

## Tale of Two Murders

The winter blues had claimed one more of the assistant-professors and Mitzi's drawing class was canceled at the last minute. She thought of going to the library but decided against and headed home. The afternoon was gradually turning into evening and Lyulin mountain was not visible in the low clouds. The young woman wrapped her tweed coat more securely around herself and started walking. She was crossing the street in front of the university when a car stopped behind her. Before she realized what happened, she was seated on the back seat and staring into Mikhail's steely eyes.

Oddly, her first thought was that it was not his trophy Mercedes; that was a police car, as the driver's compartment was separated with a thick glass and wire mesh. The car started immediately and she doubted many people had seen her disappear. She had to get out, as soon as possible. Mitzi pulled the handle, but Tashev was faster and pulled her hand.

'Hurrying somewhere?'

'Home! Let me go this instant!'

'Not so fast, we have a talk to finish!'

'We don't. You said everything and I don't want to listen to anything more from you!'

'Do you want me to think that you would rather listen to that old mummy you married to spite me? How did you manage to convince him so fast? And I have heard you even managed to convince him that the child is his, as he had been bragging around the town about it. What, poor lecher thinks he made it on your wedding night? You scheming slut!'

'I am not a slut! Iosif knows everything about the baby, he knew from the beginning!'

'How charming, so tell me, what did you do to convince him to acknowledge my child as his? No man in his right mind will willingly raise another man's bastard; don't even try to fool me!'

'It is not your child; you said you don't want to know about it. Now let me go, you said you didn't want to know about me either.'

'You are right, I don't give a damn about you, but you have made me a laughing stock of the town, and that I don't like either. No, you are not going to flaunt my child as his, you bitch!'

The first slap was so unexpected that Mitzi did not have the time to scream far less to protect herself. The next blows were as fast and severe. All she managed was to curl protectively over her growing belly before she lost consciousness.

From his corner Riste watched a black car stop in front of Professor Spassov's house. In the dusk, he looked at the silhouettes of a man, gallantly embracing a woman towards the front steps, pressing the bell, after that swiftly returning to the car which sped down the dark street. Several moments later Martha's anguished shriek propelled the shoe polisher towards the house without thinking.

By the time the housekeeper had opened the door, Mitzi was an unconscious heap on the stairs. Martha bended over her, thinking that she might have slipped, but when she turned the lump head towards the light, the air whooshed out her lungs. The lovely face was a bloody mess, her split lip bleeding and the red marks already turning ghastly purple, purple spots going down her throat and swelling closing her eyes. The only sign that she was alive was a barely audible moan and a ragged breath when Martha tried to lift her in. The housekeeper was not aware that she was screaming until the frightened Riste emerged in front of her and bended to help. He scooped the young woman as gently as he could and lifted her. The housekeeper lead him to the closest sitting room where he deposited Mitzi on the sofa, holding her not to slip. Martha started running for some water and bandages when she caught a glimpse of a trickle of blood starting from somewhere behind the door and leading to Mitzi's boot and up her thick socks. "Dear God, not this, please, not this!" the housekeeper whispered through cracking lips and run to the phone. Iossif would still be at his lecture and it would take a while to reach him, the time running out already, so she called Mitzi's obstetrician office first. The horrified assistant said to bring the young woman immediately to the hospital, the faster the better, not to bring anything, just bring her. The nurse promised to call the university herself. Martha sent Riste to hail a cab at the corner and donned her coat, stuffing her purse and the keys in the pockets. The corner street was one of the main arteries of the city and the cabs were passing constantly but the minute before Riste ran in with the coach felt like an eternity. The shoe polisher lifted the still unconscious Mitzi in

the cab, Marta climbed after her and held her mistress. Riste jumped to sit next to the trembling coach. The cab rattled towards the hospital. Behind it the darkness was closing over the street.

The Rector's office was closed and until the message transferred through several people reached Iossif, his lecture was almost over. He dismissed the class, grabbed his coat and bag and caught the first cab in front of the university. The message said "hospital" so he first hurried to Boris, only to find out that as their family doctor he had been called to the private maternity hospital which was run by Mitzi's obstetrician. Cursing the messengers' omission the professor hailed another cab. Martha and Riste were in the waiting room, the housekeeper uncontrollably sobbing into the young lad shabby coat. A look at the normally composed Mrs. Vassileva hanging on the lapels of a paper-white shoe cleaner told Iossif that his wife's "incident" was much graver than he thought. He marched to the nurse in charge, she pointed at the closed doors of the emergency and said she would try to find a doctor. She knew that Mrs. Spassova was out of the operation room, but had no information other than that. The professor returned to the couple still standing in one corner together. He looked in the blue eyes of the young man and the compassion he saw there scared him more.

'What happened?' he asked almost inaudibly.

'Someone had beaten her badly,' whispered Riste over Martha's head. 'I saw a car stopping in front of your house and someone brought her to the door and rang the bell, then left, then Mrs. Vassileva screamed and I rushed, but she has been unconscious.'

'Did you see the man?'

'No, it was dark already. He looked tall and it was a big car that drove him.'

'Drove him? He was not driving himself?'

'No, he sat on the passenger side.'

The flying doors of the emergency yard opened and Boris came out with Dr. Petrov. His face was gray and the eyes of the other doctor darted to not meet Iossif's. Boris motioned for him to follow them and they entered a corridor leading to administrative offices. Dr. Petrov opened his study and let them in, still not looking at Iossif. They all sat in the sturdy bulky chairs and then their host cleared his throat. 'Professor Spassov, I regret to be the bearer of bad news, but...'

Boris interrupted him, 'Maybe I can explain the situation to Professor Spassov and you will go back and check on Mrs. Spassova?'

'Of course, please, you will have some privacy here, but if you need anything, just ring and the nurse will get me,' Petrov hastily departed.

'Professor,' Boris turned to face him, 'it is worse than you think. She is beaten blue, the baby is gone and she will never be able have children. I believe you don't need the medical details on that part. We will be lucky if she herself pulls through. She had lost a lot of blood and there may be an internal bleeding that we do not know about yet, as we cannot probe. She hurts all over to tell if something is not right inside. If there is no internal rupture she will survive the night. If she survives the night, she most probably will live, she is young and the body is strong. I am afraid that she may succumb to the shock though. Mrs. Vassileva had brought her here immediately, but it was too late for the baby anyway. I don't know how much Mitzi had been aware of the gravity of her injuries before she had lost consciousness. The nurse told me that when they tried to undress her, she was screaming "No, Mikhail, no!" but that is all that we know for the moment. She has been under anesthesia since, but should be coming out soon. It is against the rules, but I spoke with Dr. Petrov and he allowed for you to visit her for a while. Professor, are you all right?'

Boris was looking at Iossif who had not uttered a sound. He knew how attached the professor was to the young woman who he rightly credited with pulling him out of the grave on Christmas. At the thought that she might predecease him, Boris fought a wave of nausea which he had not felt since his first year at the medical school. He was worried about the professor, who was sitting in front of him like a marble bust, just a blue vein throbbing at his temple. Suddenly, the statue's eyes flew open and Iossif rucked, 'If she dies, he will die before I bury her. If she lives, he will be a marked man for as long as he lives, mark my words, Boris!'

The doctor did not need to do that - the primeval hatred that was emanating from the old man's eyes was frightening enough to imprint the rasped words forever on a stone pillar. To his astonishment, Boris realized that it was the first time he had ever seen Iossif enraged. He could not recall him even being upset with something, his manners eminently pleasant, his temper always under control. The man in front of him was again in control, but the black fury that was animating his eyes had transformed him into a fearsome creature, all but screaming "Vengeance is mine, I will repay". Boris shivered and caught himself thinking that

he did not know the man behind the grandfatherly dandy-looking neighbor who he remembered as long as he remembered himself. Lambri had insisted that Iossif never backed up and the doctor felt good that someone would take over Tashev, God be the witness that the monster had sucked enough blood to fill the Seven Rila's Lakes. Yet to kill his own unborn child - that was beyond something that even monsters would do. The room felt very, very cold and Boris thought for a second that he was standing at the edge of an enormous ravine from where chilly vapors emanated and formed deceptive images only to dissolve into nothingness and form again, horrific figures without faces or faces without corpses, their empty eyes staring at nothing, their hideous mouths laughing soundlessly. The doctor jerked back and returned to reality, where Iossif stared at him and said evenly, 'Bring me to her!'

The sheets were stark white and so was Mitzi's face, as if an artist had gone over her features with marble dust. Even her normally full red lips were drawn into thin white line. The deathly pallor made more intense the purple bruises and the dried blood over her split lip. The only other color in the sea of white was black - her lashes hardly visible from the swell, the arches of her brows and her coal black hair, which some good hand had smoothed back from her face. The artificial sleep had eased her pain, she looked even younger than she was and Boris' heart ached for her. In his mind eye he saw her handing her wedding bouquet to Dora, one vivacious smile. Dora! They had to get her out of there as soon as possible, before anyone got an idea about her pregnancy! True, due to the troubles she had, she kept more to home, but her condition would soon become visible and then it would be too late. Loads of people could calculate, good many knew about the engagement that was never officially announced and few of them might put two and two together. No matter how far fetched his fears were, she should be hidden before the vultures came after her. Even the unborn children were not safe; the sacred protection of the motherhood was there no more. Boris had to speak to Lambri that night and convince him. Looking at Mitzi, he thought that unfortunately it would not be that hard. It would be harder to hide the reason from Dora.

The nurse brought a chair for Iossif and he sat next to Mitzi's bed. The slight movement of her chest was the sign that she was still alive. In his memory another lifeless face framed by black hair floated and he felt as helpless as then, looking with despair how it was getting further and further. Then the rage came, blinding,

all consuming rage that left a scorched land behind. His eyes stopped on the rose ring on her finger. She had said she would wear it forever. It was just unbelievable that her "forever" would be cut short by the beast who was supposed to protect the innocent and helpless. Was that what his father had tried to warn him against in his dream and he had missed it? He knew the cruel nature of the human beings first hand; he should have been more vigilant. But the snake had coiled for so long that he had lost vigilance and failed to protect the young woman, just like his father. Just like him, he knew that revenge was a dish better eaten cold; he had to concentrate on Mitzi first. Iossif strengthened his spine and turned to Boris.

'I understand that some things cannot be influenced, but please do whatever can be done. If Dr. Petrov thinks a consilium might be necessary, do not hesitate about the cost. If you need money for a drug or an instrument, let me know how much. I would be glad if you can arrange for a private chamber and a nurse that will take care only of Mitzi, better two of them or as many as you think will be necessary for she never to be left alone as long as it is required to stay here. Later we will talk about arranging the care at home. I hope that under the circumstances I will be permitted to stay here tonight. I will just go have few words with my housekeeper and will be back.'

The nurse opened her mouth to object, but met Iossif's eyes and felt silent. She doubted there was a force to pry him from his spot and the girl most probably would not survive the night in any case. What was the point of sending the old man home only to call him few hours later?

The sobs that Martha had managed to curb, resumed at the one look she cast at Iossif's grim face. She was holding Riste's hand for support and stood up to meet the professor halfway. He did his best to calm the good woman and asked for few things to be brought to him at the hospital. Martha vowed to sleep at professor's house as she did not have a phone at her flat and could not be reached there. Before they parted, Iossif pulled the lad aside for few seconds.

'Riste, I trust you to take care about Mrs. Vassileva getting home safely. I also want to be sure that you will tell not a single living soul what you have witnessed tonight. I don't want you to forget it, I want you not to talk about it - you will be safer that way. I will explain to you later. One question: have you seen that car around before?'

'No, I don't think so, Professor, I think I would remember it. How is Mrs. Spassova doing?'

'Let us hope for the best. Now go take Mrs. Vassileva home and bring me what I asked for.'

Someone was reading her a fairytale. It smelled like spring and it was still dark, but a voice close to her was spinning a story about the bride of the Sun who was frying eggs for her brother on her husband's head. Oh, it was a very real fairytale, as she almost felt the pain of a burning drop of oil splattering on her skin. It should not be painful for so long, it was a teeny-tiny drop and she should have stopped being in pain as soon as she rubbed it off. The pain was growing, it was hurting all over and she cried, but the sound that came out of her throat was more of a whimper. She felt a cool hand brushing her forehead and tried to open her eyes to see who the person was, but even that hurt too much and she gave up. The fairytale reader had stopped talking and there were other people around, she felt a slight pinch in her arm and the pain receded like seawater retreating off the shore. She tried to open her eyes again and managed a little. In the slit she focused on lossif's worried face and the white walls around. The memory returned coupled with the sinking feeling of loss and emptiness and the wave of pain washed back. She cried again.

'I think it is better for you to go home, Professor Spassov, we will call you as soon as there is any change in Mrs. Spassova's condition...' the voice was half insisting, half pleading.

'I am staying, how many times should I repeat that?!' lossif was using the tone he employed in the classroom when a particularly annoying student kept bugging him. But she was not at the university; it did not smell of disinfectants and flowers at the same time. Mitzi tried to lift her eyelids, but they felt like lead. She felt lossif's hand holding her bruised one and squeezed it feebly. 'Please don't go!' The voice was nothing like hers but who cared.

'I am not planning to do it, child, as I was informing this nice lady across the bed! What do you want me to do after I am finished with her?'

Mitzi would have giggled if her mouth did not hurt that much. She forced her eyes to open a fraction, 'Read me a fairytale!'

'That's my girl! You see, Nurse, this is a perfect good reason for me to remain here, so please stop nagging.' He turned back to Mitzi, 'Once upon a time, there was a...'

Iossif read until her regular breathing told him the young woman was sound asleep. He drank the tea that the nurse brought him, adjusted the rocker that the doctor had sent for him and took Mitzi's hand again. He tried to catch some sleep, but the thoughts swarmed in his head like small fish in a fishbowl. He looked again at the young woman's deadly white features and saw again another face from another time, also precious and beautiful, also drained of color and life, black hair in soft wisps around it. He did not want to remember that, he had hoped to forget it at certain point, but the memory always returned crystal clear like the crisp air of that day. He felt the pain in his chest again and his left hand shot there. The nurse who was closely watching him, gasped and started to get up, but he waved at her, 'Don't bother. It is only a memory.'

The morphine shot was wearing off and the pain woke Mitzi again. This time she fought to stay awake and to look at Iossif who smiled reassuringly. Any movement hurt so the young woman looked around without trying to sit up. There were several bunches of flowers and she inhaled deeply the sweet perfume that was overpowering the hospital smell. A thought jolted through her - how long she had been sleeping if several people had already sent flowers? Iossif was clad in what looked like the same dark suite she had seen on him when they dined at midday, but it did not mean that it was the same day. Mitzi looked at the non-existing bump of her belly. She did not need the doctor to tell her what happened, she had known it even before Tashev had dragged her out of his car and had thrown her like a rag doll at her home's doorsteps. The father of the little life had not given it a chance, no, not the father, the limb of the Devil who had created it had killed it. But she would make sure that he paid for it, she would avenge the precious angel who had not been allowed to see the light of the day, even if it was the last thing that she did. Oh, Iossif had his wish sealed, she would fight Tashev and his world tooth and nail, she would wake up from her grave if that was what it would take to finish him. Mitzi had never known hatred so vicious, so motivating. It was coursing through her and made her heart pound faster.

'Stay angry, that is better!' Iossif cajoled her. Mitzi looked in his eyes and felt that he understood. He had accepted the fate, but had not given up on her and she was oddly grateful.

'I am sorry about the baby,' she croaked.

'Me too, first we need to pull you through. I know you can fight for others, this time you must fight for yourself. I will help as much as you will allow me.'

'I wish I would hurt less, but will fight, I promise.'

The professor glared at the nurse and she scurried for the doctor's office to fetch another ampoule of morphine. Iossif bended closer, still holding his wife's hand. 'Mitzi, you did nothing to cause it and I will make sure that Tashev will be punished accordingly. I want you to forget about him and concentrate on yourself. Forget about the baby for now, we will adopt if you wish, as soon as you are strong enough. But promise me that you will fight.'

The door opened and the nurse came holding a syringe.

'I do. Will you read me a fairytale, just one?'

The color on her lips might have been caused by rage, despair or hope, yet it was there and Iossif was grateful for the small mercies. 'But of course, just until you are asleep...'. He adjusted his tall frame in the rocker and opened the book again.

By the morning, Mitzi felt strong enough to send Iossif home with the stern urging to get back only when he would have had enough sleep. 'Yes, Madam!' he had quipped, but had winked at her and that had made her lips curve despite the pain. He did not leave before talking to the doctor in charge and the head nurse. Martha came an hour later, bringing food and chocolate and stayed all day. Mitzi could smell the tincture of valeriana on her breath, but the housekeeper held well. Martha had brought a new book of stories to read. The housekeeper kept feeding Mitzi as soon as she showed any sign that she had woken up and until she protested that she had no space left inside to breathe. Iossif spent the evening with her, practicing his lecture on her, as he said, but because it was a rehearsal she was allowed to ask questions. The morphine and the sleeping pill knocked her off for the night and the next morning the daily program was repeated, then again and again. Mitzi was somewhat disappointed that none of the Mihailovs showed to visit her, but then she realized that even the visits of Martha and Iossif were serious infraction of the maternity hospital norms. After six days Dr. Petrov declared her fit enough to go home if she kept to her bed, which she promised over the heads of all saints.

The day Mitzi returned home Iossif's alarm clock rang long before dawn. He went to the attic and brought down a suit, a coat and a hat that had seen better days decades ago. He dressed, checked the contents of

his wallet and took the first tram to a chapter of the city that sheltered the poorest, the recent immigrants and according to the police - people a decent person would not like to meet after dark. After he descended at the last tram stop, lossif walked for a while. There was no city plan there, shabby huts were made of hastily erected walls and roofs of all kinds, as the antiquated law prohibited razing of a building that had roof on it. The "construction teams" were groups of relatives and neighbors who would gather after the regular police working hours and for a night would erect a teensy room and put something similar to roof on top. In the morning police inspectors would make a protocol for an infraction, but as the refugees had no money to pay the fine, the protocols lapsed and the city authorities turned a blind eye as it relieved them from the necessity of providing shelter to the swelling streams of people coalescing there. No night police patrols were ever seen in the maze of narrow winding streets speckled with little houses and even smaller gardens. The snow on the ground was black with soot from the stoves made from spent barrels and the air was thick. lossif continued walking past the square that passed for a center as there was a police station, dark at that hour, and a public water tap where some women were already waiting in line, shivering in the cold. In the gray light of the new day ghostly figures were passing by him and dissolving into the thin fog that seemed to have taken residence in the chapter as well.

The professor stopped in front of an odd house that looked like a child had spilled its cubes and had piled them together without paying much attention. There were three doors leading to different rooms, the windows were partially covered with cardboard where the glass was insufficient and the chimney was spewing black smoke. Before he had the chance to knock on the door, it opened soundlessly and a short elderly man looked quizzically at him.

'Good morning, I have lost hope to see you here. Come in.'

'Good it be,' said lossif and closed the door from the inside.

The room was clean and even had a floor made of boards scrubbed probably with broken brick as they had somewhat pinkish tint. The host motioned to the three-legged low wooden stools huddled close to the stove and lossif folded over one of them. A woman the same age as the man came in from the adjoining room and greeted him warmly.

'Will you have porridge too?' the host inquired and his eyes danced with something akin to laughter.

'I will.'

The woman took a bubbling kettle from the stove and left them alone. The man looked at Iossif, 'Sure you don't come all that way to have breakfast. I did not think that we will see you after that marriage of yours. How is she healing?'

'Doctors think they will release her tomorrow, but she will never have children of her own.'

The short man winced. 'You came to call in a life debt? Life for life?'

'I thought of that, but no, I don't. It is not worth putting many others in danger. Yet I don't want some filthy hand to touch her again as long as he lives.'

The woman brought two bowls of porridge with the aluminum spoons stuck in. They thanked her and she silently retreated. The men ate in silence and when Iossif finished, the host looked at him and said gruffly, 'I am glad you came; otherwise I would need to come to you very soon. There is a boy who needs to be taken away. He is not cut of the same cloth as we are. I trust you can find a place for him as far as you can.'

'What can he do?'

'He carves wood. His father was good at that also, but I knew his great-uncle and his grandfather - they could carve a tree that the birds would nest on. He has it in him. There are jealous snakes around that will take him and break him, with his family and all.'

The host stood up and brought a small icon in a wood frame. In the light coming from the stove's slate window Iossif looked at the laurel branches framing the cross on the top and the little flowers adorning the bottom as if growing from the lawn at the feet of Saint George from the cheap colored reproduction. The professor touched them lightly and felt the wood warmth and smoothness. Art like that could not be learned; one had to be born with the skills. He looked at the carving again and returned it to the patiently waiting man.

'I trust you have papers for him. Tell him to come to my office at the university tomorrow morning just before nine-thirty. I will have letters for him as well as the money. Is France far enough?'

'Good enough. He had learned some French at school, but not much. He will be out of the border before tomorrow night.'

'I need name for the letters.'

'Stoyan ...Debarski.'

'Good, I will see Stoyan tomorrow. Don't forget to put something he had made in his luggage, and his small tools.'

Iossif stood up and his host saw him to the door. Before he opened it, he looked at the professor and recited, 'Whoever saves a soul...'

'Saves the world,' Iossif finished his phrase. 'Send Baruch my greetings. Good-bye!' The professor disappeared in the white fog.

The elder woman came out of the back room.

'Send for the boys,' the man sighed. 'And wake up our wood master, he has to pack.'

The feeling of sudden cold woke up Tashev and he first thought that somehow the wind had forced the window opened. Then he looked at a silhouette of a tall man standing next to him. He was not moving and Tashev shook his head to shake the nightmare away, but the man did not bulge. The police boss turned to get up, but the black figure suddenly pushed him back in the bed with one movement.

'One sound and you die!' the whisper almost drowned into the sound of the wind outside.

'My men are just outside the door, you will not going to get out alive!' whispered back Tashev.

'You will die before that. But I don't want you dead, not yet.'

'What do you want?'

The man did not answer, he pulled Tashev's right hand, then a knife flashed and the police director felt a searing pain in his palm. He could not even cry out, as the huge paw of his night visitor was clasped on his mouth, pressing him deeper into the pillow. His eyes full of terror, he felt immobilized, although the only weight pinning him was the hot hand preventing him from breathing. He felt something pressed on his palm, then the man put his bleeding hand on the duvet and curled Tashev's fingers around a handful of it. The executioner's eyes bore into the glazing eyes of his victim and he hissed, 'My men are right across the street and ready. If the door of this room opens before midnight, they will kill everyone passing through it. After that you are free to go and talk to your bodyguards. And stay away from windows if you want to live a little bit.'

Then the man released his iron hold and with one nimble movement jumped from the windowsill. Tashev struggled for few seconds gasping for air, his constricted throat coughing and sputtering. His oxygen-starved

brain was playing again and again the scene of the man jumping through the window like a giant black animal, until Tashev was sure he was a product of his overworking imagination. Then he looked at his palm and saw that it was sliced open, twice, between his third and fourth fingers and along the middle, and the duvet was spotted with blood. The cross like wound was real, but the tall black man could not have been, the bedroom was on the second floor and he could not have come from there, nor exited the way he did. Tashev's bodyguards had not detected anything; the house was quiet as it should be at that time of the night. The pain in his palm was burning but his dazed mind recalled the warning about the midnight. The police chief did not dare to try finding if it was real. The wind was driving rain through the opened window, but the paralyzing fear did not permit Tashev to go and get it closed. Mikhail curled under the duvet clutching it with both hands over his head, heart pounding with terror. He understood that he had never been so close to death and was unsure who of the people he had killed had come to exact his revenge, as he was growing more and more convinced that it was not a live man who had visited him. He could not recall his features as he had not seen them clearly in the dark room, but the man had seemed incredibly tall, his frame filling the window like Prince Kiril at the windows of the Palace of Justice. Was it possible that he had come from under the pile of cinders that was his grave? No, the people in that pit were definitely dead before they had put them there without a priest prayer. That was it, the dead were not buried properly and they have turned into vampires to hunt the living. In the feverish mind, the night figure was assuming the features of the dead playboy prince. He had been known as fine swordsman, his deadly skills evidently following him beyond the confinement of makeshift grave. Tashev tried in vain to stop the chattering of his teeth, he was a quivering mass. His brain was flashing snippets of old grandma's tales about people who had turned into frightening monsters after death, about strange creatures that lurked in the night and looked for the vulnerable to never let them go completely. Mikhail had never believed it possible before, but he was desperate for the bell toll that would frighten the creatures away. He could not see the arms of the alarm clock ticking on his night stand and was afraid to switch on the light, so he clutched the duvet tighter and tighter and squeezed his eyes. The police boss thought about the gun in his night stand that was loaded and ready, but what protection it could offer against the already dead?

Tane came for his morning shift and greeted the people who had guarded the boss during the night. None mentioned any trouble, bid their good-byes and left. Tashev was having breakfast in the kitchen and reading the morning newspaper. Tane's sharp eyes registered the slight pallor on his face and the imperceptible tremble of the newspaper, then widened at the bandage on the man's right hand.

Tashev caught his stare and waved nonchalantly, 'Stupid accident. I knocked my water glass at night and half-awake tried to catch it. It broke and I cut my hand. It will heal in no time, nothing special.' He switched to the program for the day and soon the car arrived. As customary one of the guards was going first at the corner to check both ways, the other sat with Tashev in the car immediately. Tane took the corner and looked at the street, then looked up at Tashev's bedroom and saw the curtain flowing. He winced and disappeared into the house, ran up the stairs and went to close the window. The curtain was wet although the rain had stopped shortly after midnight. The bodyguard locked the tall window properly and turned to go out. On Tashev's night stand a half-empty glass of water blinked at him. He did not need to look at the wound on his boss's hand to know what the cut looked like. Tane ran downstairs and entered the car.

'Your window had opened, I went to close it.'

'Thank you, most probably I forgot to close it when I was airing the room in the morning,' Tashev continued the discussion with the driver about the best route to take to avoid the morning traffic.

The ambulance deposited Mitzi in front of the house and two orderly brought her to her bedroom despite her insistence that she was capable of walking herself. Iossif made sure she was firmly planted in her bed and said, 'Dr. Petrov said no walking, so you will listen, child, or...'

'Or?'

'Or I may not give you the conspectus of the lectures you missed.'

'Oh, you took it from someone for me to copy it, thank you, thank you!'

'No, I did not borrow it; I hired Riste to go instead of you to the university. I have to say that his handwriting needs working on, but the lectures are readable. He will be doing that until you are strong enough to return yourself. Keep in mind how cold it is at the corner and do him some good, stay put for a while.'

Mitzi sank into the pillows. Few more days and then to take it easy, that was what the doctor had said, few more days. As if few more days would make any difference. May be only for Riste.

The housekeeper outdid herself in order to make Mitzi feel comfortable. She propped her on pillows, brought her a pile of glossy magazines about fashion after she fastidiously had checked that no word was mentioned about babies there, cooked, got on the nerves of the nurse who Iossif had hired to the point that the already bored woman had left. Mitzi was only glad to be left alone for the first time since the incident. She could not cry somehow, neither for the child she had lost, nor for the children she would never have. She had lived and if God wanted her to live, He had a purpose, but she could not see it. Iossif had offered to stay with her, but she did not want to deprive a bunch of people of his presence by being selfish and he had gone to the university. The day was wearing off while she tried to concentrate on the conspectus written in the fancy handwriting of the corner shoe cleaner. He dropped around three o'clock with a bunch of sheets from the day and they chatted a little. Riste's eyes were so happy when he spoke about the lectures, the university and all, like a kid who was let alone in a toy shop. Mitzi was surprised how much a boy who had hardly finished his third year at school had learned by himself.

Mitzi dozed and when she woke up Iossif was back and they had supper together - she still in her bed and he on a picnic table that Martha had fetched from only God knew where. The conversation about the latest university gossips seemed light, but in the pauses that were a split second longer than it was usual for Mitzi, in her gestures that stopped just before being finished, in the lack of sparkles in her eyes, Iossif could feel the seeping dread that she was not ready to face yet. She needed a shock to counter the shock that the morphine had quelled for the first few days. Mitzi needed a catharsis and not pampering, or rather catharsis and then pampering. Also he owed her some information. She had seen the scar on his chest but had not asked a single question. The people who had seen it could be counted on the fingers of one hand and the only other person who knew its story was far far away. Mitzi might not be able to cry for herself, but she was compassionate and the tears that were building in her since she had woken up in the hospital needed to be let out, one way or another.

The housekeeper cleared the dishes and was contemplating whether to offer to stay with Mitzi for the night when she caught the expression on Iossif's face. It was a fleeting one, but she had been around for almost

three decades and more guessed it than saw it - he was up to something. If he needed her help he would have told her by now so it was better to clear the horizon. Martha washed fast the dishes, did a quick check of the kitchen and left.

The intensity of lossif's look propelled Mitzi from her apathy. He was looking for words, she thought, he was about to tell her something that was not easy for him.

'How about you cut it directly?' she intoned softly.

He chuckled, 'Are you sure you are up to a long story full of betrayal, malice, far away places, dark riders, symbolic rings and orphaned child hurt, revenge and brotherly relations?'

'You are going to read me another fairytale?'

'No, I was thinking of telling you the story of my scar that you saw on Christmas. I thought that it would be better left untold, but I have changed my mind. It is not a happily-ever-after story, Mitzi, do you think you are strong enough to hear it?'

'There will never be a better time,' bravely said Mitzi. It was a cliché, but she could not come with anything else at the moment.

'Indeed,' mused lossif, 'but you can stop me any time you feel like not going on.'

'Mitzi, we never came to talk where I was born. On my baptismal certificate there is the name of a minuscule village around Odrin which is there no more, it was razed in 1903 during the upraise. But my parents did not come from there. They also never married, so on my papers you will find only the name of my mother - and it is not her real name either. Well, partially it is - her name was Rada, but her surname was not Spassova at birth. She was born in Istanbul to a fairly well-to-do family that I don't care even to mention for what they did to her. She was genuinely beautiful, black hair like yours, grey eyes, fairly tall; I took after her. She was educated at home as it was customary at that time, and was supposed to marry someone of her parents' choice.

May be it would have happened, if someone did not try to kill my father right before the very door of her parents' house. He had been the target of the shot, but as she had been trying to slip into the door and startled his horse, the animal bucked and got the bullet instead of my father. The assassins did not wait to see the result and mom helped father get from under the horse. He claimed that it was a love at first sight

and before he parted he managed to get her name. Should the circumstances been a little different, it may have been a happily ever after. But everything was staked against them: she was Christian and he was Muslim, she was Bulgarian and he was Turkish. Romeo and Juliette had at least the help of the good Friar Laurence and a hope for reconciliation of the feuding families. Father bribed his way to her all over "coincidentally" meet her when she was shopping with her mother, to have a glimpse of her after church, whatever he could do. As he was a second son of a rich man, nobody paid him much attention, or so he thought, as his elder brother was always the center of the Universe.

It went like that for a while until the parents of my mother decided that she was old enough to marry and announced her engagement with a suitable man. Don't frown, child, at that time the arranged marriages were the norm, it was a merger of businesses in a way. The news reached dad and he paid a fortune to spend few hours with her alone one night. That was the only time they were alone, so I presume they did not only talk about the elopement that was planned for the following night. Dad was elated, went and bought her a ring in order to marry her after they were far enough.

Yet the human greed knows no boundaries. The servant who handsomely profited, decided to make more money and sold them to her father. The day had not finished before she was whisked away to a village in the middle of nowhere and her father paid for the family he left her with to keep her there. No, not as guest, but as farm-hand, as he thought that the hard labor would cure her of all her fancy ideas. When the news of her pregnancy reached him he sent a note that they did not know her and did not want to be bothered. Mom did not know even where she was, but she kept the hope that Father would find her somehow. The villagers were not bad people. They were not happy with the need to take care of an extra mouth and no matter how much she tried she never fit there. I was called bastard on every turn. We lived in what would pass for a hut that she built herself. But Mom never gave up, she worked all the hours of the day and she taught me to read Bulgarian on the Bible and Turkish on the few books she had, and to write on a tray with sand. She had a talent for music and sang beautifully. Even with me, there were plenty of men who wanted to marry her, but she refused, which did not endear her to the locals, as they thought she was snotty. I was about seven when she started planning for a trip to Istanbul to meet my father. She had not given hope on him. I was told only that we would go to a big city and I was so excited, I had never left the village before.

Dad had not given on her either. He had tried to find her but with the ways of communication at those days it was not easy. The traitor had vanished from the face of the Earth, her parents had changed the majority of their servants and even the name of my mother had been banished from being mentioned in their household. Father searched every lead, every spot that he could think of, but the Empire was immense and one could not pick up the phone and call around. He took neither a wife nor a concubine to the great displeasure of his father who decided that a trip abroad would cure the spirit and it took dad a year and a half to come back. Father resumed the search and at one point his constant bribing of my grandfather's house servants paid off.

Iossif blotted the tears streaming silently down Mitzi's face and shook his gray head, 'Are you sure you want to hear the rest - it is worse.'

The young woman did not trust her voice but nodded and squeezed his hand reassuringly.

'A servant came to tell him that he had overheard an argument between my grandfather and his son, my mother's brother. The young man had yelled at his father that if he wanted to stop him, he had to think of something better than sending him up the mountain to the village like he had sent my mom. Dad had the name of the place at last, even if he had no idea where it was.

You know that in palaces the walls have ears and my father's home was no exception. My uncle and my grandfather had the name also most probably before the servant had left the yard. Unlike dad, they knew where it was, so grandfather sent his firstborn to go and settle the question before my dad reached it. Can you imagine that he would let his son to marry a peasant infidel? Well, you can, but he could not.

It was on St. Elijah's Day that my uncle reached the village. It did not take him much time to find all he wanted to know about my mother from the local elder. My uncle was outraged at the idea of her having a child and asked where we were. We were attending the celebration for the saint at the local meadow and Mom had planned to go immediately after the prayer, so we were both dressed in our finery, she had on the robe she had come in. The tugs that my uncle came with dispersed the crowd in seconds. The pillaging raids were nothing uncommon, the villagers fled without looking back especially seeing that the Turks were singling Mom. I clung to her and she looked frightened for the first time in my life. My uncle looked a lot like his brother but the snarl would make men piss in their boots. He took one look at me and stared at Mom, 'You made my unworthy brother's son a Christian?'

She did not have a chance to answer before he grabbed me, then pulled his sword and sliced me open then threw me on the ground in front of her.

'You wanted him to bear a cross, now he has one.'

She leaped, but he killed her before she reached me. Then he put her body across the saddle, mounted his horse and left with his cut-throats. He probably thought I was dead as I was frozen with shock and pain. He did not even look at me twice, as to him I was a filth under his feet, something not worth thinking about. The last thing I remember was a hawk circling above me and then nothing.

My uncle rode without stopping and delivered my mother's body to his brother without any explanation and without ever mentioning me. The women who prepared her for the funeral however told my father that she had given birth as there were marks confirming it. Dad confronted his brother but he said that I had probably died without details. Dad had no reason to believe that if there was a child he or she would be left alive if mom was not. He knew his brother. So he mourned both of us. Under the pressure of his family he married and his wife was a genuinely nice woman, but they had only one child. Yes, I have a half-brother and he is still alive, he lives in Istanbul and he knows about all that. I did not introduce you to him when we were there as we look alike a great deal. I did not want you to get doubts about what not, as then I would have been compelled to tell you the entire story. But we will go back and this time I will introduce you properly.'

'How did you survive?' Mitzi's words were hardly audible.

'I don't know. It is a complete mystery, as the villagers claimed that a hawk had descended over me and took my body before they could retrieve it. They read the final prayers without it and made an empty grave for me. But on the day when they started trashing the walnut trees and celebrated Saint Elijah the Thrasher, that is September 23<sup>rd</sup>, there was a thunder storm that sent everyone into hiding. When they came out, the village priest found me on the church's stairs, it was more of a chapel than a church. I was dressed in the same shirt that I disappeared in, the cut was almost completely healed and very impressively so, I doubt it was a hawk's work. I don't remember anything about the period in between my mother's killing and when I opened my eyes in the church. I think this part will remain unexplained forever.

The rest is not much. The village raised me more or less together, I think partially out of pity, partially because they were afraid of me. The superstition that I have returned from the dead prevented them from doing any real harm to me. I helped in the church and was allowed to study like the rest of the children with

the village priest, who was an elderly man. When he died his widow called me and gave me a letter that my mother had given to him in case she died unexpectedly. It was addressed to me. On the envelope there were instructions to open when I was sixteen, which I was not yet. As I was growing older, the villagers were becoming more hostile, as by the age of fourteen I was almost as tall as I am now, in fact even taller. One of the boys started telling tales about how I was talking to the birds and can jump from the tallest peaks and other rubbish, but you know how it goes with tales. Soon the village was convinced that I could uproot trees, call winds and cast a spell with my evil eyes. The priest had done his best to curb the nonsense which he said went against what Christ taught, but with his death I lost the only mentor I had. So I decided to get out before it came to someone's mind to test my supernatural abilities that I had not have.

For some time I wandered with a tribe of gypsies with whom I found I was good at playing card games and they taught me piles of tricks how to cheat and how not to be cheated. When they put the tabor on the outskirts of Sofia, I was mesmerized by the city and decided to stay. Everyone knows the rest - I worked, studied, played cards, got married, lost my wife, became a professor and now torment students with the stories of the distant past.'

The professor took a sip of water from the glass on her night stand. Mitzi blew her nose in her hankie and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

'Did you ever meet your father?'

'I did. The night I turned sixteen, I opened the letter that Mom had left for me. It was not long, she was just telling me who my father was and that she loved him very much. She wrote that they were betrothed when she was abducted and that she would do whatever takes to fulfill her promise. Mom asked me not to hold grudge against anyone, not even her family who she also named.

My first urge was to go to Istanbul and confront my dad for not coming to look for me, but I thought against it. Who knew if he had any idea about me, much less would accept an urchin for a son. By that time he was fairly well known man and my chances of showing at his door and be let to talk to him were not good. So I bade my time, worked day and night as I wanted to be at equal terms when we met. May be I would not achieve that much, if I was not driven by a blinding rage at my uncle and my grandparents for causing that much pain, and probably at both God and Allah for allowing all that to happen. I am afraid I had missed some part of my youth, the usual dating and partying and dancing, but I had not time for that. The card skills

came handy. I was good and I improved, won a lot, then more, then the fame was working for me. I bought better clothes and was playing for higher and higher stakes. That was at night, I quit all my jobs and passed the school exams as a private pupil. Then I breezed much the same way through university when it opened, learned languages on top of the Turkish I never stopped practicing, as I wanted to talk my father's tongue when we meet. The time to go to Istanbul was never right, but when the news about my paternal grandfather's death reached Sofia, I decided that I should not wait longer. Moreover, I was engaged to Anna and for some strange reason I wanted to meet my father before we got married. I don't know why. So I packed and boarded our favorite Orient Express. In advance I got a stack of recommendation letters from my card-playing patrons as I told them I was interested in starting a trade with antiques. Among the references there was one to my father. Of course it was the first one I picked and the audience was granted two days later.

I went to his office and the moment I entered he stood up and I thought he would have a heart attack. He was pale like he was seeing a ghost - and may be he was, as I told you, I do look like my mother, and my hair was black those days. He shoed away everyone and asked me only one thing. He asked when I was born. He did not need any other proof. He told me my mother's name and told me his part of the story and I told him mine, and gave him mom's letter. He asked to keep it as he had nothing left from her. He asked why I had not come earlier, and said he wished I had. I told him I was getting married and he gave me the ring that you are wearing. He wanted to publicly acknowledge me as his son, but I thought it was not a good idea, as it would have made a mess of lots of people's lives. We agreed to keep it secret except from his wife and son - about them he was adamant.'

'He did not want to tell anything to your uncle?' prodded his listener.

'May be he would have liked to, but you see, my uncle was known to have assembled a long list of enemies during his life. The year before I went to Istanbul he had been found dead in his bed. The version that made to the news was that he had choked on something. What did not make to the news was that he choked on a small boy's blooded shirt that had been cut open crosswise.'

The professor looked in the eyes of his young wife, 'Do you find it horrible?'

'No, I find it just. He lived rather long after what he had done, that is my only regret. He probably had the time to do a lot of other monstrous things, the son of the Devil!'

'Unfortunately he did. Yes, revenge is a dish better eaten cold, but cold and stale are two different words and if there was no need for two words, the people would not have created them instead of one. That is why Tashev will be taken care of sooner rather than later, I want you to be sure of that. There will be other things to take care of and I will not be around forever. Do you think you want to do that, Maria? It is not going to be easy and you do not need to do it...'

'I do.'

'Then sleep over it tonight and if tomorrow night you feel the same, we will talk about it. You know I am an old guy and I will do it the old way, I will ask you three times. Now go to sleep.'

Mitzi obediently closed her eyes and he chuckled and solicitously tucked her in. The professor watched her face where the purple marks had begun to turn bluish-green. She looked like someone who had come out of the grave and in certain sense she had. People who survived their own deaths saw life from a different prospective. He did not envy Tashev for what she would do to him. No, he did not envy him for what they would do to him. Anna had been right again - it had not been his time at Christmas. Iossif looked at the young woman breathing evenly and headed to the door.

'Iossif, are you sure you cannot cast spells?' came from the bed. He guffawed but did not turn. He went to his study to write.

The professor slept soundly and was glad that he had put his alarm clock; otherwise Morpheus would have continued his tales past the reasonable hour. He visited Mitzi for few minutes, ate his porridge and left a little bit earlier than usual. His first lecture was starting at ten and he went to his study at the university which he did not use often. In front of it a scrawny young man was waiting, holding a beaten suitcase and an umbrella. He greeted the professor politely and Iossif was surprised by the deep bass that came out of the bony frame. He ushered him in and locked the door.

'So you are Stoyan Debarski, I presume.'

'Yes, Professor.'

'Take a seat, my boy! I am very impressed by your work that I saw and I think it is a good idea you to practice with another master. Here are three letters. One is for you to keep, it is my recommendation for you. The second is for a nice woman that you will be going first to. She is an old friend and I trust her to take

good care of you in Paris until you are ready to move. She will also find where Georges is at the moment - as far as I know Georges Gimel, he can be anywhere, but Katenka will know where he is and when he is returning from there. You will give him the third letter.

Now the technical details. Here is the address of Katia in Paris. Here is some money. I want you to take your time, Stoyan, you are too good to carry coal around. There is enough here to keep you afloat for a while. Give them to Katia and ask her what to do. Learn some French, see the museums, just roam around. Once a year send me a letter how you are doing, although I will hear from Katenka and Georges anyway. And eat properly, wood carving calls for strength and we will have to put coins in your pockets for the wind not to blow you away. Put some meat on these bones, son! Do you want to ask me something?

'Thank you Professor, I will do as you say. I can't thank you enough. I will repay the money as soon as I can; I wish I can repay your kindness!'

'No, you don't need to repay it to me. But may be, just may be, someone may come to you in my name to ask for help and I hope you will do what you can.'

'Of course, Professor! I carved you something to thank you. It is small, as I had no time, but I wished to do something for you.'

The young man put a hand in his pocket and took a little newspaper package. From it came a wood figurine. It was a bird sitting on a blooming apple branch, the entire composition not bigger than a matchbox, yet one could almost hear the bird chirping just before it flew away, its beak open, its wings already apart from the body, the petals of the single tiny blossom with their veins visible, the few small leaves as if blown by invisible wind. Iossif remembered the phrase that the elderly man had used to praise Stoyan's relatives work: "they could carve a tree that the birds will nest on". The boy could outdo them.

'This is fine art, if you were any better, your bird would have flown away before you came. I think I will give it to my wife for a brooch if you permit.'

'You think she will wear it? It is only wood...'

'No, sonny, it is not only wood and there will be a lot of people who will tell you that soon. Anything else?'

The young man put the piece of newspaper that the bird was wrapped in back in his pocket and gasped. He withdrew a neatly folded handkerchief and offered it to Iossif, 'I was supposed to give you this one first and I almost forgot.'

'It is not a problem, you gave it to me, so don't worry. Now, pack all this and go, it is a long way! Let God take care of you!'

Stoyan put the letters and the money in the inner pocket of his coat and, after one more lengthy expression of gratitude, left. Iossif locked the door after him and shook his head. "Not cut from the same cloth" was an accurate description of the young master. The professor unfolded the handkerchief. On it there was a bloody spot in the form of cross, roughly the size of a palm. The messenger had not thought of wrapping his gift in it, although it would have been appropriate, what an irony, mused the old man, folded the cloth and put it in the inside secret pocket of his jacket.

'I brought you a present, in fact two,' Iossif said after supper. They were alone in the quiet house. Martha had left earlier, as Mitzi was sleeping most of the time and promised not to do anything.

'Thank you, you don't need to spoil me constantly.'

'These are not ordinary presents, child, but let me see. Here is the first one that I promised you.'

'A handkerchief?'

'Open it!'

'A blooded handkerchief???'

'Remember the pattern, my dear! You will see it on the right palm of very bad people who someone had marked as such. One of your acquaintances is nursing a hand somewhere around. Just remember the pattern.'

'You took care of him,' there was a reverence in Mitzi's voice.

'Let say he was taken care of. He is not worth even to die, it would be too merciful. Trust me, his guilty consciousness or whatever passes for such in him will do the job better. Sofia is a small city, no matter what people think, so you will meet again, but you will know that he is marked man and you have little to be afraid of. Rub it in, so to speak. Will you trust me on this?'

'I will trust you with everything.'

'So you will trust me if I say that this is not a wood?' Iossif handed her Stoyan's creation.

Mitzi looked at it closer and caressed the little bird and the flower. Her face lit. 'No, it is not wood, it is alive. You said yesterday that a boy insisted you could talk to the birds - what does this one say?'

'This one is indeed fairly talkative. It says that the man who created it left today for France to study under Georges Gimel, that an old man had given him some great recommendations and some money and if anyone ever comes to him with the name of the old man, the wood carver should remember that and help that person as much as he could. The bird says that it was carved by Stoyan Debarski and that he will be famous in not so distant future...'

'It was very, very nice of the old man to do that,' Mitzi was looking at the carving on her palm. 'I know that it is not the first time he had shown a heart of gold. I just hope he will reap the rewards of what he sowed!'

'Mitzi, Mitzi, shall I remind you the story about the passerby that saw an old man planting walnut trees? He asked why the gardener was putting so much hard labor into trees that he would not live to see the fruits of. The old man said that when he came to the world, it was already planted with walnut trees by his forefathers, and he felt compelled to continue their good work. Who knows who will be picking these walnuts? Yesterday night I told you I would ask three times whether you want to continue what I have started. I am asking now - are you sure you want to pick the walnuts? They are good and tasty, but can stain more than the fingers. It is a hard work for a man, and for sure harder for a woman. Think again, Maria!'

'If I can save one soul for the one I lost, all the stains will be worth! Will you teach me how?'

Iossif hurt for her, for the hole that Tashev had ripped into her. Teaching would not heal it, but may make the patch easier to bear. Mitzi did not have an alternative, he realized, fighting over something that had gone away could be as devastating as fighting with something that did not want to go away. Three months ago his plans for her were completely different; he had hoped to give the young woman and the baby an island of stability, a piece of happiness, and all that had shattered in few minutes. Now he had to live long enough to not let her slip in the bitter mire of the despair, and to be careful enough to not break whatever was left of the sunny child that had been eating sweets on the shores of Bosphorus. He thought about the dream when his father had told him it would not last. His old man had been right, it did not last. Then the professor remembered another part of his dream, the hawk that had nodded approvingly. Hawks were fairly common birds, even in Sofia, but this one looked oddly familiar. What had the hawk tried to tell him? Iossif felt an odd feeling that there was link among all that had happened recently and that the hawk was that link, but he still could not make out the picture. He looked at Mitzi, who was waiting for his answer.

'I will. You need to rest now. Where would you like me to put the handkerchief?'

'In the stove, please. I don't need it anymore. I remember the pattern. If one day I feel like looking at it again, I will go and get it myself, with the hand, if needed.'

'Dear Lord, I don't envy the man who will stand on her path!' thought Iossif and went to the stove. He opened the top small door and let go of the piece of fabric. The professor turned in time to see the flame it turned into reflected in the blue depths of his wife's eyes. No, the man who dared to cross her would better have a coffin prepared and a burial plot dug out. Otherwise she would make him dig it himself.

Blue turned to green and then faded to yellow before disappearing completely from her face. The tiny scar on her lip was hardly visible, especially when Mitzi smiled. Dora was sending her funny letters from far away, but they knew each other well enough. Mitzi could feel that the things are not as rosy as Dora was pretending them to be. Of course, in the letters there was no word about her real condition but a cough that "augments" and the fit that "kicks" were the shorthand to learn that however slowly and painfully the baby was on the right path. To Riste's great disappointment, as soon as the doctors allowed her to stand up, Mitzi resumed her studies at the university. After short discussion with his wife, Iossif hired Riste for a job that could not fit any description. He was not a bodyguard as he had no weapon, he was not a page, although her was assigned to carry Mitzi's schoolbooks, he was not a secretary, although he wrote his parallel lecture conspectus as Mitzi wrote her own. He was best described as "gentleman-in-waiting" as his main task was not to leave Mitzi alone except for trips to the bathroom, where he was at looking distance anyway. At first, the young woman felt uncomfortable with that much personal attendance. However Iossif was adamant that it was going to be like that or he would hire a real bodyguard at the same conditions. After a while, Riste turned into a perfect shadow, always there, sometimes arriving before Martha and going home after he had safely remitted Mitzi to Iossif at night. He read voraciously as ever, and as Mitzi got used to work in the library at the ground floor, he was peacefully sitting sunk in the armchair for hours with one of Iossif's volumes.

February passed and March the 3rd was expected to be celebrated with much pomp to underline the unbreakable friendship between Bulgaria and Russia forged during the Liberation War. Sofia was being

cleaned and more lights were added, but that was peanuts compared with the balls that were expected to unite the cream of the cream. For a while even the arrests were getting less frequent and disappearances after dark almost stopped. Boris was about to take a deep breath and was even thinking about a few days of vacation to go and visit Dora at her distant destination. Despite the appearance of normalcy, Lambri felt the clouds growing thicker over his head. He was more or less sure that the new order will not tackle him before the Liberation Day but after the celebrations he was a fair game. Vesselin was graduating in June, if only they left him that much time! He refused to bulge despite the warnings that grew less and less subtle. His well wishers would not understand that, explaining it partially with Vesselin, and partially with Dora, who was considered at her deathbed in a remote village. Even her infrequent appearances in Bourgas had ceased. The gossipers maliciously described her as bloated and pale, losing her balance and a good part of her hair. Nada was torn between the necessity to stay with Lambri and Vesselin and the need to accompany Dora, although she was not so healthy herself. Little by little the frontiers were getting closed, less and less passports were issued and less and less news trickled in and out of the country. Several times Iossif went to bribe the police department to get out a student and virtually smuggle them out of Bulgaria afterward, but he was not always successful. Under the cheerful facade, the country was suffocating one person at a time. Schools were closed, organizations demolished for either being too rich or at the wrong side of an alliance.