

Union

Mitzi's wedding outfit together with the fitting and a trial version of her hairdo did not take long past lunchtime. Even Maritsa was not let see it as Nada told her that it would be spoiling her surprise the next morning. The little maid had already had all her excitement that she could soak in for a day and was going through her chores mechanically. One could practically see wedding bells in her eyes and their din was ringing in her ears, so her sensory overload resulted in a heavily salted crème brûlée, sugar in the potato soup and cauliflower puree instead of breaded one. Mitzi consoled her that she would pass it as her rehearsal as a young bride. Then she tossed the spoiled vegetable in the bin and did it herself to the astonishment on behalf of the young girl. Maritsa was convinced that Mitzi could not make a difference between a ladle and potato press if they hit her. Then Nada and Dora helped the future bride pack for her surprise honeymoon amidst wild and wilder speculations as to where Iossif would take her on such a short notice. Rome was considered too far away for a week travel, and as he had mentioned something about humidity, Nada suggested that their destination would be Athens, despite the rumors about the dramatic events in Greece. Mitzi looked at the engagement ring. No, it would not be Athens, she was sure, but as the rose refused to help, she agreed to wait and see.

The morning of that Sunday promised a nice sunny day with the tiny shivers of the full blown autumn. By ten o'clock the thin fog had dispersed and the capital was back to its usual Sunday's chores - families coming back from church or going to visit friends or relatives, everyone dressed in accordance to their ideas about fashion and the monetary availability to turn in it into reality. Old ladies were gossiping over cups of tea and some dainty cookies at the sweetshop, maids and nannies were relaxing with a cup of cocoa and some cakes, happy groups of young men were debating the qualities of the little restaurants where they would spend the afternoon, venerable family fathers were admonishing their offspring to be patient in the ice-cream lines. Iossif was dressed up when Lambri came, up to the yellow chrysanthemum arrangement in his breast pocket.

'Ivy?' the best man's brows rose.

'Ivy,' confirmed the groom, pointing at the glass panels behind Lambri.

'You still love her...' It was not a question, nor there was a surprise in the best man's voice. He had met Anna albeit briefly during one of his vacations in Sofia but had not paid much attention to the circumspect wife of his father's friend. He had received a letter with the tragic news of her death and that of the unborn child, he had hoped like everyone else that the time would ease the pain and let Iossif continue his life. Which Iossif had done, yet he had never given his heart to another woman. Sure there had been candidates, some of them really decent women, some not so, but the only portrait in Iossif's wallet was of the woman eternally smiling from the wall. The sudden decision to marry Mitzi had shocked everyone. Nada and Lambri had had to fend several calls with not so subtle remarks about the capacities of the groom. Looking at Anna's blue eyes, Lambri felt the pain of the sudden realization that should the Fate have had mercy for her, today Mitzi could have married her grandson, instead of her widower. Why was Iossif going through that entire circus when it was painfully obvious that the only woman in his life had been and remained Anna? He turned and met the ebullient gaze of the groom.

'Come on, spit it!' Iossif said. 'Ask me why I am doing it.'

'Was I talking aloud?' Lambri looked at him with horror.

'Not at all, Lambri, we know each other for so long, that I can do without the words sometimes. No, I am not out of my mind. And it is not only that I will be saving a damsel in distress, although this is the sweet addition. In fact I am selfish - I want someone to continue what I have started on several directions. In the last few years I had felt apathy, waited for a sign of the Fate, if you wish, rather than fight for it. I am old. As I told Boris the other day, I am more than ready to meet the Lady with the Scythe. But in the last few months I found that I am not comfortable with the legacy I will leave. No, let me rephrase it: I am comfortable with the legacy, but not the legatees. I am selfish, I told you. I want Anna's portrait to remain here even after I am gone. So my curators will do that? I doubt that a person who had never entered a museum in their entire life will be able to resist turning this house in something, how to say it more politely, well, cozy, rather than a memorial. So I decided to get my own curator. I know it is blackmail, but Mitzi will be handsomely compensated for the trouble. She will have the baby, the baby will have a name, they both will be provided for life, and I will have my wish. In few years she will be free to remarry and I trust you all will take care that

she goes on with her life. I know it is a high stake, but I have nothing to lose and everything to gain, and so has Mitzi. Now, as we have to move, you shall tuck your flower in and before you do that, you will tuck in your inside pocket this envelope. There is the address of the hotel where we will be staying, as well as the address of my notary, you know Shlomo Behar, don't you, as well as the address of my funeral agent in case something goes not as planned. Don't look at me like that, Boris was remarkably frank, if I manage to finish the spring semester that would be a miracle. We will all go there, so better be prepared. Let us go, I have a mother-in-law to meet!'

It was for his benefit, the joke, Lambri thought, adjusting the chrysanthemum on his best suit. The carriage was waiting and Iossif locked the door. Mrs. Vassileva had departed earlier with her son and Riste in his new suit to supervise the church decoration. Nada was going to come few minutes later with the girls and Vesselin.

'I hope that my bride's outfit will go with the yellow, I never heard a word about what she will be wearing...'

'Oddly enough, but I did not either. They were so secretive, even Maritsa had not had a glance. I will confess, I checked the wastebasket, but there were no pieces of anything that may give away their ideas. I think it will be white, so it will go along. Anyway, it is too late for that now. May I have the rings, please; I will have to give them to you in the church.'

'You are sure you will recognize which one is mine and which is Mitzi's?'

'Iossif, we had not had anything to drink today, and I am sure that the bottle that we shared between the four of us yesterday could not last that long...'

'Just asking, you have more practice as a best man than I have as a groom, I am expected to be nervous!'

'Once again that one, about the nervous, please! Did we get the bouquet for Mitzi?'

'No, Martha got it, packed in an ice box of all things. Let's ride.'

Strand after strand, Nada was plaiting Mitzi's lustrous black hair into six-section ancient hairdo. She felt fleetingly sad that the mother of the bride would not have such a pleasure, but reasoned that it had been her choice to relinquish it. May be it was for good, as far as Nada knew Mrs. Altinova, there would have been shrieks and cries and faints and moans about what she would have considered improper, childish, old-

fashioned idea of her hare-brained daughter. During the last two days, Nada had come to a completely different set of epithets to describe Mitzi. The young woman sitting on the floor was a sea of serenity. She had taken her own wants and put them on the back shelf in order to show respect and gratitude for a hand extended in help. She was composed and had bitten the bullet like a soldier. The mother understood the powerful drive to do what would be the best for the unborn baby, but Mitzi was not meekly accepting an offer, she was doing her best to reciprocate the goodness. Nada pinned another flower to the black locks and adjusted the golden net with it. Almost done. And almost time to go, few minutes to the most to spare. Iossif had asked not to be too early though.

The news of the wedding was the talk of the town and the cathedral was full to bursting point. The front pews were occupied by the dignitaries and their wives, both the invited couples and the ones who invited themselves, at full parade, orders clinking, diamonds sparkling, silks rustling. Right behind them were the academics with their venerable halves, decorated in all thinkable and unthinkable medals that they have gathered during their long careers, some of them grumbling about the politics always usurping the rightful place of the science. Most were friends or colleagues of either the groom or the best man or both, and were invited to the dinner at "Balkan" across the street. The arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Altinov brought some bustle, greetings were exchanged, congratulations offered, yet nobody dared to comment on the utterly unconventional age difference between the bride and the groom. Mr. Altinov was sweating in his best suit, adorned with a chrysanthemum arrangement by the watchful Martha. The cathedral was lavishly decorated in white, yellow and green, must have taken hours of work to accomplish the fairytale atmosphere. There were flowers everywhere, every pew, candelabra, icon of the gold-plated altar held its own special arrangement, the one of the Holy Family having the most elaborate one. Mrs. Altinova was grudgingly sinking into the feeling that even with their decent income they could not have offered Mitzi anything remotely close. Their daughter had tricked them again, she thought bitterly, even the scene on Friday had possibly been a part of the plot to comply with her schemes. But she had played her cards well, really well. Now her father had to be very careful around her if the future son-in-law could command such a presence on a short notice. Or may be she and her husband have been the last to know, everybody snickering at them behind their backs. Mrs. Altinova had not dared to call any of her friends to attend the wedding, but

she had seen several of them on the pews at the back, looking with a new respect at her. Well, not many of them could boast that they had sat in front of two rows of ministers, couldn't they! Mrs. Altinova straightened her shoulders and arranged her hat. She could afford to be very, very selective with her next tea party invitations.

Lambri took out his watch and looked at it. There were five minutes left to one o'clock and he was beginning to worry. It was not in Nada's habits to be late, and technically she was not yet, but it was getting close. Next to him Iossif was calmly chatting with Martha's son about his upcoming exam in Latin which the boy obviously was not fond of. He did look decades younger, the best man thought, he had reached that eternal stage where few days or few months or even few years would make rather small difference. Lambri hoped that it would be as long as possible, as Iossif was a good man and it was good to have him around. The racket of a carriage at top speed startled him and the best man turned to see it arriving at a screeching halt at the cathedral's steps. Out of it jumped Vesselin, who first helped his mother to get out, then Dora in her dark blue dress. Then Lambri's eyes widened and he pulled indelicately on Iossif's sleeve. The groom followed his gaze and turned into stone pillar next to his best man.

Up the wide stone stairs, a Roman bride was coming towards them. Oblivious to the fact that she was late by several thousand years for her wedding, the tall woman was regal in her white long tunica recta tied with a girdle in a Herculean knot, folds splendidly arranged by a skillful vestiplica, her shoulders covered with a sprawling bright sunset-yellow flameum, her hair elaborately arranged on top of her head under golden net fastened with a crown of fleur d'orange. The hem of her tunica almost completely hid matching yellow shoes. Her naturally golden skin was void of any make-up, except the kohl around her eyes which looked hypnotic blue under the thick dark lashes.

It was Iossif's laughter that broke the spell, a young, joyous, victorious sound, and Mitzi smiled in return. Lambri slapped his forehead then joined the laughter. Nada, Dora and Vesselin came up also. Iossif looked at his bride and sighed contentedly, 'Mitzi, that was worth waiting for. More than worth it! Thank you! But I think we have to correct something with your costume!'

The young woman sucked her breath, but did not say a word. The groom hurriedly continued, 'Oh, you have done it all right on your part, my dear, but I think we need to add that!' He pulled a small package from his pocket.

From it came a pearl string of wondrous beauty and a matching pair of earrings. It was Lambri's turn to suck his breath as he recognized the set. Anna was wearing the jewels on her portrait in Iossif's sitting room. Why was Iossif giving them to Mitzi at that moment? He could have sent it with Martha across the yard in the morning, but he had chosen to keep them until now. It was his final gesture of confirmation that Mitzi was the right person to come at that moment in his life. He could have withdrawn it at any time and still kept his side of the bargain. The pearls were a sign that Mitzi would not be Anna's shadow, but a continued legacy. Definitely Anna would have wished for Iossif to continue with his life after she was gone, and had told him so. Lambri's heart swelled that it had taken so long for his friend to find a matching soul and it was so late. But a slice of bread was better than no bread at all, was it not? Could it be that Mitzi would match his friend's zest for life, his sense of humor, his insatiable curiosity, his finesse of judgment and his fierceness in fight? How one could ever be sure of that?

The bouquet was brought by Martha, who smiled at Mitzi. Dora, Vesselin and the housekeeper entered the church doors and a deacon came to lead in the bride and the groom. The matron of honor took a sweeping look over the flowers decorating the cathedral ablaze with hundreds of lit candles and filtered sun rays, then she looked at the bride. Mitzi was outstandingly beautiful and the classic outfit showed her features to perfection. Iossif had been right about the final touch that the pearls added. Nada had also recognized Anna's jewels and was thinking about the professor's motives to hand them to Mitzi. In her mind's eye she saw the smile of Iossif's first wife for decades facing the delicate glass panels that had been her swan song. The matron of honor quickly looked at the bride's bouquet - a cascading splendor of white and yellow chrysanthemums and ivy. Goose bumps covered older woman's skin although the day was warm. Anna somehow had known what would happen half a century later, Nada thought, she had to have known. How otherwise to explain the coincidence between Iossif's presence at Mitzi's announcement, his decision to act upon, the short notice and the lack of other flowers to decorate the cathedral? The professor had told Boris and Lambri that he had dreamed of Anna the morning before he had come with his bleeding nose. The

wedding preparations were done so fast and yet not a glitch had happened, everything flowing into order as if an invisible helping hand was there and a watchful eye above it. Nada looked at the pearls like dew against Mitzi's golden skin and a reassurance flew through her veins. The young wife had her predecessor's blessing, unknowingly she had obtained a guarding angel that she had never met. It was only right to bless the union. The matron gripped the hand of the best man and he read the statement on her face. The doors of the cathedral opened and the sweet notes of the choir filled the air, up and up to the clear blue sky above.

Nobody remembered Professor Spassov dancing as long as they lived, and some of the people present had lived fairly long. The day have been full of surprises and when the small orchestra of "Balkan" started playing the first waltz after the sumptuous dinner, these present were in for another one. The groom murmured something in the bride's year, gallantly pulled her chair and led her to the dance floor. Evidently waltzing was like riding bicycle, one never forgot it. The newlyweds were gliding in perfect rhythm as if they have been practicing for ages. One-two-three, swirl and sweep, Mitzi's yellow shoes like darting goldfish over the polished floor, her yellow shawl draped low over her arms to a gentle arc on her back, her golden hairnet catching glints from the chandeliers above and reflecting them on Iossif's smiling face, his full head of silver hair a little above hers even with her height enhanced by several inches of heels and hairdo, his black suit a stark contrast with her flowing white dress. Over his glass of wine, Lambri was looking at the couple from the vantage position of the central table. When they were dancing, nobody could tell about their age difference, they were out of the folds of time, a Roman priestess and a turn of the century gentleman, an impossible meeting and improbable match, but somehow forming a harmonious union. The best man fervently wished he could turn back the flow of sand in the hourglass for Iossif, to buy him few more instants to enjoy that celebration made possible by the goodness of his friend's heart, no matter what he had claimed in the morning. The wedding was fitting for both of them, extraordinary like the man who organized it and unique as the woman who was in the center of attention. There had hardly been a dry eye in the cathedral when Exarch Stefan had announced that the groom may kiss the bride and Iossif had kissed Mitzi's forehead, then she had bowed and kissed his wedding band.

The irony that they all had Tashev to thank for the entire situation did not escape the best man. Should the police boss have taken his chance to marry Mitzi, neither of the events of the last three whirlwind days

would have happened. Lambri admitted that he would have been the first to declare a total madness the possibility of Iossif marrying his goddaughter's best friend and his own student. Mitzi would have never thought of making a pass at a man she rightfully considered a part of the history of art. Every scandal-monger worth her salt would have claimed as an outright lie the rumors about Iossif getting married altogether, not in three days by the Exarch personally, with full pomp. Yet it had happened and it was going to be interesting time when the news reached Mikhail. Graceful retreat would be the last thing expected from the ruthless monster that he was gradually turning into, so they would have to watch for Mitzi not to be left alone. There was a slim hope that he would say "good riddance" and forget about her, but Lambri was not buying that. He was afraid that when the news about the baby came around, Tashev would retaliate with vengeance. It would not be news to cover under the lid, that was for sure. A lot of people around the town were good at mathematics to guess who the father of the little one was no matter what the baptismal certificate would say. Lambri tried to stifle his uneasy thoughts, it would be plenty of time to worry later, today was a day of celebration. The waltz had finished and the radiant couple was coming towards the table. He stood to toast them.

The groom responded to the toast with few playful sentences that drew roars of laughter from his guests. He then pointed that as the time for the couple's honeymoon was approaching, he would like to ask all the attending ladies of non-married status to get together for Mitzi to throw her bouquet. A quick look around the banquet room yielded only one apparently non-married lady attending. The scarlet Dora had no chance of hiding behind anybody's back. Her best friend smiled broadly and hugged her, handing her the dainty arrangement of chrysanthemums. 'I hope you will tell me in advance who he is going to be!' she joked in hush tones. Iossif urged the happy gathering not to stop the celebration upon their departure, insisting that Lambri the best man was as hospitable as the groom himself. Then he waved, took Mitzi's elbow and escorted her under the cheers of the revelers who continued to enjoy their wining, dining and dancing.

Nada went after them to help Mitzi change her wedding dress with the suit she had chosen for traveling. The Matron of Honor was beyond proud with her charge, to the point that she did not want to think of Mrs. Altinova playing grand dame at the banquet hall under the condescending looks of the other guests. The

mother of the bride was not a good advertisement for her daughter but lossif had asked for patience until Mitzi departed and his friends' good breeding had endured much tougher quests. Nada was glad she would have few undisturbed moments with the young woman. After folding the bridal outfit and helping undo the ancient hairstyle that she had created, the matron smiled and picked up her handbag. She took out a new wallet, very feminine soft leather one, and handed it to Mitzi.

'My dear, we could not find you a special present for your wedding within the time we had, so you will get it after you come back. Lambri and I decided that you may need some money for something whimsy during your honeymoon, although I know lossif well enough to tell you that he will not let you in need of anything. He is a good man, Mitzi, and I hope you both will be happy for as long as God had decided. When you come back, you will be even closer neighbor and don't forget, whatever happens, you can always count on us.'

Mitzi hugged the older woman for dear life. Nada hugged her back and thought that her charge had enormous courage - she had not asked a word about the conditions of this hasty marriage, had voiced neither concern nor request about herself. She needed reassurance, but the time was up, as lossif was at the door in his traveling outfit with a small briefcase in hand. The luggage had been collected early during the day and all Mitzi needed was her handbag.

'Thank you for everything!' she breathed in Nada's ear, then smiled and turned to face lossif. 'Shall we go?'

'Indeed we shall hurry, child, as no matter how important we think we are, the Orient Express has a schedule to keep with or without our presence!'

'Orient Express? Does it mean that we are going to Istanbul? Really?'

'One bird had told me how much you like the city; I thought it is a good place in the autumn and close enough.'

'Thank you! Thank you very much! I do love the idea!'

'Let us not miss it then!'

And they left, her hand firmly tucked in the crook of his arm. The Matron of Honor did what all the mothers do in such a moment - she took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. She went to look for the informative bird and reassure her that her godfather had listened to her talk more than she could imagine.