken over by all the unmarried young ladies and their suitors, as it was believed that should one push the swing with his sweetheart, it was almost certain guarantee that they would get married before the following Easter. Finally, Dora had stomped her little foot and had come to the table to pull his hand. The elder Mihailovs had tried to gently remind her that the custom was for the ladies of certain age and she could wait, but she had stood next to him stubbornly. At one point he had seen the light tremble of her lips, and had been surprised, as she had been a child that rarely cried, so he had taken the matter in his hands, literally. He had carried her to the swing, had waited for his turn under the good

natured taunting of everyone present, and had put her on the single board that had been her swing. She had clasped the ropes firmly and he had pushed the swing sedately at first, but she had kept crying "More, more, more!" until he had grasped that she could easily fly over the brick fence if she would have let go of the ropes. He had taken her off immediately and has started to apologize to her mom for the scare, only to be surprised by the expression of Nada's face. No, it had not been a fear, but something more deeply running, which he could not have fathomed up to that day, a sadness, a resignation may be. Todor had remembered it over the years right next to the exuberant face of Dora, in her white dress with puffed sleeves, her hair carefully braided in a coronet "just like a big girl, mom did it, isn't it pretty" and several dandelions stuck into it, few curls had escaped from the severe style, lit in the still tender sunshine of the late spring. Those were happier times, or were they just better than the present ones, he thought, chewing the soft, sweet fruit, and then another and another, until Dora fed him almost all of them.

Todor looked at the practically empty tin and covered her hand with his much larger one. He took a fig and offered it to her.

'I remember,' he breathed, 'and you also like figs!'

Dora accepted the offering and chewed on it diligently, then grinned. 'I am glad you remember, as I came for you to fulfill what you promised!'

Todor looked at her, 'What had I promised?'

'To marry me. Twice, in fact!'

God, she had a nerve. He was to die before the night was over, they were in a prison cell next to the gallows, his executioner was on his way and if anyone had caught a whiff about the little conspiracy, there would be more people to die before dawn. And she was talking of marriage of all things. Wahn, wahn, überall Wahn!

'I am too old for you,' he decided to joke.

'We have already discussed that and I am not taking it. You promised and I am here.'

'Dora...'

She put her finger on his lips again and motioned him to sit on the bed. Dora took from the satchel the white shirt and handed it to Todor. She turned her back to him while he changed. The young woman dug her nails

in her palms when she heard the muffled gasp of pain as he probably tore at a wound that was stuck to the material.

While he was busy with the mother-of-pearl buttons, she took from her satchel the little white bundle, spread the handkerchief like a table cloth and put the scone in the center. Then the young woman took the vial with the wine and filled the eye bath cup which she placed next to the bread. Dora took two slim church candles and gave him one. Todor swallowed. She had thought of everything - the white shirt, the bread, the wine, the candles, God, she really meant it.

'Now we only need your Bible and we are all set!' Dora said brightly, not exactly meeting his eyes. She was holding onto the last shreds of her courage, he knew it. Dora had gone that far alone, she needed him. It was the most humbling experience in his life and he owed her big time, Todor thought and in one swift movement he pulled the Bible from the stack of books and handed it to her. Dora opened it at the Wedding at Cana, lit her candle and held it for him to light his.

'I think we both can recite the entire one, so what about if we get to the point?' she smiled tremulously at the man looming above her.

'Do you, Todor, take me to be your wife before God, to love and respect me now and forever?'

'I do! Do you, Theodora, take me to be your husband before God, to love and obey me now and for the eternity?'

'I do!' whispered Dora.

Todor handed her his candle and pulled off his signet ring. He put it on the fourth finger of her right hand and sealed the motion with a kiss. The ring was too big for the delicate finger, he smiled, then undid the top button of his shirt. He pulled his baptismal cross, took it over his head and took the ring from her finger. He looped the almost invisible chain around the ring and removed Dora's head cap to put the chain over her head. She smiled and opened the top buttons of her uniform, then pushed the ring and the chain inside.

The tall man could not tear his gaze from her. Her hair was braided in the same coronet as at that Easter feast. He tenderly stroke it with one finger.

'Mom did it for me,' Dora whispered, feeling his gesture, then bent her head and kissed his palm. 'Speaking of her, she made the bread also and said that she would have loved to give it to us herself, but God had other plans.'

The young woman turned and took the bread, then held it on one side for Todor to take the other. Then she reverently raised it high above her head, their fingers almost touching as the scone was so small, and they broke it. The bread split in two nearly equal parts, but the little knob on top remained on her half. Todor grinned, 'It seems to me that you have the bigger part, so you will be the boss!' and swallowed his piece in one morsel.

'Oh, I am glad to hear that!' quipped Dora, took the minuscule glass and offered the wine to him. He drank half of it and kept the glass to her lips for her to finish it.

'Now you may kiss the bride!'

'What about if my bride waits until it is properly announced? Do you have something to write with?'

'Sorry, just a pencil, the chemical one that the hospital uses for the records,' Dora pulled it of the inside compartment of her satchel. Todor opened the Bible on its opening page, where all his family's births, marriages and deaths were registered, and carefully wrote in his beautiful scrip "Marriage: Todor Todorov to Teodora Mihailova, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1947". He closed the book and gave it to her.

'That is it, now it is properly done. And it is yours. Please take it. I don't want their dirty hands on it!'

Dora took the book and put it on the table. She turned to him and tilted her head, 'So you will kiss me now and everything...'

'What? Dora, you cannot mean it, darling, there are thousand and one reasons not to even think of it! Look around, I can be your father, and I am a dead man almost, this is not exactly Ritz, and I have not the right to do it even if it was, Dora...'

'You are my husband, so your age is of no importance, you are not dead yet, and you can put me on broken glass if needed, so...' Dora pulled his head down and kissed him again, tender, quiet kiss at first, more of a reassurance than anything else. He did not respond initially, the list of the thousand and one reasons flying through his mind, all that he stood for resisting the idea. But Dora did not let go. She had come to that place to tell him that they were meant for each other, that the Fate had decided it long ago, that time did not matter, that all the doubts had been erased and that she was there not for her family, not for his party, not for the unity of the nation. It was about the two of them only and she had accepted that it may not be the same for him, but she still hoped. Dora wanted to tell him millions other things, share dreams and memories, plan a future and live it. But the clock was ticking and she had to find the words quick, and she did.

'I love you! I always had!'

Her whisper stopped him dead in the motion of pushing her away from him. Todor looked at her and saw all the words that she longed to say. In a split second he saw in his mind the women who had been attracted to him, some to his wealth, some to his social status, some to his family name, some to his good looks, and tried to recall whether at least one of them had ever truly understood him, accepted him for who he was, strengths and faults, and loved him for himself alone. He drew blank. Then the man looked again his bride's features and the power he saw there shattered his carefully built defenses. He pulled her into his arms and then was kissing her with the tenderness of a first courtship, the fervor of a young man, the sensuality of a mature lover, sweetly rolled in one. He would have traded everything for the chance to guide her through the long and winding road of life and love, but all he had left were mere few minutes. There was no time to regret or to hesitate. He scooped her in his hands and carried her the two steps to his blood-stained straw mat.

The candlelight played on her lovely face, and the aesthete in him saw her as the young maiden that she was, but also the fascinating beauty that she would become and the old woman that she would die. He tried to be gentle and composed, but she instinctively knew how to undo him and they slid into the rhythm of the eternal melody, slow at first and ever increasing in tempo. He drank her cry of pain from her lips and swallowed her tears of joy, he obeyed her pleas for more and shared her ecstasy in the fulfillment. Todor thought that it was his first time to experience the union of the bodies and souls and it was beyond the realm of physical. That was made in heaven and belonged there to come upon the blessed ones only. When he looked at Dora he knew she was thinking about the same. She lifted her hand to caress him and they breathed in unison, 'I love you!'

The motion exposed her wrist watch and he gasped. Of their hour there were seven minutes left. He kissed her again and murmured into her ear, 'As much as I regret, but we have to get up!'

She actually smiled, 'No coffee and croissants in bed?'

'I know why I married you!' he chuckled, and pulled her to her feet. He arranged first his clothes, then replaced her headscarf and solicitously brushed the straws from the back of her uniform. When she faced

him, she was holding her untouched part of bread. She took a piece and fed him, then ate the second half herself.

'That will do!

Then her face grew solemn and she said, 'I promised Boris that I would transfer his message word for word. So he said, "You know what, tell him to swim across Styx instead of taking the boat and paying his obolus to Charon, as he will need the coin when I beat him again at backgammon in the land of asphodels! And tell him that it might be sooner or later, but I will put a good fight before, during and after the journey."

She drew a breath and continued, 'Dad said I have his blessing, whatever I decide to do. Mom made me promise that I would give you this one last.'

Dora held on her open palm the tiny pebble of dough that was baked on top of the scone she had brought. He opened his mouth and she slid it in. Todor tasted the frankincense. Nada's message was laud and clear - he was to embark on a journey into an uncharted territory, but his harbor was safe and she was sending him their last blessing. The beginning had come a full circle to the end.

Dora took her eye bath again and emptied there the wine that had remained in the vial. She held it to Todor's lips, 'I wish I could spare you what is coming, but I cannot. So I absolve you of any sin, willingly or unwillingly committed and leave you in the hands of God!'

Their eyes locked while he drank all the wine.

'Amen!' he said and his strong clear voice almost overrode the slight knock on the door.

'Please do come in!' he said as if he was once again the courteous host that he had been known to be. Stamenov elected to remain at the door - the cell was overcrowded anyway. In few seconds Dora folded Todor's blooded old shirt, put it in her satchel together with the eye bath and the Bible, closed the satchel, straightened her spine, lifted her chin and said, 'We are ready!'

Todor hugged her and whispered, 'Dora, I love you! Take care!'

He let her go and she stepped over the threshold. Stamenov locked the door behind her.

The director of the prison silently followed her towards the exit and started opening the iron door when they heard a commotion in the inner yard.

'Quick, in my room!' he said.

His study was as old-fashioned as he was - dark polished wood bookshelves lined the walls, heavy dark desk of imperial proportions occupied a good part of the wooden floor and there were several simple dark wood chairs at both sides of the door. The room was austere; its only personal touch visible was the heavy bronze reading lamp that was glaring over the desk in sharp contrast with the matted opalescence of the chandelier at the ceiling high above. It looked like few of its invisible bulbs had burned out and nobody cared to replace them. The only window, heavily barred as all prison's windows, faced the well-like inner court. Stamenov quickly looked out and said, 'Tashev is early! Remember your story, child, I will do whatever I can to get you out of here safe!'

Dora sat on one of the chairs next to the door, her satchel on her knees.

Tashev was mad at the entire world. He had to get early from the ball, dragging the loudly complaining Mitzi with him all the way to his car, which the stupid valet could not get fast from the garage, then, in the car, he had to listen to Mitzi's rants about the dances they were missing until he absolutely unceremoniously dropped her in front of her apartment building, then he had arrived at the central train station to learn that Tanas' train had broken at a village an hour drive from the capital. His boss had called the train station boss to get Mikhail to call immediately upon arrival via the train telephone service. When the connection finally was established after several futile attempts, it had been so bad that he had been hearing occasional phrases only, but as Mikhail knew what the subject was, they were not hard to make sense of: "They will try to find a way! My informants told me that...." "keep an eye on our man!" "...get it from him myself, you hear, myself, I have been waiting for that for ages!!" "I .... there... arranging car...fast as possible...without me! Don't..." The words kept disappearing into the racket, Tanas was yelling, evidently livid, and the last they heard was a thunderous: "You are responsible to see that..." The line had gone dead and no amount of sweat on behalf of the telephone operator who was scared out of his wits by Tashev's presence had been able to revive it. So the colonel had decided to get straight to the prison, sure that he would find Stamenov there as he had instructed him to be, and with any luck - to get a glass of cognac from his liquor cabinet. He had had few glasses at the gala, then just a little at the ball as he had to toast the event, but Mitzi's winging and the unplanned delay of Tanas had grated on his nerves and he was thirsty. He was not planning to

spend the night in the prison where he had served his time. He would wait just a few minutes after midnight for the protocol to be dated "23<sup>rd</sup>" and be done with it.

The guards at the front door were not quick enough for his taste, so Tashev yelled at the oafs on the top of his lungs. He did not care if he woke the dead; they knew his car and could have been more expedient. He made a mental note to talk to the director again, a purging of the system of these remnants was necessary; they were probably as old as Stamenov himself and as inefficient.

The colonel mounted the stairs two by two and reached the bars at the entrance at the same time as Stamenov, who unlocked the door and let him in.

'Is everything ready?' Tashev grumbled instead of a greeting.

'Yes, it was prepared today as you instructed, but...'

'No "but"-s, Stamenov! 'What is wrong now?'

'All the doctors at the hospital were operating; I had to bring a nurse for the protocol...'

'A nurse?? Are you completely senile?? Who will believe a protocol signed by a nurse, of all people! Get the capped hag out of here right this moment and go fetch Poshtov, the doctor, he is in 405 in the Central Wing, if I recall correctly. He will do, who cares that he is a prisoner, he is still a doctor, isn't he? I authorize it. Do you have anything to drink? Cognac will be nice!'

'In the liquor cabinet, the left bottom drawer of my desk, there are glasses there also!'

Tashev passed by Dora without even looking at her, throwing a bark "Get going, you!" and plopped into Stamenov's chair. He did not bother to see if she has obeyed his command before diving in search of the bottle. By the time he emerged, she was out of the room, satchel firmly in hand.

'Go fetch Poshtov!' Tashev yelled at the director through the half closed door, unscrewing the cap.

'Sire you will be compensated for your time, after you, please ...'

Tashev nearly spat on the floor, indeed, "After you, please!" What was the old fool thinking, a nurse to sign such a document, he was out of his molded mind. The moment the protocol was in the open there would be cries and yells about impropriety, breaking of laws, not following democratic procedures, all the crap that the Western newspapers could produce. He better not even mention it to Tanas, only the devil knew how he would react. Stamenov was going to fetch the old doctor, so the problem was solved and forgotten. Tashev

poured himself a good measure and gulped half. Unlike Stamenov, the cognac had aged well. He topped his glass and drank again.

Stamenov made sure that Dora was out through the small side door that led to the well lit stretch of the street and turned towards the Central Unit. He greeted the guards and waited for the chief guard to come out. The man had probably been sleeping, if his creased cheek and tossed hair were any indication. He was coming fast, on the way adjusting his peaked cap.

'Mr. Tashev requires the presence of Dr. Poshtov in my cabinet as soon as possible,' Stamenov announced as if they were talking about an invitation to a tea party. 'I will come with you...'

The two men started climbing the stone stairs to the fourth floor. At the third flight Stamenov stopped and wiped the perspiration from his forehead, then folded the handkerchief back in his pocket. It was so very close tonight, he thought, so damn close, he prayed that Dora at least would be fine, as fine as she could be under the circumstances. He felt his heart swell with fatherly pride for the young woman, for her unflappable courage, for the determination to put her head in the lion's den and risk her life to bring a spark of comfort to a man condemned to die. Mihailov had all the rights to be proud of her. In one rare second of regret he wished he had had the courage to remarry after the Great War, but he had been so afraid that any woman would find his scars appalling when he had been younger. With the age, the understanding that a physical imperfection would not stop a loving heart had eventually come, but then it was too late, he was too tired of the other people's troubles, too bitter and too settled in his hermit's ways. He thought of Todor, of the bleeding torture marks on his body and winced. The shirt that Todor was wearing when he had opened the cell was not the same shirt that he had seen at Dora's exit. That one was pristine white, just few spots here and there. Stamenov shuddered. So that was the reason for her visit, she had brought him a white shirt, as the heroes of the folk songs about the yoke. He heard his father's voice booming in the classroom, children of all ages sitting on the earthen floor as close as they could gather around the blackened stove and reverently looking at the Teacher, as he had been known, as he had been the only one in the village, listening to the last request of the imprisoned hero: "They will hang me tomorrow but today, please, young maiden, wash my shirt and help me wash my hair, as when I am going to hang there, the breeze shall lift my hair and my shirt shall show white." It was a poem about the fight for national freedom, Stamenov though

bitterly, not about the fight of a brother against brother, those senseless killings around, and he felt oddly grateful that the Teacher had died before seeing it.

Behind the thick prison door Todor was unaware of the drama in Stamenov's study. The candle had almost burned out and in the few remaining minutes he had no desire to read any of his books, but decided to have a sip of water before it got dark. The tall man reached for the pitcher and his hand stopped in mid-air. On the table, Dora's handkerchief laid a neat white square. His heart suddenly raced, there was no place in the cell to hide it and he doubted Stamenov would be paying him another visit before his executioners came. The candle sputtered, but continued to glow and he bended closer to look at the cloth. To his immense relief, Dora's handkerchief was a simple white one, no frills, no lace. It was made of a home-woven linen cloth, washed and hanged in the sun to bleach probably many times, as it was not the off-white that one associated with new linen, this one had seen a lot, he mused. It was not a dainty little one either, it was bigger than a lady's hankie, but somewhat smaller than a man's one. Its only decoration was a bold letter "T" at one of the corners, the stitches not tiny as one would expect, but rather the needlework of a person whose vision was fading and relied on decades of practice rather than eyesight for working. It reminded him of the elder Mrs. Mihailova, Dora's grandmother, who was almost blind when Todor had last seen her shortly before her death almost ten years back. Her physical sight may have been giving away, but not her perception, she had warned him then of a lot of things he had not believed were possible and even if she had not lived to see them, he had. He buried his face in the soft cloth and inhaled its scent - Dora's ordinary soap and some pine, from the box the handkerchief had been stored in, clean and refreshing. The candle spattered again and with a final flick its light faded. Todor folded the handkerchief twice on his palm, then lay on the mattress, his cheek resting on the linen. The scent of soap and pine overrode the dried blood's stench from the mat and Todor's mind drifted to a book he loved. He remembered the scene when its hero was about to die with the woman who loved him in his arms, but "he wanted to yield himself to Hypnos before Thanatos put him to sleep forever." Todor prayed to God to spare Dora the fate of the lovely woman who had chosen to follow her lover in the fields of asphodels, but decided that the man's example was worth repeating.

Hypnos had evidently heard his summons as in a minute Todor found himself walking along a sea side, the waves lapping at his bare feet. It was a lovely morning. Although the sun was shining brightly, the breeze was wafting from the nearby pine grove and patches of fog were dispersing over the waves. He was clad in a white shirt, only half buttoned, the shirttail flapping in the wind, and black trousers, rolled up to his knees. He felt young and happy again, and he was expecting someone. From around a pile of driftwood two shadows – a small and a large one - emerged, and then their owners: an exquisitely beautiful young woman with flowing wheat color hair and hazel eyes and a child with a hair the shadow of russet gold and eyes somewhat grey and somewhat hazel, changing as the color of sea water at storm. Both were clad in white sundresses, floating in the morning sun. They held hands and ran towards him, their faces all smiles that were a reflection of his own. He ran towards them, the child reaching him first and throwing her small body onto his much larger one, hanging on his neck and smothering his face in kisses. He had a chance to twirl her around just one time and her happy squeal was still echoing from the cliff when he pulled the young woman in his arms also. He held her tight and whispered, 'I love you! Take care!'

'And we love you!' the young woman said, 'Now and forever!'

The little girl took their hands and they continued to walk down the beach, the sun climbing higher and higher, blinks of its rays reflecting from the waves waving intricate patterns of light on the child's dress when she jumped high, swinging on their hands, her joyous laughter like pink ribbons around them.

Tanas was looking at the darkness through the window of the car that was speeding along the narrow road to Sofia. He was looking forward to getting hold of the object he had spent ages researching. There was no mistake, that was the key to so much things that the present keeper could not imagine! There was money involved, big money, but money could be obtained in many places, may be not that much, who needed that much, anyway. Tanas was not after the money, although he would not refuse it, he sneered. He was after the power that it held locked and the possibilities that it could present to the right person. Tanas was the right person, his granddad had followed the old fairytale and caught whiff of the location, but could not touch it, neither his father, who had managed to amass a fortune but died with his eyes open, craving the power that was almost in his reach, almost, but not there. Tanas had learned all that was there to learn, he thought, and before dawn the power will be his. He was not looking forward to share it, though, he had his

own plans. His time had come at last. Tashev would see that his orders were followed to the letter, he was sure that the colonel would not risk his head-spinning career with something that might anger his boss. Tanas was good at finding the same money- and-power-craving men as he had once been, he could smell the lust for the gold and the fear of others. It was easy to manage them as he understood the mechanism that was making them tick, knew how to grease the parts to make his machine efficient. Too bad that he could not do it to all the mechanisms, like the bloody train tonight, but his own machine had proved that it was working, as he had managed to get a car and a driver within an hour from the accident. The storm that was brewing was following his path, but Sofia was already close and it would not slow him much. Everything else was arranged. Tanas wished he could do something in the car, his restless energy seeking an outing. That was why he had taken the train, in the first class car he was the only passenger in his compartment and could read and write and pace at least. He had been planning to finish everything before midnight, and every glance at his expensive watch was infuriating him more and more. He made conscious effort not to look at it again.

Stamenov waited for the chief guard to open cell 405 and entered alone. He knew the middle-aged man as he knew his father, also a doctor, as decent people who had been tending to their rich clientele, but had also spent countless hours in the hospitals to put the same efforts for a person who could not pay their fees, doctors, who had come immediately at his request if an inmate had been ill, the same professional politeness being directed at a rags-clad under-age urchin at the prison infirmary and at ultra rich heiress at her posh salon. Dr Poshtov was in cell 405 because he had refused to "provide housing to people", or simply said, to relinquish his home to a new governing party boss who happened to like it. Dr Poshtov was snatched from the hospital, accused of treason and thrown in jail until he would confess so his nemesis could live undisturbed. Stamenov politely shook the shoulder of the sleeping man and he turned to him, instantly alert.

'Mr. Stamenov, what happened? Anyone needs help? Give me few seconds, please!' He was putting his glasses and trying to comb his hair with his fingers.

'You are required in my study, please follow the guard, I will explain later.'

'But I do not have anything with me, may be you should send someone to the infirmary to get my emergency bag at least...'

'You will not need anything, please, follow the guard.'

'But...'

'Please!'

Doctor Poshtov heard the strain in the old man's voice and thought better than to argue. The chief guard took the handcuffs from his belt, but saw the withering look on his director's face and hastily put them back. The director was leading the small group, the doctor walking after him and the chief guard closing. It was eerie silent, the only sounds their steps and the occasional clang of the bar doors opening and closing. More out of a habit, Doctor Poshtov was listening to Stamenov's wheezing breathing and thought that the old man was not sounding good. The director had a history of heart problems, nothing that bad, but some murmurs that had not been followed thoroughly. It was late and Stamenov should have been in bed and to come to him the next morning for a thorough check-up of his motor, or even better to keep the old man at the hospital for observation. Then a clang of a metal door shook the doctor back to reality. They were entering the death sentence zone and he thought it was weird, nobody was supposed to be here, not at that hour.

Tashev looked at the small procession and frowned, 'Why is he not handcuffed? Do you let all your prisoners walk around like that? It is a prison, not a club!'

'Doctor Poshtov does not need to be cuffed and I would like to remind you that I am still the director here!'

'So you give the order then! Not behind his back, but cuff him now or I will tie his hands myself!'

Doctor Poshtov nodded at Stamenov and held his hands together to the flustered chief of the guard who handcuffed him as loosely as he could.

'That is better. Now sit both of you and send the guard to let my people in. They should be here by now and I want to finish as soon as possible.'

'My understanding was that we will be waiting for Mr. Tanassov...'

'His train broke and he will be late, but he phoned. He thinks that there will be an attempt to strike a last minute deal for our man, so he put me in charge. As soon as my men are here, we will do it'

'May be we should wait for Mr. Tanassov anyway!'

'I said I am in charge! No delays! Did you tell the doctor why he is needed?'

'I did not have the opportunity...'

'Doctor Poshtov, tonight a national traitor will be hanged and I need you to sign the protocol of his death. I believe you will not refuse to serve the Republic!'

'And if I refuse?'

'If you refuse, I will just have to try not to break your fingers while convincing you as then I will have to fake your signature. Don't imagine that your refusal will stop me.'

'Even if I am forced, as you say "to serve the Republic", I cannot establish a death without at least a stethoscope, can I? So I am not equipped...'

'I believe you will be able to tell a dead man from a live one without it, not that you will need to establish anything else. And he will be hanging long enough, so I doubt he will be able to stand up and walk after that... 'Mikhail was definitely enjoying himself. Poshtov felt sick. He had no idea who the designated "national traitor" was, but his executioner was worse anyway. The flippant disregard for the sanctity of human life had never failed to appall the doctor. He had fought for every chance to save a life, now he was supposed to be present at the deliberate extinction of a human being as a helpless witness. If his cooperation was going to make the victim's last minutes less painful, so be it, the doctor remembered his oath not to harm anyone. He had seen enough people dying... It was the National Liberation Day, he thought bitterly, the day of the union of Bulgaria, and it should have been a day to celebrate the new life. What an irony!

There was a noise at the door and the Chief Guard entered accompanied by three burly men. They greeted Tashev but did not sit. He quickly dismissed the guard and ordered him to let Mr. Tanassov immediate upon his arrival directly to the gallows, if they were still there. There was a stern warning that no other people should be let in the prison under any circumstances. The guard left. Somewhere far away a church bell announced that the Liberation Day has ended.

Tashev sprang into action. He ordered Poshtov to remain where he was and motioned Stamenov to move. They all left without bothering to close the door. The doctor was left alone in the semi-darkness of the study.

He heard the small argument as to who would open a door, then the unmistakable clear voice of Todor, 'Good evening, Mr. Tashev, did finally someone come to his senses and put you back in prison?'

'Bastard!' yelled Tashev and there was again the noise of a commotion, then Tashev again, 'This one is not handcuffed either! Stamenov, what do you think you are running, a hotel service? Tane, get the handcuffs!'

'No need, Tashev, I am not running anywhere, spare us the circus!'

'Oh, as you are so kind then, what about you carry some of your books with you... I want to be able to tell everyone that you have put yourself above the law before you were hanged!'

'Any preferences about the titles, Tashev? Although I suspect you have never heard of ...'

'Stop barking, I don't have the night to talk!'

There was no mistake as to who was going to die tonight, Poshtov thought. So the rumors were true, the new government was slaughtering its former allies. If they were ready to hang Todor, that meant that they were confident in their impunity. Or was it a desperate personal vendetta by someone who had gotten the power up in his head? Was there nobody out of the prison who was willing to help? If there was no hope for Todor, what was there left for the ordinary citizens? Poshtov thought that he had sent his wife and two children to his small native village high in the mountain and it was not far enough for the marauders that were ruling. He had to warn Mina get the kids and run away while there was still some chance and the boundaries were opened. For him there was no hope, not after tonight really. If he lived to see the light of the day, he would find a way to communicate the urgency to her. And make her listen, now she should do what was best for the children and forget about him. It would be hard, but he had some money stashed in a Swiss bank and she would have access to it at least them not to starve at the beginning. He wished he could have seen it coming, but who could believe it only two months ago.

Tanas caught himself that he was looking at his watch again. The two arms were pointing straight at 12. The night of the Equinox was half over. He hated when his plans were delayed, but he had waited for so long, he could afford few more minutes. The storm was getting more intense and the swish of the rubber against the front window was annoying. The driver was trying to balance between the stern instructions to get to Sofia as fast as possible and the caution not to slip into the ravine on the side of the winding muddy road. The

lights were not much of a relief under the pouring rain. An occasional flash of lightning was bathing the landscape in a surreal bluish tint. Finally the car came to the turn where the feeble lights of the town would have been visible if not for the deluge. All was going according to the plan, what were another fifteen minutes compared to the reward that was awaiting him, unknown to the others...