

Easter Feasts

The dinner was progressing steadily towards the oven-baked stuffed lamb amid laughter and jokes, memories of the days gone and other celebrations mingling with the plans for the future, toasts to the new crops and the good health of those present. There was a minor commotion when Mitzi's last minute addition to the list showed almost an hour late. Mitzi has intended him to be a surprise to the company and had started to introduce him to the people at the table when Konstantin emerged from the double French door carrying an enormous tier cake covered with all kind of marzipan flowers. At the sight of the new guest, he nearly dropped his sweet burden, but put it on the table and approached as if to be sure.

'You? Dimitar, what on Earth are you doing here?'

'Konstantin! What are you doing here?'

'Well, I asked first, but I am having an Easter dinner with my grandparents and their old-time friends, and I had no idea you are back from France, and you did not call to say you are coming and I don't know where you are staying!'

The last statement made the other man laugh even louder. He turned to Mitzi. 'Mrs. Spassova, you made the day even happier for me! Konstantin is the person who rented my studio in a jiffy when I went to Mr. Debarski for a first time. When a year later I was back in Paris for few days, he graciously let me stay at my old place with him, as he said to get rid of all the mess I have left. He had earnestly kept all my unfinished work instead of throwing it, to which he was indisputably entitled. My vanity took that as an utmost compliment and I had bestowed upon him my most gracious friendship!' the laughter bubbling through his speech was contagious. 'I had no idea you were related, honestly!'

'Well, Konstantin is a grandson of my dear friends that I had just introduced you to, and I had no idea also that you two had ever met! Alas, like King Solomon and the sea monsters, I decided to flaunt my acquaintance with you and was deflated like a hot air balloon by a mere coincidence, as Konstantin can claim he met you first! Any chance you are going to share his quarters again - he lives in my attic now!' Mitzi was patted young man's arm.

'No, he will bring again five tons of plaster and the remnants of an old fence to carve, and I will be left to clean after him, no!' grumbled Konstantin, but the escaping grin was giving the insincerity of his moans away.

'As if Grandpa is going to let me do that, you know he lives now in Sofia. I am not supposed to clear the entire table here, as there will be the lunch in his house to down also, I am glad it starts later.'

'May I dare to hope that I can get your share of the cake then?' teased him Rada.

'My, my, my, you are getting more and more beautiful with every time that I see you, Rada!'

'NO, NO, no, you are not offering to draw her portrait, I know you! I will kidnap her and keep her away from your clutches!' interjected Konstantin and Mitzi enjoyed the ever so slight warning note at the young man's voice. She exchanged a knowing look with Elka and Milena.

'If painting is not on the cards, how about a glass of wine, Rada and Konstantin brought a real good Melnik?' offered Vesselin.

'It will be greatly appreciated - I will drown the sorrow of his garish refusal to shelter me in the glass!'

Right before the dessert, Dimitar excused himself as he would be late for his grandfather's party and left. The conversation was flowing around the food and the wine and the ways of cutting the cake. Rada started clearing the dishes from the main course but when she reached the far end of the table, where Konstantin's grandfather was seated in one of the captain's chairs she stopped. The young woman carefully put the pile of dishes on the table before she dared to look again at the old man. Grandpa Kosta was sitting with his gnarled hands on the table, one of them holding his half-empty glass of red wine, a piece of meat speared on his fork, a happy smile on his sun-lit face. His faded green eyes were trained at his wife few chairs away. The old man was not breathing.

Konstantin was following Rada's progress around the table and he was curious why she left the dishes next to his grandfather. Few seconds later her stillness registered, but he was few steps behind her back. When she swayed, he jumped and caught her, at the same time having a look at what she had been staring. He was not a doctor, but the instinct conveyed the message fast - Gramps had had his final feast. Holding Rada, he sucked his breath - how would Gran take that? He looked at her and she turned from the

conversation with Mitzi who was sitting next to her. Elka looked at her grandson embracing the young woman and smiled, but the next instant the smile turned to alarm and she followed Rada's gaze. Elka stood up, took her husband's lifeless hand and collapsed in Mitzi's arms. Before Rada reached her, she was not breathing also.

Rada fought with all she had in her, tears streaming down her lovely face, but when the ambulance arrived only minutes later, both cardiograms were showing a straight line. The middle-aged doctor on duty shook his gray head and said that the only thing he could do is to offer Konstantin a sedative for the shock of losing both family members at once. He wrote the protocols and asked about the funeral arrangements. Konstantin paled at the thought that he had to call his brother and parents and it would take days before they arrived. The doctor offered to take the bodies to Rada's hospital morgue as it was a decent facility to keep them until the family could arrive and Konstantin agreed. When the ambulance left, he numbly stumbled into Mihailovs' sitting room and dropped in an armchair, only to jump at the sound of Mitzi's voice from the open study.

'Stop it, Rada, you could not have done anything, it was not your fault, child!' Her soothing words had the opposite effect on the young doctor and she wailed desperately, 'But I knew it, I knew it, I should have done something!'

'Kosta you talk to her!' Mitzi said and closed the door on her way out.

'Rada, Mitzi is right! Nobody lives forever...' Konstantin knelt in front of her and took her hands. 'You told me that they were fine on Friday, you did check, you did your job, my dear! One day or another, we all will be there, calm down, it was just their time. Rada, look at me, they are a happy couple, their lives were long and full, they could not go one without the other. Think about them as a fairytale - they lived long and happy and died the same day!' He wiped her tear-streaked face with his hand and she finally opened her mermaid eyes.

'But it was such a great day and everything was so perfect! I should...'

'Shhh, you remember what the priest said yesterday, no, you were not there. He said, "Twice a year the Gates of Heaven are being opened so whoever dies on Easter or Christmas goes straight to God, no matter what he had done in his life. It is a special mercy and only God knows the reason to take them on His most

sacred days!" I believe He took them today to spare the formalities; they were anyway going up, as far as I am concerned.'

Konstantin's clear voice carried to the garden where around the now deserted table three people were sitting. The guests had hastily beaded their goodbye, offering condolences and help, and only Vesselin, Milena and Mitzi remained. The table was still not touched as if any moment the gay crowd would return and resume the feast. Milena was crying in her handkerchief but neither Mitzi nor Vesselin were in tears. The host looked at his guest and sighed 'You knew.'

There was no accusation in his voice; it was a plain acknowledgment of a fact of life.

'Now the question is who will be the third one,' he continued

'What do you mean the third one?' Mitzi was alarmed. 'Elka did not tell me anything about a third one!'

'Today in the morning I dreamed of Dora, Boris and Todor, sitting around this very table. So there must be a third one, Dora for Elka, Boris for Konstantin, so who was Todor here for?'

'I don't know,' the sheet-white Mitzi whispered. 'It has to be a man, right?'

'Not necessarily, but yeah, I think it would be a man. We will see. How about if we clean up a little?'

'Yes, of course, yes!'

'To your health, Grandpa and for gathering like that for many years from now on!' Tanas Jr. raised his glass sitting across from Dimitar at the polished dark table that should normally seat twelve. There were only six of them and plenty of space between the seats. Next to Tanas Sr., their grandfather, were seated his only son and his current wife, probably it would have been easier to number them than to remember their names, the blonde doing her best to be at nice terms with her stepsons who accidentally were older than she was. Tanas Jr. was seated next to his father while Dimitar was assigned the chair next to the stepmom. The presence of the sixth person around the table irked immensely both Tanas Jr. and his dad, but they knew better than to even glance at her with contempt. The young woman occupying the hostess's place was not a family member. She was Tanas Sr.'s favorite manager, his right hand and was privy to secrets that the family had no idea about. The rumors insisted that she was her boss's bought mistress. If the invisible bond between the two could glow, the capital would not need street lights, one of her colleagues had aptly

remarked. Dimitar was the only one unaware that during the last few years she had repeatedly thwarted the attempts of the other family members to chip even a sliver of the patriarch's vast empire – all done with remarkable shrewdness and complete lack of respect for them. Tanas Sr. paid her handsomely, no doubt, but even that piece of information was obscure to his progeny. Tanassov's son could hardly wait for his dad to kick the bucket to savor the moment when he would sack her! But until then he had to be nice and polite to the old coot and the fox sitting across from him.

'To your health!' repeated in unison his guests and Tanas Sr. thanked them for their kindness. He may have grown old, but not senile enough to not see that some of the smiles did not reached the eyes of their owners, he thought. He felt a tinge of pain that he should spend a chunk of the day in their company, but propriety had become his second nature and he did not want to even ripple the water in which the ship of his empire was sailing full mast. The old man had spent the last three years in scheming on the transfer that would inevitably come and he looked at Dimitar with pride. His grandson was still unaware of the plans, they could talk about it after dinner when he would shove his son, daughter-in-law and Tanas Jr. out and sit with the sculptor and Valkuda. He looked at the young woman with admiration - even the hatred emanating from the trio could not spoil the aura of confidence enveloping her like an invisible armor. Her grandfather would have been proud of her; she had inherited his sense of balance, his once jet-black hair and his fascinating green eyes. Another part of her inheritance was her absolute loyalty; it was something no amount of money could have bought him, as well as a head for business that Tanas Sr. had not seen on the shoulders of even his most competent advisers. He had followed her steady progress since she was a precocious mite and her grandfather used to carry her everywhere with him, like the knife he had never been seen without. Thus Valkuda had learned some skills indispensable for a young lady - like repairing motorcycles, fishing, shooting any rifle she could lay her tiny hands on, throwing knives, stealing eggs from the birds' nests, the list would go on and on. She had learned shorthand from her grandfather's apiary diaries, won all the math competitions she had decided to enter and was the nightmare of every teacher who had come in contact with her. The proud grandfather insisted that her first word was not "mama", but "why". He had poured his bottomless reservoirs of patience into her education, waiting after her language classes which she loved, piano lessons which she hated, and countless trips to the library and every imaginable public lecture that

may interest her. Upon his insistence she had graduated from a business administration school to the outrage of the entire family and promptly spent the summer working for Tanas Sr. At that time she had already received her acceptance confirmation from the leading economics faculty she had applied for and had a chance of a lazy summer on the beach. Valkuda had continued to work for Tanas Sr. during her first two student's years in Varna and then two things happened within days from one another - her grandfather died after few short days of a hospital and Tanas Sr. decided to move the headquarters to Sofia. The young woman moved with the office and continued her studies in the capital, refusing his offer for a foreign scholarship. Valkuda had channeled her grief into work and studies and had graduated on the top of her class. She had been Tanas Sr.'s general manager since then. Her former colleagues, now her subordinates in the management pyramid, had grudgingly recognized her as the force to reckon with. The reforms she had executed and the energy that she had put into reminded Tanas Sr. of his younger days. Yet Valkuda did not crave the power the way he did then, for her it was just another tool in the arsenal she deftly used. That made him far more content and assured that the bloody work he had put in all his life would not be torn apart by both the vultures sitting around the table and the ones lurking around in waiting. Sure the plan was not an orthodox one, but he had not been an orthodox man anyway. His only regret was that he had spent so many years chasing a mirage! If he could turn the sand glass back, a lot of misery would have been avoided. He sighed heavily.

The object of his pensive mood was watching her intently. She could sense that her boss was upset and she knew the reason, but the tingling in her spine indicated that she should be wary anyway. It was not like him to carry his emotions on the sleeve of his perfectly tailored suit yet Valkuda was sure she could see the regret and remorse oozing from him. No, it was not only the emotions that were coming out, she could sense something else present, like the cats could sense an earthquake before the seismologists. It was not the presence of Dimitar; he was familiar after few days spent in running from one lawyer's office to the next one from seven in the morning till the last one closed shop, which was after nine. The young sculptor had been totally confused but polite and making earnest efforts to get hold of the enormity of the situation. It was not the embers of rage, thinly covered but smoldering in the postures of Tanas Jr. and his dad, or the envy that transpired from the trophy blondie. It was one of those rare moments when she wished she were seven

and could run back into her grandfather's solid embrace as if into the safest harbor. Valkuda quickly shoved the feeling back in the fund of fond memories to draw strength from and smiled bravely.

The long hours of studying models at the art school had taught Dimitar a lot about the expressions of human faces when the humans thought no one was watching them. He was amused how easy it was to read his father and his brother. He was not surprised and not offended by them looking down their aristocratic noses at him. They were convinced that of the arts there was one to enjoy and it was the off-tune singing of some scantily dressed voluptuous young women, which fascination explained the last three of his stepmothers. For his sibling the right lasso had not tightened yet, may be it was a question of time or the young women preferred to dig their brightly manicured nails into a prey that would become independently richer sooner. The lore had put together legends about Tanas Sr.'s wealth and the common expectancy was that it would be transferred according to the tradition to his only son. However the patriarch's longevity had been their problem for years, no, for decades. He had stubbornly refused to transfer the reigns even partially to his offspring. He sometimes discretely paid his son's and grandson's creditors upon condition that they would not give them money again, but there were always some other suckers who were lured with the promises of fast gain soon. That was the reason why the office had moved from Varna, which Tanas Sr. loved to the last brick of the Cathedral and the last pebble of the Sea Garden. That had been hard on him but he rarely let the mask of superiority slip and Dimitar could count on the fingers of one hand when he had witnessed it. The young sculptor had offered several times to come back - half-heartedly, as he worshiped his apprenticeship chance and cherished the satisfaction that came with it. His grandfather had refused the offer, saying that Dimitar still had time and he would be called if needed. He had been, indeed, when his grandma had faded off in the nursing home where her failed mind had kept her prisoner in her own body for over thirty-five years. And even then, as soon as suitable, he was asked to give his grandfather a power of attorney to settle the estate and was virtually shipped back to France. Dimitar had not been surprised by the lack of open mourning for a person who had been forgotten by the world long before he himself was born, but the urgency to get him out of the way hurt somewhat. So why was he summoned in mild but imperative tone this time? Because of some paperwork that had already been prepared and read to him in a hurry, the legal people eager to get his signature next to the stickers with a pointing finger which were in vogue with

their secretaries? Because of a family reunion which invoked all the joy of an intimate funeral of a pauper at state's expense? To meet his father's present wife before she became ex-wife? He looked at his grandfather's assistant who had been his shadow since his return. Valkuda has revealed only that the hustle was part of restructuring plan devised by Tanas Sr. to avoid taxes over the estate. She had reassured him that there was nothing to worry in the foreseeable future, Mr. Tanassov had been in the care of the best specialists in the country, but at the age of eighty it would be prudent to think about estate taxes, especially so soon after the demise of Mrs. Tanassova. Dimitar wished they had more time to spend together not talking about restructuring, shares, reserved parts of inheritance and other things that were gallimaufry to him. He still wanted to take her to dinner where she would not catch him staring at her completely oblivious to her legal-terms-splattered speech. Valkuda had done it several times already and he loved the way she shook her severe bun that reminded him of school teacher. The stiff hairdo could tame her curls, but not the flame of these eyes the color of freshly mowed meadow where the sparks of impatience floated like silver butterflies. Dimitar knew she would never look at anyone down her straight, a little bigger than expected nose, her nostrils flaring like that of a big cat sensing the hot, maddening taste of a quarry. She was as extraordinary as her name who some relative had fished from the "Dictionary of Obscure and Forgotten Monikers" to spite another relative, Dimitar snickered. Grandfather was calling her "Vàle" which diminutive no one else used except her own grandfather who was becoming blurry in Dimitar's memory. What was she doing on Monday night and would she agree to do it with him? When she had met him at the airport with his grandfather, a quick scan of her fingers had revealed no engagement ring but the direct interrogation of Tanas Sr. had revealed only a quizzical smile and "I suggest you find yourself!" smirk. May be he should give it a try tonight?

"There is only one real power!" thought Tanas Sr. looking at the wistful expression on Dimitar's face who was looking at Valkuda. He felt bubbles of happiness coursing through him, like the bubbles of fine champagne, spreading their refreshing fuzz. The old man was content that his last scheme had a chance of success much better than the most elaborate stuff of his youth, because this was based on the knowledge of human nature and the instinct that he had learned to follow. It was a "just like that" decision as one of his old acquaintances would say and may be he would be able to meet her husband in the other world and tell

him how much he appreciated it. Hopefully there would be someone to introduce him, he smirked inwardly, as most of his associates would definitely not be up there. Was he going to be, that was a question also. There was too much pain, too much suffering hanging on his balance, although he had tried to repent and tried not to augment it unnecessary. Was he able to repent for at least a fraction of it? He closed his eyes and heard a polite 'Indeed, yes!'

Tanas Sr. shuddered, thinking that he had spoken out his thoughts. But the voice, it was a voice that did not belong to anyone around the table, he had last heard it fifty-two years ago in a chamber of the Sofia Central Prison, his owner was dead for so long! The old man's eyes opened warily.

'You are right again!' chuckled the voice, coming from a tall man in white shirt sitting comfortably in a chair next to him. The conversation around the table continued as if he was the only one to see or hear him. Tanas Sr. was surprised that he was not afraid of the encounter and smiled at his unexpected guest.

'I presume it is time to go.'

'It is. Because of that night so long ago when you tried to buy me some more time, never mind your motives, I am willing to wait for few seconds, but hurry up, we are almost late again,' the vision folded his big hands over the crisp white table cloth.

The nostrils of the jade-eyes enchantress flared and she put down her wine glass.

'Mr. Tanassov?'

Dimitar looked at his grandfather and saw his face drained of any color except the intense black of his eyes. He jumped at the same time as Valkuda and run towards the old man clutching his chest. Dimitar grabbed his chair muttering something like "Hold on, you need to lie down for a second!", but Tanas Sr.'s hand shot at his and stopped him.

'No time, Dimitar, promise me that you will listen to Vale, whatever she says, you will listen, promise me!'

The sculptor swallowed convulsively 'I will, but you hold on, please, Grandpa!'

'Vale, take care of him and don't forget my coin!' his other hand was clutching the slender wrist of the young woman bended above, his voice a fading whisper.

'I will, and please say hi to grandpa!' whispered Valkuda back for only him to hear her.

The old man surged in one last effort to stand up, using their hands to lean on, and when he almost succeeded, his voice was unexpectedly clear. 'I am ready, Todor, let's go!'

His tall frame swayed and if not for the support of Dimitar and Valkuda, he would have hit the table face first.

The young people carefully laid his body on the floor and after a blink of hesitation Valkuda reached and closed his eyes. Somewhere close a church bell tolled five o'clock.

'What a charming display of affection, hopefully the last I need to witness,' sneered Tanasov's son. still in his chair. He felt liberated from the necessity to hide the hatred on his face and the derision in his voice when he was talking to Valkuda. 'You may pack and go, by the way, your services are not needed further. Consider yourself fired without notice and get out of here fast!'

'Father! Stop it!' Dimitar was outraged.

'What? We can arrange a funeral without her and we are better without her in general.'

Before Dimitar managed to formulate an answer, Valkuda stood up and straightened the cuffs of her dark green dress. She looked right in the eyes of Tanassov's son and her voice was even.

'I am sorry for you as you might be up to the surprise of your life, but according to the will of Mr. Tanassov, I am entrusted with the funeral arrangements as well as the disposition of his estate. A copy of it with his lawyer Mr. Tsarev should be read to you immediately upon Mr. Tanassov's death and at any rate before any funeral arrangements are to be made. Mr. Tanassov had made provisions that his last requests would be followed to the letter and the guards had been aware of them since the death of your mother with the strict instructions to intervene if needed. As far as the management of the estate is concerned, I have the right to occupy this house up and until the final distribution of the assets, including the trusts that had been set up, all at the expense of the estate, guards included. After that it goes back to the owner.'

The deafening silence that followed was broken by Tanas' son, whose words rattled in his throat.

'Bitch! I will kill you!'

'I doubt you would like to do that!' Valkuda was calm with the deceptive stillness of a swamp, her voice equally cold. 'According to the terms of the will, if anyone listed in it is even associated, I repeat, associated, with my demise or the death of any other of the main beneficiaries, that person loses any rights in the inheritance, except one penny to be distributed under express acknowledgment. Same is reserved for the people who challenge the will in court, by the way! A penny does not cover much expense, I believe.'

The three people still seated around the table were frozen in their chairs. Experience had taught them that if Valkuda was telling them something, it was probably true. They knew the old man was vindictive, but to bypass his own blood and to handle everything to a stranger, that was hard to swallow. Of course they could hire lawyers, but by Tuesday morning the witch would have the will published. It would be hard to find a lawyer who would work for the promise of being paid from the estate, moreover under the conditions that their only option was to declare Tanas Sr. inapt. Who would believe that? Two days ago he had made a substantial donation to Sofia University and his photo with the rector shaking his hand and bestowing upon him some honorary degree in exchange for the money has been plastered on the front pages of every newspaper in the country. The amount had been so outrageously big that even the yellow press got unexpectedly interested in economics. They would have to wait and see what they got and take it from there.

'So we cannot go back to Varna before the will is read?' the blondie voiced their common concern.

'No, I don't think it would be proper, but you still have a choice. Now under the circumstances, may I suggest we skip the dessert? I will call you about the reading of the will, hopefully it will be possible to arrange it for tomorrow morning around ten at the office of Mr. Tsarev, as I need to contact some more people about it.'

'We are not done!' rasped Tanas Jr. pushing his chair forcefully. His father followed suit, glaring at the young woman. The blondie tiptoed around her dead father-in-law and had the decency to make the sign of a cross and mutter something appropriate before following the two men. A young lithe man appeared from nowhere to see them off. He closed the door and Valkuda dropped in Tanas Sr.'s chair, grabbed his linen napkin and wailed in it. Dimitar stood up and pulled the chair the blondie had vacated close to her. He was astound by the sudden transformation; the iron lady of two minutes ago crumbled over the stark white tablecloth, the facade of ice cold disdain now a mask of burning grief. He had seen such primeval cry over dead in a scene from a film about ancient Greece, where the women were pouring their hearts out in sobs and wails, but had always thought of it as a horribly beautiful scene born out of director's creativity. Yet there she sat next to him, the sophisticated, educated, professional woman, and her grief was not different from the one of her ancient, illiterate, home-bound sisters. He put a hand around her shoulders and tugged. Valkuda turned, buried her head in his shoulder and continued to sob.