

## Graveyards

'The tap is over there,' pointed Mrs. Hlebarova and Tanas went with the beaten watering-can to bring some water for the flowers wilting on Matey Hlebarov's grave. It was Saturday and there were a lot of old women around, most wearing the customary black of the widows. The cemetery looked like giant ants hill where the women were tending to the old and new graves. Only women, Tanas sighed, he was the only man around. Why it was always the women that were left to tend to the graves? It was not possible that there were no widowers around, like his grandfather. The men were afraid, he thought, causing pain or death may be easier than living with its constant reminder. The women were not afraid of dealing with pain and may be that was why they were less afraid of death, probably because giving birth was so close to death and yet they were doing it again and again willingly, for the love of a man in most cases. Maybe that was why Death paid them less attention and they stayed alive longer, as the Grim Ripper had seen them close and was not in a hurry to run to catch them, like the fleeing cohorts of men. Death needed someone to tend to its garden. And women came because they were not scared by it. Tanas looked at fading Mrs. Hlebarova who was readily hauling her bulky bag with gardening tools every Saturday through the stifling ride in overcrowded bus with erratic schedule to take care of few strands of greenery on the grave of the man she had taken care of all her adult life. She believed that marriages were forever and was carrying her part of the contract. He tried to imagine his mother or any of his stepmothers tending his father's grave. Unlikely picture to say the least, but one reaped what he saw. Tanas thought that if his father's plans about him had been successful, he would not have even a theoretical chance of someone bringing him flowers. The thought was nudging other similar ones in his mind - his life had not existed enough to make a difference. Dimitar would have diligently paid for the required cleaning and supervision out of the damned sense of propriety that had poisoned his grandfather's life. But it would not have been something that Tanas had done for him that had mattered, it was again something vested to him due to a bloodline; it would not have been a memory, but an obligation. That was a thought, he was here for an obligation also, a payment of a homage to the same blasted propriety. Tanas remembered that he had forgotten to ask Dimitar where their father's grave was, as

he had not been planning to come to the cemetery at all. Mrs. Hlebarova was finishing her task and he had promised her to bring her back, he better go.

It was getting hot, but smoldering hot like before a storm. Siran Hlebarova wiped her brow and looked at the two bouquets of flowers perched on the small bench. Tanas had gone to fill the watering-can again and she was grateful that there was a pair of hands to relieve her aching ones. The boy was so much like Tanas of those years long ago, yet there was something in him that was from Tanas after Margarita was pronounced hopeless case by every doctor to whom he had taken her. It was not her fading eyesight that was playing her tricks; the boy was walking as if carrying not a can but a mountain on his shoulders. But of course, he had lost his father not even ten days ago and his grandfather in April and out of the goodness of his heart was carrying water around instead of going to put the bouquets on the graves that had not been leveled yet. The old woman remembered that he had not been present at his father's funeral; he had been in hospital with something similar to Margarita's stroke. Goodness, he was supposed to be home resting and he was helping her instead in the heat. She should gather her gardening stuff and when he would come tell him that it was time to get to see his father and grandfather and go, as she was feeling tired. Otherwise he would feel she pitied him and it was not good for a man to feel that an elderly woman pities him. Live men needed care more than graves.

It was getting hot and late, if anyone intended to show up, they would have been at the place by that time, thought the bored photo reporter. It was the first Saturday after Tanassov's funeral and his editor had sent him to try capture the grieving relatives that were supposed to come on the day the Church had designated for the dead. Grieving relatives, my ass, thought reporter, he had been at the cemetery since a quarter to nine and had already done his picture of the wilted bouquets left from the funeral, had read all the names on the tombstones around, then their dates of birth and death, then had calculated their years of life, and was bored of doing nothing. What an idea his editor had had, who would have come to see a grave when the supposedly grieving relatives of the deceased were probably busy counting his money and arguing with each other. The reporter was about to leave when he spotted Tanas Jr.'s tall frame. He was alone and was talking to an old lady who was giving him directions. Damn the editor, he was right, the man though and

positioned behind a massive black marble tombstone, hastily changing lenses. The camera clicked discretely: Tanas approaching the grave with a bucket-size bouquet of red carnations, Tanas bending to put the flowers, Tanas staring at the cross, Tanas with bended head in a moment of silence. Beautiful! It was enough for a full back page. But why was Tanas carrying a second bouquet, oh, the gods of journalism were with him, the guy was going to visit his grandfather's grave next! What a moving centerfold it would make, although even the last printing press knew that he could not stand the old man when he had been alive. The reporter carefully left the section and got to the Tanas Sr.' grave first, found a good shooting spot and waited. The camera was clicking again: Tanas with white carnations this time, Tanas at the double grave alone, Tanas wiping his grandmother's porcelain portrait with a handkerchief. Then the tall man turned and walked directly to the reporter who froze. He had been sure that he had not been noticed.

Tanas did not reach him. He stopped at another grave adorned by a life-size statue of a young maiden with angel wings. But of course, his father's first love, Vilena Tsareva, how could he be that dumb! Tanas reading the names of Vilena and her parents, Tanas touching the bouquet in the hands of the angel, damn, the battery was fading, Tanas looking into the sky, battery died completely, damn. Fast to the car, he still had time to get into the Sunday editions even in the capital.

'Excellent, just plain fantastic!' The chief editor was lovingly arranging himself the shots and the scarce text that they did not even need for the centerfold trials. The front page was reserved for the picture of Tanas looking at the sky - manly beautiful, soulful, simply Sunday front-pager with the crass "Angel's Touch" title. With the speculation that he had asked the relatives to leave him grieve in privacy - who knew, they may have shown up after his lucky photographer had left, so not to step on anyone's toes.

"And I wanted to shoot him with the woman in black who was telling him how to get to the graves and all but my battery finished. It would have taken too long to change it,' the guy was gushing next to him.

'You want to say that the same woman was with him at all the graves?' The editor had been in business much longer.

'Yes, you know, I thought it was strange!'

The editor looked at the guy and knew that he would always be no more than a reporter in a relatively small provincial newspaper. If he were any better, he would have understood by himself that he had missed exactly the most intriguing shot. But it was too late to enlighten him and because of that - pointless.

Tanas deposited Mrs. Hlebarova back home and headed to the office. He bought a bag of chips, a pack of mineral water and a stack of sandwiches from the local deli and locked himself in the office part. The dispatchers looked at each other and raised brows and shoulders. He was the boss and now that his father had died the playboy Tanas needed to play the management field instead. Good luck!

The summer storm had been too short for the rain to cool the fire-breathing apartment complex and the pair sitting before the television set without sound was irritated by the musty air as well. A second evening had gone by in vain - it did not seem that the original inhabitants of the place were coming anytime soon. Either the girl had got a whiff of her boss's ideas and had gone for good or they were the second set to be after her. The woman was insisting on the former, the man on the later. They had to decide fast what to do - the money were paid half in advance but the remaining part was not uninteresting. It was a gamble with life and it was what they did for living. Chances were that with some luck they would be out of the country before the woman who was their last client would catch up with the news that her prey had escaped. She would not come to verify and would steer clear of the place hoping that the heat will finish their job to perfection. If the girl had taken a flight, she would steer clear of the place also and give them enough time. Their passports with the new names were in order. They had never believed in banks to keep their money. The car could be 'forgotten' in an alley, there were hundreds of rusty car carcasses rotting around the streets, stripped in half an hour after they were left abandoned or broken. The pair discussed the crime scene, even played dead in the respective places to get a better mental picture if the client asked too many questions. After they were sure they have cleared the important topics, the man and the woman left as quietly as they had come.

That was the mother of all hangovers, thought Elvira Palikareva, massaging her neck. She had slept the Friday and well into the Saturday morning, woken up, drank at least three aspirins and half a bottle of water and decided for a short nap to let the aspirin work undisturbed. The next time she had got up it was because

of the persistent ringing of the door bell. She had opened to see the pair who she had hired to take care of Maria and let them in. They have confirmed that the job was done, gotten their money and left without much noise. Elvira looked at the grandfather's clock and frowned, she should be going out and join some company who would confirm her whereabouts in case of investigation. But boy she did have a headache. The only thought that sustained her while she was grudgingly getting dressed was that the snake that had been her dinner companion was nursing a similar hangover. That wine was a fraud, she should tell Misho to be more careful who he had been dealing with. Elvira put some more lipstick and called a taxi. Her car was still in front of the bank but she would not dare to drive like that. Why risking one's head for a few bucks when there were so much more awaiting her?

The printer coughed another sheet and Tanas stood up to stretch. It was dark outside and he winced. The bag of chips was empty, two bottles were empty too and there was one meager excuse for a sandwich left. But he had finished the recaps and knew who had not got their money, as well as how much the dead souls had been paid for the last year. The sum was not small but did not add up to the amount in Dimitar's safe. There was another source of income that had to be identified. Elvira was bound to know it; it was a question of how to get it out of her. Tanas straighten the pile of pages. On Sunday afternoon he would make the envelopes for the people who had not received what was due. He would explain it as a mistake in calculations, apologize and hand it personally to the guys one by one. Who cared that it would be almost every one of the people in the agency? The rest were the dispatchers who were on a fixed salary, meddling with them would have been too obvious. Tanas sighed and thought about Maria. Valkuda had assured him that she and her husband were safe and sound and he trusted her. The man gathered the remains of his food, put the pages in a folder and got into the car. He had to start packing but the first thing he was going to do the next morning was to go and ride, he had earned it. Tanas stopped at the big supermarket that was working round the clock in summer and bought a pack of sugar cubes, a bag of apples, two small pouches of carrots and a pack of sturdy garbage bags. The cashier did not even lift a brow. She was used to people buying strange selections - why otherwise one will need a 24-hours service. But the guy was worth a second thought, he looked so pleased with himself. Probably his wife had sent him with a list and he was happy that he had found everything. Why one needed sugar cubes though at that hour?

The news that he was back had not reached all his father's cronies yet and he had fended the few phone calls with the promise to see them soon. Some sounded genuinely concerned about him and some were openly phony, his sober brain cells mutinously warned. The life had not stopped with the demise of Tanassov and he was sure most of them would be partying the night out. It was summer, the open gardens of the taverns were crowded and the booze was flowing freely. After the storm the air had cooled down a little and along the coast it would be nice. The young man thought about Stavros, sitting alone in front of his shack drinking his ouzo and munching on a piece of grilled fish. Or if he had caught more - stringing them to dry in the sun the next day. It would be nice to pay him a visit one day. The wine season should be starting earlier as the summer was hot and Stavros may need a hand, he had said. Before that there were many loose ends to tie though. Tanas opened the box of garbage bags and started sorting his father's possessions. Technically it should be Mila's duty, but the grieving widow was probably busy lacquering her nails somewhere. He was grateful that she had vanished from the public eye for the moment and hoped that she would remain away from the press at least during the customary forty days of strict mourning. She had also cleared her stuff to the last scrap and he was relieved that he was spared digging through woman's underwear. Tanas thought that he should ask Valkuda for the new phone number to call her directly as it was not fair to let his brother's future wife do all the work. Tane had driven her mercilessly as a girl, after that she had fallen into his grandfather's clutches and was transferred together with the property to his favorite grandson, much like the house and the money. His brother better appreciate it, she was brilliant. A girl who could thwart the most elaborate schemes of their father was priceless. Add to the package the undercurrents in those green eyes and the body to die for - Dimitar was one lucky bastard. Tanas remembered her at the university when one of his colleagues had spat that she would probably marry her grandfather Tane as that was the only man in her life. The guy had nursed a black eye for a while for that but had not dared to go and tell her who decorated him and why, Tanas chuckled. He had told Valkuda the truth the day before, he genuinely had liked Tane. He had slipped in the hospital when he had heard that the old man was ill and had brought his favorite cherries. The nurse who he had charmed to let him in for just two minutes, had warned him that Tane was in and out of a world of his own and Tanas had been wary.

Valkuda's grandfather had smiled broadly at him and clutched his hand with the remains of his once proverbial strength.

'Tanas, I am so glad to see you, sonny! I have heard a lot of what you do and want to tell you something, you will decide whether you will listen. You have a lot of doors opened right now but not all of them lead out; you have to be careful where you are going before the doors will start shutting. Right now you think you can open them all after that but trust me, there will be ones that you would love to have kept closed in the future.'

Tanas had joked that it had been Tane who had taught him how to open locks and doors and had promised that the next time he would come through the window to avoid the staff. Tane had patted his shoulder and they have had few words about mundane pleasant subjects clearly steering from the behemoth in the room - his relationship with his father and grandfather. Then the nurse had come and ushered Tanas out as the doctor was coming any second for his visitation round. Tane had squeezed his cherry-juice stained hand and his fierce voice had followed Tanas to the door:

'Don't get blood on your hands, sonny, don't be like your...'

The nurse had shut the door and the young man had no idea who Tane had been referring to. Tane had breathed his last that night and Tanas had neither a chance to ask him neither to open that window. He did not go to the funeral as it meant meeting his grandfather and had sent a flower arrangement instead. But he had at least followed the old man's advise. He had done many dirty things but there was no human blood on his hands, even if then and there Tane may have referred to the cherry juice. Valkuda's grandfather had been right on all accounts - many doors did not lead to where it was written on them, opportunities had started shutting and there were a lot of things he would love not to have touched. He had turned the skills the old man had taught him into a business - keeping doors shut was not less important than prying them open and he was good at both. That had probably saved his life in the nuthouse, he grinned.

Stavros had had one look at the locksmith and had warned Tanas that the man was dangerous and he better take care of his door. By that time the fisherman had his young companion's full confidence. After the place was locked down for the night, Tanas had used Tane's old trick to ensure that the door did not open easily and that he would have enough warning to be awake before someone had the chance to enter the

room. When the guy had broken in, Tanas had been wide awake, but pretended he was sleeping. The mad guy had left but had come again and shaken him up as he wanted to discuss the door secret. He had been fascinated by it and wanted few quiet words before he let everyone out. The locksmith knew that some of his fellow prisoners, as he named them, could be noisy. Tanas had kept the conversation going until a doctor had arrived. Despite the odd circumstances the talk had been informative. Tanas had learned few recent important points about the modern doors and had had a virtual tour through history of how some people tried to prevent other people from getting into places they did not want them to be - and how the locksmiths had helped those other people to achieve their goals nevertheless.

'You see, God had given the keys to Saint Peter as he thought the door would be safe with him. But Pete was a fisherman, not a locksmith. Would you like to come and see if we can break in? You seem a fine company to do that! Not that I need anyone to help me, but it would be fun to go together.'

The little man's face had shone with his obsession. He had been mad, sadly unhinged as Stavros the fisherman would say, but somewhere deep inside his scrambled soul Tanas found that he envied him. The locksmith had something he wanted to do, a goal that he strived to achieve and it did not matter how crazy that goal was. Tanas did not have a goal, he had just the road that was going in a certain direction and he was following it although he did not see the end and did not know what was there for him. The locksmith was a psycho, but a happy psycho with a guiding dream. Tanas was sane, miserable and lost.

The costumes, shirts, shoes and whatever else was reusable from his father's wardrobe were packed to be delivered to the local church who would distribute them. Tanas' father had been well built although not to the impressive height of his father and elder son. He was the same height as Dimitar but the years of drinking and dining had transformed the former sportsman into bulkier figure. A lot of middle-aged men would fit in his fake designers' suits and expensive English loafers. To his surprise Tanas found a leather jacket and trousers, evidently custom sewn and a pair of cowboy boots with them. He had never seen his father in attire even remotely similar. Tanas packed them separately as the church grandmas could be offended by the offering. Some sixth sense was telling him that if the widowed Mrs. Tanassova had not taken anything from the linen or kitchen stuff, she would not like to bother with it. There were people less persnickety who would pick it up from the priest's office, Tanas thought and packed some more garbage bags. The furniture



belonged to the owner of the place. It had suffered a lot during the rare cases when the family had entertained at home or some of its members were falling asleep drunk on the floor, his last stepmother's image quick in Tanas's mind. He should offer the landlord some compensation for the damage. They were going to meet on Tuesday to finalize the documents.

Tanas was aware that his floor space was looking uninhabited. His occasional liaisons were on the ladies' turfs not his, so his personal impact consisted of an ironing board, iron and state-of-art shoe rack plus some decent hangers instead the cheap plastic that was overflowing his father's wardrobes. It was the first time when he thought that there was nothing personal around - no photos, no paintings, no knick-knacks to gather dust except the strategically located heavy crystal ashtrays. That had been the only point where grandfather and grandson had always been on the same wavelength - smoking was a waste of time, money and health, Tanas being often the single non-smoker in the company and teased for that. He had had so much secondary smoke since he was born that he did not need to smoke any more. He added the ashtrays to the kitchen stuff for give away. No books. No family albums. Nothing that his famous brother had made although he was talented and his work would be considered an investment of sort. Even the old man had bought some.

Dimitar had offered him their father's personal jewelry, still sealed in the plastic bag by the pathologist who had removed them, but Tanas had refused. He could do without the Kalatrava, fake or real, or without the heavy gold chain with an even heavier cross, and he believed that the wedding ring should be given to the widow, even if they had been married for less than a year. Dimitar had shrugged that she had refused it also, without an explanation. That much about family propriety, but Tanas was ready to cut her some slack that for her the cut ring would be a painful reminder of her husband's accidental death. They should try to offer her less traumatic memorabilia - out of the dresser a decent size box had emerged, half full of tie pins, cuff links, few more chains and pendants. Some were obscenely expensive, few looked like that, some were new and few were older. The pendants were mostly crosses, what an irony; his father had gone to church only when invited to a wedding or funeral which he could not avoid. There was a small gold heart that Tanas knew belonged to his mother as the imprint of Dimitar's first tooth was still visible on the puffed jewel. May be his brother would appreciate the memory of his first bite into gold in life? The gilded letter "E" probably

came from his second stepmother, Emilia, who had lasted almost as long as his birth mother and was not bad at all. She had left when it had become evident his father had no more intention to reproduce and Emilia had wanted children of her own. She had remarried soon after the divorce and had moved to Sofia with her new husband, rumors said with the help of her ex-father-in-law. The following wives had either not made enough impression or left other signs in his father's jewels collection, but the memory about them had gone with him. Tanas put the box aside and looked at his watch. It was past midnight and the church would be opened at seven, it was bed time.

It had been a strange dream but that was how the dreams were supposed to be. He had dreamed of his grandmother Margarita who he had never spoken to as she had been in the asylum since before he was born. She was young and pretty in his vision, and had brought an old gramophone, the one with the flower-like horn, that had to be winded manually. She had frantically turned the arm and put an old vinyl record with some aria on, then turned to him and cautioned, 'Listen my dear, you need to listen carefully but not only to the music!' After that she had left and the music had gone on and on, much longer than the poor gramophone spring would have been able to play. Elvira had come next, on a motorcycle of all things, and had yelled that she had taken care of everything, she had not yelled at him but at someone behind him and when he had turned to see who that person was, a door had slammed, just a door in the middle of nothing. Valkuda had arrived on a sorrel horse, dressed in all white and smiling at him in a decidedly non-sisterly manner. He had reached for her, she had slid in his arms and he had kissed her and had waken to find himself hugging his pillow for dear life.

The dream was reasonable to some extend though, Tanas thought. He had wiped the previous day Margarita's photo and his grandfather had chosen for her grave not the picture of the old woman who had died in her late seventies, but her last photo before the stroke. She had died then, he had insisted and few wanted to argue with him. And she had been a classic music teacher, what else she should put on a gramophone, hard rock? Elvira had told Valkuda that she had taken care of Maria, and his sober brain had paired the accountant with his father's rocker's outfit and his own reflections on the door theme. His brother had mentioned that the weekend would be devoted to seeing all the wedding gowns modeled on his fiancée and he himself was going to ride Smerch the cherry-chestnut. And he was supposed to kiss the bride at the

wedding, right? Right, but for such a kiss if he were the groom he would skin the kisser on the spot, brother or not. Better get going or Smerch might be booked later.

After he had unloaded with Father Pavel his father's stuff the only thing that had remained in the previously full to bursting car was the shopping bag with apples, carrots and sugar cubes. Tanas took an apple, took out his handkerchief and wiped it before chomping with enthusiasm on it. The sugar cubes made him think of Stavros with his name questions. He was sure that the breeder would drop her jaw with surprise when he was going to ask her about the taste choices of his favorite horse. Smerch had been obtained after months of wrangling from a sordid owner who had been abusing it. The horse that had arrived was a sore picture - dirty, nervous, scared, mane and tail had not seen a brush in ages. The trainer had cried in front of the trailer as the horse had responded badly to the sight of the former owner next to her and had refused to get out. Tanas had approached after a ride out of sheer curiosity and fell in love with the red coat, white diamond on the forehead and the black mane. He had shooed away both the owner and the trainer and had brought a bunch of fresh hay. The former owner had protested loudly that it was a no-no but Tanas had towered over the man and had used few chosen words to hush him. He could swear Smerch had listened and understood every syllable and had given an approving whinny at the end. The horse had taken the hay, let Tanas lead him out without a fuss and they have been friends ever since. Smerch had proven to be a character though. He had been throwing out of the saddle everyone who he did not like and that included some prominent businessmen and horse trainers. A professional jockey had used a whip on him and had been badly bitten. His complaints were ignored as the trainer had vouched that the beast had been provoked. The day before the same "uncontrollable savage" had participated in front of the cameras in experimental program for kids with cerebral palsy and had proven to be docile as a lamb with the small invalids, so nobody had trusted the venerable horse specialist. Smerch was tall for an Arabian and could ride for hours with Tanas on his back, real "Drinker of the Wind". There was one inconvenience, the horse loathed trotting. Galloping around was counterproductive when negotiations should be conducted with some nouveau-rich who had recently mounted for the first time for the simple reason that it had been expensive, thus limited to few thus prestigious. Tanas had taken as a rule to come earlier, exercise with Smerch, after

that select a sleepy mare for the tour with prospective clients. He had never imagined that he would be interested in the horse culinary preferences though.

Most of club patrons were on vacation and the place was deserted which suited Tanas perfectly. Smerch's trainer had also snatched few days of leave and the owner of the place had taken the reins in her own hands. She complained that "the boy" had been restless as nobody wanted to ride with him under the blistering sun. The small circles in the pen could not take the edge of horse's frustration. Tanas was given time until midday to enjoy themselves, "but no jokes, even if you paid for those watermelons last time". Speaking of fruits, did she know what the boy would prefer? But of course, apples of all kinds, he had been caught trying to get an apple from a tree. The guy who saw him had sworn that it would have made a front page with a title like "Arabian impact on the dying apple business?" Not that Smerch would refuse carrots or sugar, but his first love was apples. Tanas felt guilty for the one he had munched in the morning.

They have cantered for a warm-up and galloped after that as if all the hounds of hell were after them. It had been pure joy, the beat of Smerch's hoofs chipping on the poisonous mass clogging inside Tanas. He was breathing easier and when they stopped for a short break, they have shared few apples. The horse affectionately nipped at the hair of the tall man sitting on the grass with a bag of fruits next to him. The beast could sense the tension uncoiling in his friend in great spirals that if let too fast could cut into the flesh. Smerch knew firsthand that the physical pain was less important than the pain of rejection, of not belonging. The man who had brought him hay and apples had been with the wrong herd for too long and had rarely come free or happy. He sometimes smelled of that ugly thing that the trainer used to clean his stable with and was killing the sense in Smerch's nose. He sometimes smelled simply lonely. But the tall guy was nice; he had brought him apples and had bitten his abuser with sounds that had made him silent. The horse wished he could introduce his friend to that human girl that came once on a blue moon for a short mad ride. Her hair was like his mane and she brought apples too. He had not seen her for a while though. The girl also smelled lonely. Smerch lifted his head, someone was coming, no, those were two people and they were trotting their way. He nudged Tanas a little harder and refused the apple piece on his palm.

He would have made an excellent battle horse, was the first thought of Tanas, looking at the stallion showing him to mount. May be Smerch's grandmother had seen a real desert war and the genetic memory was talking in her grandson. Tanas mounted and Smerch snorted and took charge making a big smooth curve which ended at the small tree patch at a bend of the road. There the horse stopped and stood still, sniffing the air. Then he pranced as if parading and stopped in front of two so-so mares. On them perched diligently were Dimitar and Valkuda.

'Good morning!'

'Good morning. Varna is a small village, you know! The first thing we were told was that you are already here and had ridden into the woods. I believe someone mentioned watermelons.'

'Good morning, Smerch! Glad to see you, buddy! What do I have here for a good boy like you?' On Valkuda's outstretched palm there was a quarter of an apple. The horse gave a happy whinny and daintily took the offering. Immediately another piece was produced from the saddle bag. Chomp!

'And come to think of it, you have just refused my apples, you Lovelace! I went shopping for you!

'I could have told you that he likes apples and is not much into sugar, I did not know who you were talking about, sorry! Smerch, stop nudging me, you have a rider!'

'Why does he do that?'

'We love the fast ride, don't we?' Valkuda bended to pat the horse.

'They will beat me with a broom probably, but let's race then!'

Dimitar looked smug, 'Sure, but I have to tell you that Valkuda is excellent with the broom also, she practically swept me away when I proposed!'

'With a broom?'

'No, she was holding a broom!'

'Were you flying on it, by any chance?' Tanas was tightening the reins and keeping at arm length.

'Val, catch him and show him what we were talking about!'

'You cannot!' taunted Tanas. Smerch was already speeding ahead and he did not turn. Few minutes later he frowned - there was only one horse trying to catch up with him. He turned and saw Valkuda who was

racing her mare as serious as she could but the horse was no match to Smerch. Tanas slowed and waited for her to reach him.

'What did you do to Dimitar, sent him for the wedding broom?'

His future sister-in-law laughed, a tinkling sound like hundreds of similar small silver bells. Tanas was listening to her incredulously - she had argued with him, yelled at him over the phone, he had seen her crying, but had never actually heard her laughing. It made him think of siren's songs and that made him think of seaside and Vassiliko and Stavros.

'No, but he said he had not been riding for a while and will not participate!'

'Come on, for a person riding dragons, he sounds lame...'

'How do you know, I mean how do you imagine him riding dragons?'

'Yes, indeed, but I can very much imagine you doing it. You are pretty good with horses!' Tanas had stored her slip of tongue for later.

'Grandpa taught me. I am even better bareback as where I learned to ride there were not many saddles.'

'It is forbidden here as far as I know. If you are still game to race me back I will give you a thirty-second advantage because of that sleepy lady you are riding. She should have been retired long ago.'

Valkuda did not need a time to think over his offer and the sleepy mare had felt insulted so they both burst into a gallop. The rider's barrette snapped open and her hair flew after her like a cloud of shimmering black. Tanas was smitten by the picture. Looking at the elderly horse striding with determination he could believe in the tale that an Arabian blood-shouldered mare had carried the Prophet Mohamed out of a battle and to his home,. He did not want to admit though that for the loving embrace that the mare was a subject to, he would go to a battle himself. On foot. Barefoot. Under him Smerch trembled and Tanas let him follow the fleeing ladies.

'You should tell me your preferences about the brand of vacuum cleaner, as I will definitely buy you one as a wedding present!' Despite gasping for breath after the mad dash, Tanas was talking loud enough for the approaching Valkuda to hear. 'Your fiancée will be much better riding it than that broom!'

'You know perfectly well that my horse is not a match for yours!'

'OK, OK, I agree, as compensation may I treat you to a dinner at the club? Their chef is a salad genius!'

'Poor horses!'

'Why?'

'Imagine how many salads they have had before he reached his state of perfection!'

'And while we wait for him to perform his magic chops, we can pour over the press. You made a nice front page, brother mine!'

'What?'

'Don't be coy, the photo-op had turned everywhere!'

'I do not know what you are talking about, I do not know. Show me!'

'Let us get in, I will bring them from the car,' Dimitar tossed the reins to the groom who had approached.

Valkuda dismounted in less hurry. She handed the reins of her mare and buried her face in Smerch's neck. He breathed deeply and nipped on her wind-combed hair. Tanas felt jealous of the obvious affection between the two. For the first time in his life he was jealous, not envious of someone's success or acquisition, but jealous with the blinding rage that the writers had spilled rivers of ink over, the darkest feeling that was used as an explanation of despicable cruelty. Tanas had never bought that, one could always control his feelings, yet looking at the two raven manes meshed he understood it. A small voice in his head was teasing him that he was jealous of a horse and his brother's fiancée's closeness, but Tanas was occupied with keeping a tight rein over the spreading mass of molten envy towards the beast who had just licked the woman's ear. Dimitar's arrival with a bunch of papers was a salvation ring.

'If I were not sure he is a horse, I would have bet my last penny that he is flirting with your fiancée!'

'Very safe bet, he is just one of the four-legged ones, that is all. Let's get in.'

Menu first and press after, Valkuda had been adamant to the point of dropping her bulky bag on top of the newspapers and making a face. The moment the waiter had left with their order, Dimitar spread the colorful tabloids. Tanas was looking at the sky from three front pages with different titles, one sported him touching the angel over Vilena's tombstone and one was showing him laying flowers over his father's grave. All promised more snapshots inside. Depending on the quality and orientation of the newspaper the captions varied from syrupy tearjerkers to acidly offensive. Tanas rubbed his face but did not say a thing. He should have expected it but his guard had been lowered and he had not seen the bastard with the camera.

'Did Reni supply the carnations?' Dimitar prodded.

'No need for that!' Valkuda wanted to slap him. He got the signal and retreated to the bathroom. 'You know, when Grandpa Tane died, your grandfather sent two wreaths. Someone must have misinterpreted his order. He brought one and one was delivered, but both had almost the same band.'

'I have no idea what he brought, but the white lilies with "Thank you for everything. Yours, Tanas" was from me. Your grandpa told me once that he loved lilies but was allergic to them. I thought that he may enjoy them one last time but without sneezing,' Tanas was looking somewhere far away.

Valkuda's wiped a tear. The wreath that had been delivered had been white lilies and Tanas Sr. had looked at it with what she had taken for a fury at botching his order. She had tried to deflect it by telling him that those were indeed her grandfather's favorite flowers which had made him even more agitated. The explanation was surfacing unexpectedly so many years later out of the blue. She remembered that she had gone to the cemetery the following day to be alone. The flower arrangements had wilted under the bright spring sun and delicate white curly petals had fallen to the fresh ground mixing with red petals from Tanas Sr.'s wreath.

'He brought peonies, red peonies!' she sighed.

'Valor and shame in one flower, how appropriate!'

'I did not get that one...'

'Flower language. A year ago we had to sort a series of idiotic robberies, not much stolen but the neighborhood was irked immensely at the culprit. He was leaving flower pictures cut from different magazines, thinking that the act elevated him above the common thieves. We caught the creature, but before that I had to learn all the crap about symbolic meaning of buds, blooms and how they combine.'

'Will you tell me what the white lily stands for than?'

'We have not finished with peonies yet. They would stand for wealth and distinction and represented good fortune; like that Grandfather was lucky to have met Tane. White lilies - they stand for innocence of the person who does not know where to look for the danger and does not recognize it. In China it is the flower to glorify the dead. May be that wreath was right on all accounts.'

'And the carnations?'



'I am afraid those represented the only two buckets of decent greenery in the flower shop next to the graveyard. I had not planned to go there, but met an old friend of grandfather and offered her a lift so I had to go to the graves as she was going to the cemetery herself. She told me about Vilena.'

Valkuda's nostrils flared. Mitzi had come with the notion that Tanas and his father have planned to do to her what his father had done to Vilena. He had to have known who she was if they were in it together. Valkuda had no reason not to trust what Mila had heard. Attacking him with that knowledge however would expose his father's widow as the only possible source of information about their wretched plans. The letter that Dimitar kept in the safe was not known to anyone but Andon before he gave it to him. Was Tanas using his silver tongue to get the information from her? Was he seeing her as gullible girl ready to spew news at first call? Dimitar arrived and cheerfully asked if they can throw away that garbage from the table as he had seen their salads on the rolling table coming.