

Signs

lossif went home, Nada and the girls went to settle Mitzi on the sofa in Dora's room, Vesselin went to put his daily lection conspectus in order and Lambri was left to his studies. But he could not concentrate. His lectures for the following day were prepared previous Sunday and were not a point of concern. He settled back in his leather chair and closed his eyes. He was trying to find a reason behind Tashev's rejection of Mitzi and the unborn child who was doubtlessly his. What was the mentality behind the repudiation of the life he had created, albeit involuntarily? The former swindler was at present a reputable man of immense power and handsome income, his career was going up. The circle of people willing to forget his past was growing by the ones who were good-natured enough naive to believe that he had repented and was working for a better future, and by the cynics who were trying to get close to the new power. What was the seemingly mighty man afraid of? Was he afraid that a child would make him more vulnerable to the vultures he worked with and for? Was he afraid that a wife and an offspring would shatter his image of the iron revolutionary? There were no gossips that linked him to any affairs of heart except with Mitzi; he was presented as an individual completely focused on his work. Lambri knew that Mitzi was not so madly in love with the young man as the gossipers believed; for her Tashev was an acceptable way out of the tyranny of her family. The pill was sugar-coated with the thin layer of vanity that they were rumored the most handsome couple in Sofia, and with his animal virility, the zest to succeed at all costs, the cruelty that could be passed for masculinity, the stern face that could be passed for romantic, the fear he instilled that could be passed for personal presence. Unfortunately for Mitzi, she had started the dance and made a faux pas somewhere. To some extent, Lambri was relieved that Tashev had not taken her upon her offer to marry, as he would have hated his daughter's friend to fall in bloody hands forever. But throwing any woman a man professed to love like a soiled paper doll? Lambri came back to his old conclusion that Tashev was a coward inside, who was putting a facade and fooling the public at the moment. It was a question of time for his bosses to guess if they were intelligent and Lambri knew some of them were. He remembered the Tanas's steely eyes at their last meeting. He despised the man for his actions but his personal qualities were formidable. Horrible, but fascinating all the same. Why was he allowing the meteoric rise of Tashev? Mikhail was controllable; he

could be easily manipulated and was doing Tanas' bidding. Yes, in this light it was possible to think of the rejection as a way of protecting Mitzi from the cruelty of his world. But protecting her by shattering her pride and stomping at the most sacred woman's dreams was not an option a man could contemplate. Tashev was not a man, not on Lambri's list of men, he was a hollow puppet and the power had drained everything human that may have existed in him before. Lambri knew his parents, a couple of small village people who were coming sometimes to visit their powerful son and then returned to their garden and few hens and turkeys. He had met them first long ago, when he had been their son's public defender as they did not have the money to hire him a private lawyer. Lambri thought that the look in the mother's eyes was more haunted now than then. What would she say if she knew that her son had rejected his blood and her grandchild would bear another man's name? There was no chance that the elderly parents would change Tashev's decision, Lambri knew it. Some things were better left unknown, as the knowledge caused pain.

The big sofa had sheltered Mitzi since she could remember. It seemed that nothing changed in Dora's room, except for her books that were becoming more and more. Two sheets, a heavy woolen blanket and a pillow were produced and placed at the corner of the sofa. Then the girls put Nada in the middle, put up her feet on a chair and staged a modeling show. Gales of laughter swept the room when Mitzi was producing a perfect lady image, up to the twirling of her dainty umbrella over her tilted pill box hat. Then they all sobered and packed back everything except their last purchase. Dora brought up the book with the photo of the statue which hairstyle had impressed Mitzi and showed it to her mother. It was not hard to copy, and they would have time on Sunday, Nada assured them. Then while the girls were discussing the details, she scrutinized again the illustration. It was not depicting a happy newlywed woman, rather a mature matron. Her posture was one of utter sadness. The cut of her garment could be as ancient as the beginning of times and as contemporary as the beginning of the current century. The disturbing element was the accuracy with which the artist had carved the lines of pain on the woman's face, the ache in every curve of her body, the despair of her gesture. Was she mourning a loss of a child or a loss of a husband, was she despairing over the passage of time? It was to remain a mystery, as was her name. It did not prevent however the transmission of her message through the ages - the fragility of happiness, the heart-wrenching pain at its

loss. Was it a prophesy of some sort for what was coming Mitzi's way? No, it should not be, Nada thought fast, as if the fierceness of her rejection of such thought could ward the evil. Yet...

Luckily for Riste, most of professor's addressees lived near the University, and the offices that he had to deliver invitation to were also close. So by six-thirty the carriage stopped again in front of Professor Spassov's home and the lad ran to ring the bell. Instead of Martha, it was the professor himself who answered. He motioned to Riste to get in and went to pay the driver. When the host returned, Riste was still in the corridor, not daring to get further. Iossif pointed at the sitting room and the shoe cleaner sat at the edge of a leather armchair, as if afraid to spot it. Then he recited in one breath that he had found either the person to whom the invitation was addressed, or at least his or her assistant. Yes, Mrs. Altinova had got the invitation hand in hand, same as the minister. The third person that Iossif inquired about was represented by the office clerk, which was fine also, the message to be transmitted immediately upon arrival of that person. The professor was content; he withdrew a big note from his wallet and handed it to Riste. Iossif saw how the boy's eyes first glowed, then as if a bucket of water was splattered over them, went dull. He tried to return the note to Iossif.

'You don't need to give me that. Dad will first accuse me that I have stolen it, and then he will take it and drink it to the last dime anyway.'

Iossif did not take the note, so Riste put it on the coffee table.

'Riste, what do you know about banking?'

'Professor, the banks are for the people with a lot of money. Why a shoe polisher like me will need bank knowledge?'

'My point is that the banks keep your money - sometimes too well, of course, but keep them anyway, and you can save for something you want instead of giving all your earned money to anyone. How about if you come with me to my bank tomorrow morning and I will show you how it works?'

'You mean, you will take me with you to look how a bank works? Me?'

'Of course you, but you are not going to look only. You will deposit safely your money and your father would not be able to touch them. You know what, we will leave that note on my desk and tomorrow you will bring your student's card and be here by eight-thirty. Do you plan to work any more today?'

'I better do. Dad has had his wages today and is already somewhat spirited; better wait until it knocks him down. And I will earn few extra coins for tomorrow!' Riste cracked up.

'Then let us go to the kitchen and get something to eat before you go.'

'Thank you, Professor, but Mrs. Vassileva fed me already. I am sorry; I think I ate your supper! She said you ordered so. It was really delicious, thank you, but I am still full. Eight-thirty tomorrow. Good night, Professor!'

Riste took his box and headed to the corner. May be it was not a lucrative one, like in front of the big banks around the Court Palace, but it was lucky corner for sure. The thought kept him warm while he brushed and polished until well after nine. Then he walked to his small hut where his dad was seeing his drunk dreams, his mom was silently crying and his two brothers already slept on the kitchen floor under the rag cover.

The dinner at "Union" was relatively short, the men having a bottle of wine between them, the ladies refraining from drinking, as they exchanged knowing glances and claimed an early start the next morning. Boris did not show up, calling from the hospital that there were several cases that needed his immediate attention. The conversation was lively, nothing in particular, the latest gossips about the art world, the latest students' anecdotes, the preparation for the winter that was coming. Obviously the note of the upcoming nuptials was not read by the entire town - or if it was, the personnel were too well trained to show. So when Nada and the girls took their carriage together, there were no knowing smirks. The men elected to walk for a while, as the weather was unexpectedly balmy for that part of the year.

The ladies had the house for themselves for few minutes so Dora and Mitzi ran to the downstairs bathroom to brush their teeth, dressed in their nightgowns, just like at the boarding house of their college. Nada heard their quick steps and happy giggles and sighed. She could almost hear her mother-in-law cautioning her "Too good is no good!" but did her best for once to ignore the voice. The previous Mrs. Mihailova had had a foresight that could shame a fortune-teller. She had the uncanny ability to see through people like other people see through a magnifying glass and good many were afraid of her gift to qualify a person with one sentence. The more her eyesight faded at the end of her life, the more her qualifications grew accurate, as if stripped of the obvious the person was becoming more easily readable. Every woman who knew Nada had at least once expressed her consternation how the young woman could not only bear her character, but

worship her mother-in-law. Yet it had been easy, as the elder Mrs. Mihailova had accepted the young one with opened arms and had not stopped praising her only son's wife until her last day. Nada smiled at the memory of her return from the hospital after Dora was born. Instead with sour comments that Lambri's firstborn was a girl, they were met with smiles, special dinner celebration and the utmost praises that a woman could get. In patriarchal Bulgaria it was a real surprise, and Nada was forever grateful for the unswerving trust and support of her in-laws. When a little bit more than a year later Vesselin had been born, her first idea was to name it after her father-in-law. He had got the news from Lambri and had vehemently resisted, claiming that a little bundle of joy should be named as such instead of burdened with an archaic name that the village priest had selected from an obscure book for his parents. Thus Vesselin had received a most unusual name among his peers. Speaking of him, was that his voice booming from the front garden?

Snuggled under her blanket, Mitzi was trying to come to terms with the events of the day. It was less than twenty-four hours that she had faced Mikhail and whatever was left of her feelings for him were ground to powder and thrown to four winds. It was at dawn that she had tried to talk to her parents about the baby and the non-impending marriage and was thrown away like something the cat had dragged home. It was before midday that she had accepted the proposal of Professor Spassov, who she admired and thought like most of her fellow students to be a mythical rather than real person. She already had her trousseau and the ceremony was a day away. Mitzi heard the faint noise of Dora's mattress and realized that her friend was not asleep either. 'Dora,' she whispered, 'I owe you one big time. Thank you! I pray I will be able to repay at least a crumb of what you all did for me today!'

'Mitzi, we are happy that you are happy! You deserve it! Vesselin was right, I also would have tied you not to marry Mikhail, may be it was meant to be.'

'Odd, your mom said in the morning the same - that everything that happens, happens for a reason... Are you sure Professor Spassov will not regret it? I mean, when we wake up tomorrow, he will not come back and say it had been a joke and ...'

'Mitzi, don't be dumb! He has already printed invitations, arranged for the church, invited everyone and his brother for Sunday, even your parents - and you think he will back at that point? I told you in the morning - I cannot remember ever seeing him backing off on a promise. It will be fine, you will see!'

'If you say so!'

'I do, now let us sleep, we have a dress to make tomorrow, that is not as easy as the algebra homework, you know!' The girls chuckled. They both had been on top of the class in algebra and it had become a customary joke.

The meeting of the security directors from the several big towns in the central Varna hotel had continued into the late hours then they sat for a dinner together as some of them were planning to return with either the late night trains or drive during the night. The overwhelming entourage of his subordinates had hauled with them surprised unpleasantly Tanas. It looked like that they were trying to prove their importance to each other by demonstrating in what imminent danger they all were. Some of them merited it though. They have not exercised any selection who they wiped out of the political map and had slid down the slope of personal likes and dislikes. It was counterproductive and he had told them so, dead people could not sign documents or stand trial and the remaining ones were getting the message and fleeing abroad effectively tying the hands of the legal expropriators. There were not enough new specialists to be able to dispose with the old ones. Tanas had reminded his colleagues the ancient tale about the king who ordered all the old people in his kingdom slaughtered as they were just eating and doing nothing and what had happened later. The ones who had laughed carelessly Tanas had noted very carefully. He would have to unobtrusively find a way to replace them before the new law would be enforced. Probably around the New Year's day when people would be occupied with other thoughts. The tall man looked at his watch and thought that it was time to dismiss the drunken company. The guards had left a core group on duty and gone to sleep. His people had not even come as he insisted that Varna was safe enough city for a single man to get home at around midnight, he smiled.

The porter offered to call him a taxi but Tanas refused. A brisk ten minutes walk would bring him home, he said and he would benefit from some fresh air before bed. He left the well lit lobby and looked at the wisps of fog swirling around. Tanas lifted his collar against the cold and walked into the darkness. A dark figure slipped after him unnoticed.

The secret service director had that crawling feeling that someone was right behind him but there were no footsteps or other suspicious noise. He was leaving the boulevard and was going to cross the small park in front of the theater so he took his time to look around. The closer he was to the sea the denser the fog had been and he did not like the solitude the place represented. However his home was just few hundred meters away, he could not possibly hail a carriage to there even if one appeared out of nowhere. Tanas moved his pistol to his coat pocket and went ahead.

He could make the outlines of the old theatre tickets outlet, which marked the end of the park when a shadow left the small building and came towards him. Tanas gripped the arm in his pocket. The man waved a pack of cigarettes and asked, 'Do you have a match?'

'Sorry, I don't smoke!' Tanas did not release his gun.

'Really, don't you?' The man sounded somewhat surprised. "With so much tobacco in your pockets and you don't smoke, Tanassov?' A long knife appeared in the man's left hand. Tanas had enough time to fire once before another knife was pressed to his throat and the pistol kicked from his hand.

'You killed my buddy and you will die for it. I want you to bleed before that so I will make only little nicks here and there and you will look like a pig at Christmas...' the whisper was coming from behind him low and full of malice. All of a sudden the grip slacked and the knife clattered on the cobblestones. Something heavy dropped behind him and Tanas heard Tane's calm voice.

'I hope he did not manage to cut you badly.'

The pair of green eyes scanned Tanas and the strong fingers pressed a handkerchief to the nick on his throat. The bodyguard bended over the scrawny man laying on the alley and turned him over. He pulled a throwing knife from his back, wiped it at the man's coat and put it back in his ankle strap. The guard briskly searched the pockets of the two bodies but there was nothing to identify them. He pulled the sleeves to look at their arms and spat an expletive when he turned the right hand of the assassin who had held the knife at the Black Cardinal's throat. Tanas bended over. The palm bore an ugly scar – it looked like a cross, healed badly. Tane swore again and looked at the right hand of the other one. There was nothing there.

'What does it mean, Tane?'

'Whoever sent them after you, had chosen poorly. This is a mark that this here is man no more, this is carrion, not worth even of killing. What he had done had been so bad that it is useless to kill him, he is condemned, rotten, and it is unnecessary sin on one's soul to kill such thing. There was not much time to check though. I am sorry I was late.'

'No, you were not. I am alive and eternally grateful for that. Thank you, Tane! Now let's get out of here! Come with me!' Tanas picked up his pistol.

'To the police?'

'No, home. The morning patrol would find them anyway. I don't want to make waves about it. An almost successful assassination attempt on me does not stay well on the stats. I have to figure out what to say.'

Tane walked with Tanas until they almost reached his home then stopped.

'You don't need to say anything. The cut is small and will pass for a shaving slip at the place where it is. I will go back now and will forget that I have been out tonight.'

'But you deserve a medal for saving me, a premium, a promotion!'

'No, I don't need that. I have saved a soul, that is a reward in itself or so I have been told. But you need guards, Mr. Tanassov. The time has changed and the pendulum went too far aside. That is why I came after you, to be sure that you will be safe.'

'How did you know that I may not be?'

'There are signs that tell me, but you will not believe them and it is late anyway. I should be going. I may be needed there.'

'If you insist. Thank you, Tane. I owe you a life!' Tanas smiled.

'I may take you upon this!' the green-eyed man smiled and waited until Tanas entered his house. Then he disappeared into the night.

The dawn was still trying to pry its way through the clouds when Nada heard the light steps of two pairs of slippers going down. She stood up trying to be as quiet as possible. Lambri was sleeping on his half of the bed a sound sleep which was not as frequent a guest as she would have wished, so she dressed and left the room like a ghost. Vesselin was sleeping also and like Lambri, he had a second and third period lectures on Saturdays, so they had a lot of time. Nada joined the girls for breakfast and while they were sipping their

herbal tea, the day schedule was discussed. Mitzi asked if it would not be imposing if she stays home all day, as she was reluctant to poke her nose out of the door. The chance, however small that she might meet her parents, was terrifying her. Nada agreed that in that particular case, hiding was best policy and they all laughed. Then the small company moved to Lambri's study and started drawing the picture of the future outfit. Mitzi drew the sketch, Dora measured her and Nada put the measurements on paper. There was really not much work to do, as the outfit was a simplicity incarnated, so the women decided to first let the men go and start after that - the bride had to have some secrets. Instead they discussed who was entitled to get an invitation. First on the list were few of their former teachers, then few of Mitzi's cousins and their parents, although most of the invitations going out of town would be definitely late. Mitzi was thinking about running to the post office to put them in the morning mail, when the servants' door opened with such impatience that Nada winced that the noise would wake up her men. Maritsa came in through the open doors of the kitchen and the study to halt before the three of them. Her face was flashed red:

'Mrs. Mihailova, is it true?'

'Good morning, Maritsa, what is supposed to be true?'

'Riste told me to keep it a secret, but not from you, no, you know, he said, that Mitzi will marry Professor Spassov tomorrow! Is it true? I told him that he's joking, but he says he is not!'

'Yes, my dear, it is true. Mitzi will indeed marry Iossif tomorrow.'

The maid's full mouth formed a perfect "o" and for few moments her eyes flicked between Nada and Mitzi, hoping that one of them would laugh and confirm the joke that Riste had told her. But all the three ladies were smiling at her, very patiently, while Maritsa was trying to comprehend the unexpected turn of the events. Mitzi smiled broader and took one of the envelopes, wrote Maritsa's full name on it and handed it to the girl. She opened it with shaking hands and slowly read the contents of the white card. 'It is for me??? You want me to come to your wedding?'

'Of course I would like to invite you, if you will be so nice to come at such a short notice,' Mitzi was serious and Maritsa thought she would dissolve in tears.

'Oh, but it is my first invitation to a wedding! I am not sure what I am supposed to do! it is not like at our village, it is in the best church in town and there will be so many people, I don't know what to do...'

'You will be fine, Maritsa, if you like you may come with your sister and her family. There will be plenty of space for everyone.'

The bride was trying to suppress a smile, but Nada caught the faintest note of misery in Mitzi's voice and interpreted it correctly. No matter what her parents had told her the day before, she would miss them on her wedding day. Mitzi was loyal even to people who did not exactly proved to be worth of loyalty. Dora's mother thought that she should at least try to talk to the parents and see how it would go.

'Such a garden of flowers and no one to feed a man dying of hunger? I can't believe it!' came Vesselin's teasing from the stairs.

'Oh, I am sorry, Mr. Mihailov, I am so sorry! Please let me know what you want and it will be ready very soon!' exclaimed Maritza, looking at the clock with horror.

'Maritsa, calm down, I will survive another five minutes, but barely, a piece of bread with salt will do for now,' chimed the young man and padded to the kitchen after the girl who hurriedly was taking off her coat, still clutching Mitzi's invitation as if afraid that it might disappear.

Under the commotion that Maritsa had caused, Dora slipped unnoticed in the garden. She needed few moments alone. Forty days had passed from her wedding night and Todor's death. It was time for his soul to start its journey away from the living and she wanted to say her farewell. The news of his death had been big for a while, but no amount of pressure made his executioners reveal his grave, as one of them sneered, he did not deserve to be mourned. Todor's sister had protested, his party, although weakened, tried also, everyone tried, but it was like an iron curtain that had been drawn over the stage of his life. With the death of Stamenov, the prison director, all the records about Todor had vanished, as if they have never existed, or may be they have not existed in first place. That was a trick the Soviets had taught their favorite Mr. Dimitrov - no papers, no person. The guy, as current Prime Minister, was welding the big knife at the moment, going equally merciless to his former aides and his former foes, but he was forgetting that he was also human and he would one day face his Creator. Mr. Dimitrov did not believe in Creator, a tiny voice nudged Dora, he believed in submissive serving. He might not, but Dora did. She remembered an ancient curse, as ugly as the crimes he had ordered. Before she could stop herself, she was whispering, "Let the earth not accept you, until my land is free to elect who will govern it! Let your grave after that be uneasy one to lie in until my

husband's grave is known! You robbed me of the love and life Todor and I could share, let your masters rob you of your pathetic existence, let you die far from everyone and everything you might have appreciated, as I don't think you know the meaning of love and life!" The splash of great wings startled Dora and she trembled. She did not regret the harsh words, but she knew she had more important message. Across from her, in the branches of the old fig tree, a magnificent hawk was looking at her with its bloodshot eye.

'Tell Todor I am pregnant! Tell him that I love him and our child will be the most beautiful revenge ever conceived! Tell him...' Dora stifled a sob and covered her eyes with her hands. She fought for composure but before she managed to put down her hands, a gust of wind blew in her face, one huge wing brushed lightly her hair and the bird was gone, as if it had never been there. Dora smiled as she was sure what the hawk had been. Few lines of one of Todor's favorite book floated in her mind.

"If the soul is more than what Pyrrho thinks, mine will fly to thee and Lygia, on its way to the edge of the ocean, and will alight at your house in the form of a butterfly or, as the Egyptians believe, in the form of a sparrowhawk. Otherwise I cannot come."

Her husband was a man who kept his promises, even in death. Well, November was simply not the time for butterflies.

In front of his late wife's wall portrait, Iossif was standing in deep, almost trans-like concentration. Not that he had second thoughts about marrying Mitzi - his gut feeling was one of complete rightness and it had never faltered him so far. He was trying to decipher what the message of his early morning dream had been about. It had been a disturbing one, Iossif was sitting next to his father on a bench at a riverside and most of the buildings behind them were hidden in a thick fog. It was a big town around, the din muffled by the fog, but distinctively city one, although Iossif could not pick out individual conversations. His father was an old man in the dream and was listening to Iossif telling him that he would be getting married the following morning. The old man had shaken sadly his head and told him that he was giving him his blessing, but that it would not last long no matter what Iossif would do. Then his father had taken out a small velvet pouch tied with two red silk strings. Out of it came a small ring of exquisite beauty and rare craftsmanship. It was a rose with two leaves on both sides, the petals of the flower holding a diamond, and seven petite diamonds forming the dew on the carved leaves. The central stone was the most unusual one Iossif had seen - as if

inside the clear form there was a smaller perfect octaeder of yellow, like drop within a drop. His father had handed him the ring and at that moment single sun ray had pierced the clouds and the swats of fog to illuminate the stone. The jewel came to life, the sides of the inside form causing an incomparable play of sparkles as if coming from the stone itself rather than a mere reflection. The ring looked ancient and lossif had marveled the unknown master who had turned a defect in an otherwise perfect stone into a miraculous beauty.

'I wanted to give it to your mother, but you know what happened. I wish you to be luckier, son!'

Then the old man had stood up and walked into the fog leaving lossif with the flaming ring alone. Few seconds later a hawk had descended from the sky and perched on the back of the bench. He had looked at lossif with its round yellow eyes, nodded, as if approving on something, and flew again into the clouds.

The professor took off Anna's portrait and opened the wall safe behind it. The weary morning sun was bright enough to illuminate the object on his palm when he approached the window. It was a dark velvet pouch with red silk string bow. It had been over fifty years since it was last untied.

The ring slid on his palm and all the details that lossif had seen in his dream were there. He had not given it to Anna, as he had been afraid that she would be hurt by the association of the stone's yellow heart and the tuberculosis that was eating her up, the euphemism for the disease being "the yellow guest". He had bought her a beautiful but somewhat lacking imagination sapphire with a diamond frame around the main stone, which had been the center of oh-s and ah-s among her friends and relatives. The rose had been in his safe waiting for its time. lossif took out of his pocket the handkerchief with Mitzi's ring tied to its corner. He undid the knot and put the two rings together. His gut feeling had not played him tricks - they matched perfectly.

After few moments of contemplation, lossif decided to change his plans for the day. It was just after seven, but he could hear Martha in the kitchen. He picked up some notes from the safe, carefully closed it and replaced Anna's portrait. He grinned at the woman painted on the canvas and murmured, 'I know you understand.'

The artist had been a compassionate man and had managed to capture his late wife's elusive beauty, the tenderness of the blue eyes and the softness of an expecting mother's features. The portrait was commissioned as soon as the news of Anna's pregnancy had given both of them a new hope that she might pull through. No matter how fast the artist tried to work, every sitting was becoming more and more difficult for her. At the end, the master had finished the portrait without his model, by memory. When Iossif had seen it ready on the easel at the atelier he knew that his hopes had been in vain. He spared Anna the pain of seeing her former self and comparing it with the shade that she saw in the mirror in the mornings when she had been well enough to stand up. The portrait came home after her funeral and had not changed places even since. Anna's was the only permanent presence in his personal sitting room, which has been visited by very few people. The room was also intact since Anna's death and apart from a fresh coat of paint on the walls and varnish on the elaborate wall panels every few years, it still carried the unmistakably Art Nouveau air that she had favored. It was a relaxing room, the light filtered through the linden tree in front to the double windows where it once again was muted through the beautiful stained glass panels in lieu of curtains. Iossif looked at them with renewed interest. Anna had made the paper project herself. It had taken months to execute by one of the best glass artists, who had initially proclaimed the task impossible. It was not the customary wisteria, not the irises and not the roses, not the lilies or water lilies that adorned the windows. The panels were an intricate depiction of a chrysanthemum garden - the fading green of the late autumn leaves emblazoned with the sunlight of an occasional yellow bloom amongst the mostly frosted white ones. Here and there the garden was streaked with a line of ivy, its dark glossy green in stark contrast with the pale landscape where the eyes can stop and rest. Each ivy leaf was carved individually, alive under the late autumn sun. Anna had not forgotten even the dew drops - minuscule circles of clear glass, strategically placed. Iossif felt a stab of pain that she had gone so young, so full of talent and so full of life. He looked at her portrait again and her smile seemed to be wider. Chrysanthemums. He had to remember to call the florist to add the ivy.

Shlomo Behar had been Iossif's notary since he took over the practice of his father in 1933. Since he had received the invitation for the wedding the previous day, he had expected the call from his client and the early morning ring was more relieving than annoying. He congratulated Iossif on his upcoming matrimonial

status change and agreed to meet him at ten-thirty in his office. He listened to the explicit instructions and was glad that the phone could not transmit the disbelieving shake of his head while he was short handing. Of course he would prepare it himself, as always, no secretaries, of course, the clients' secrets were always safe with him, he reassured Iossif. When he hung down the receiver, he went to tell his wife that he would be going earlier and she may drop at the office no earlier than midday. Ernesta complained that she would need a dress for Sunday and that there was no time to stitch a new one, so she should get at least a new hat for the event of the week. Shlomo indulgent smiled and pointed that she should have time for that at least, but he would like to be spared the search. Then he hurried to his office.

Friday had been a long day for the florist, as the amount of chrysanthemums that were required had been daunting. He had mobilized all his acquaintances to search for the blooms. On Saturday, the bazaars' flower lines had made quick sales immediately after opening. Several of the vendors had agreed to return to their yards and harvest all their remaining chrysanthemums, astonished by the demand. Most of the others had opened their hands in a gesture of resignation as those had been the last remnants of the former garden glory - it was November, after all! An assistant had been dispatched to Plovdiv with the delivery van to collect whatever he could there and from the villages alongside the road. Mr. Georgiev, the cloth merchant, had seen his stock of yellow ribbons severely depleted. But all in all, the order was coming along beautifully. Iossif's call was a pleasant surprise, as the florist was able to confirm that the preparations were up to the schedule. Of course, he could add ivy to the arrangements, but was Professor Spassov not concerned of the ivy's bad reputations as a witch's herb? Sure not, it was not a problem procuring it, he confirmed. When the florist hanged the receiver, he was still laughing at Iossif's remark that such abundance could be explained only with hordes of witches in Sofia. At least the ivy was growing all over town; the florist had only to call Georgiev about dark green velvet ribbons.

The kitchen was Martha's undisputed domain, her pride and joy. Although Iossif had displayed little interest in it, he had diligently acquired for his housekeeper all the newest inventions and had never been tight-fist with decorations and supplies. He knew that in case of dire need, Martha could prepare a dinner for six with an hour notice and was content with her cooking skills, despite her good-natured moans that she should be

practicing more. It was a cozy, airy room and was domineered by the massive kitchen table. Here, dressed immaculately as always, Iossif was sitting and eating his porridge while listening to Martha's grapevine news. He was quite pleased to find that the town was still more or less unaware about the upcoming marriage - the news had not got to the army of servants who were faster than the national daily's to carry a message. His invitations had reached the addressees in the early afternoon, were opened after the evening meal when the topic of discussion was not in direct earshot of the maids, and if any news was leaking, it would be on Sunday at church to be discussed. That suited him perfectly - Iossif did not want a jealous man to show and spoil Mitzi's wedding. He scrapped the last spoonful and smiled at Martha.

'Mrs. Vassileva, I will probably dine in town with Mr. Behar, please do not bother with a lunch for me. I will be having a supper at home and if I am lucky - a glass of wine with Lambri and Boris in the early evening, so would you be so kind to make us something appropriate. I will be sending Riste to drop Mitzi's invitations before lunch, but before that I have a small business to attend with him. He will be coming in a minute to wash and I will pick him up in fifteen minutes. I think he may do with some bite while waiting, please take care of it. Do you need me for anything or is there something to ask?'

Martha assured him that all would be done as he requested and Iossif left for the neighboring corner.

The shoe polishing business was good in the early hours and Riste had been busy with his usual customers, but by that time the regulars were already at work and the tempo was slowing. He had been very careful not to splash polish on his better shirt, which was ironed by his mother. He had washed his hair and had dried it next to the stove, but because he had been standing head down, his hair had gotten the form of a hedgehog. Luckily, the day was warm and he did not need a jacket, as his one was getting really small. Or was it that he was growing so fast? A shadow fell over his shoe polishing box stand. Riste looked up at Professor Spassov.

'Good morning!' said old man before the boy managed to open his mouth.

'Good morning, Professor, am I late?' asked quickly Riste, afraid that his lack of watch had played him a nasty trick.

'No, you are not. I thought of changing the schedule a little. Are you very busy today in the morning?'

Riste made a sweeping gesture. 'I think I can spare the time, the fellow directors of polishing stands can pick up the slack for me!' and he laughed, a genuine, happy laughter. Iossif laughed with him.

'In that case, may I propose a business program for the morning, sir? I would like to engage your services for the morning, much to the same purpose as yesterday, as the future Mrs. Spassova had not had the chance to send out her invitations. But before that you may go to my house. Mrs. Vassileva will feed you, and I will pick you up in fifteen minutes to go to the bank as we agreed yesterday. Does it sound like a business plan? I am even going to pay you in advance for the services rendered so you can put all your money in the bank.'

'Sure, Professor!' Riste was finishing with putting all his simple tools back in the box. He straightened and followed Iossif.

Mihailovs' front door was opened by utterly stressed Maritsa, who squeaked at the sight of the professor. Then she curtsied awkwardly and mumbled some congratulations. Iossif called decades of cards-playing experience to keep his face straight - she was so funny in her attempt to follow something she considered a protocol! He reassured her that Mitzi's invitation was in good standing and he would be happy to see her at the wedding, and was finally rescued by Vesselin, who had come to see who Maritsa was not letting in and why. The little maid was flustered that she was in fact keeping the venerable professor at the door like a grocery vendor and she promptly fled to the kitchen. Iossif followed Vesselin to the drawing room, where Nada and the girls were discussing something, but they immediately stopped when they saw who the guest was. He did not intend to spoil their fun.

'I will be very quick, dear ladies, and will leave you to continue that intriguing conversation that I just interrupted.'

Iossif sat across from Mitzi and pulled the small velvet pouch from his pocket. He took out the rose ring, but kept Mitzi's simple band inside. The professor looked at her and smiled.

'Every bride deserves to have the ring of her dreams, child, and although we did not have much time to discuss it, I hope you will like this one enough to wear it. If you excuse my aching back, I would rather not come to my bended knee.'

Mitzi was taken by surprise, the marriage proposal becoming so much more real. She hesitantly put out her hand and lossif slid the ring on her finger. It felt so right and so eerie at the same time, the rose almost alive.

'It is incredibly beautiful!' she whispered 'Thank you! I will always wear it!'

'Always is a long time, child, but I will take it as sign you like it,' smiled lossif. 'I am glad about it. Nada, I will be gone for most of the day, but my sincere hope is that Lambri and Boris will not refuse my invitation for a glass of wine tonight. Not exactly a bachelor party, but some entertainment to keep me from getting cold feet. I am joking, Mitzi, I am not going to have cold feet, rest assured, but maybe this deception will persuade them to come and join me.'

lossif stood to go. Mitzi stood abruptly before him, took his hand, bowed and kissed it in a centuries-old gesture of gratitude. He put his other hand on her head and said, 'It will be all right, child, don't get upset,' and he left.

As lossif was entering his kitchen, the phone rang. Martha picked it up and from it a very agitated male voice inquired whether he could talk to Professor Spassov. According to the curt introduction, the voice belonged to one Mr. Altinov. Martha remembered the name of the future professor's wife and a trickle of cold sweat went down her spine - if that was the father-in-law, the chances that his daughter would be any different were slim. She looked up at lossif and he motioned that he would take the call in his study. Martha held the receiver until he picked up the other phone and slowly put it on the cradle.

Mr. Altinov swallowed nervously and cleared his throat 'Well, I am not quite sure you are the same person who visited us yesterday in the morning, so I am not sure where to start with...'

'Yes, I tried to speak with you yesterday in the morning.'

'You sure can understand my nervousness about the situation, my shock at the news first from Mitzi and then from you...'

'Mr. Altinov, how about cutting it short. I am interested neither in your motives nor in your excuses. I do not need from you anything that involves money. The wedding is arranged, it is paid for and all you need to do is to show at "Sveta Nedelya" in your Sunday best half an hour before the ceremony. You and your wife are invited to the dinner at "Balkan" after the church and I hope that will be the last interaction me or Mitzi have

to endure. I would not have bothered with you myself, but for the sake of the daughter you said you did not have, I am inclined to tolerate your presence for the day tomorrow. I want not a shadow over her head, am I clear on the subject?’

‘Oh, you can be as arrogant as her, sure a lovely pair! You, what, you are old enough to be her grandfather? I don't think I want to participate in your charade!’

‘You are correct about the grandfather, but from the vicinity of my illustrious age I don't give a broken penny what you think about your wants or don'ts. You will be there, otherwise your boss and my good friend may be surprised to learn a little bit more about the charade, as you named it. For now he knows only that I am marrying in haste, but that may change, especially in your absence. Come or don't come, it is up to you. I want to know now in order to spare Mitzi some painful expectations.’

‘You are trying to blackmail me?’

‘No, I don't need that at all. I am just letting you know the facts to make an informed decision. Also, I definitely do not intend to spend the day chatting with you. So are you going to come?’

‘She does not deserve it, but let it be, it will be less gossips to quell if we come.’

‘You are right. And one more thing - I don't want you to upset her tomorrow. No matter what.’

‘Can I talk to her now?’

‘No, of course not, she is not staying with me!’

‘Hmm, I wonder where she had gone.’

‘If I were you, I would drop the attempt to find her - she is well hidden,’ Iossif laughed mirthlessly. ‘Did I make it clear that I don't want Mitzi to be bothered? Before I forget, I expect that any person who expresses his surprise will be met with polite silence on your part about the reasons of such a flash wedding. No details, Mr. Altinov! It is up to me and Mitzi to distribute them. Would you like to ask me something before I go?’

‘Hmm, well, what shall I tell them?’

‘The truth. That Mitzi and I have our own motives and it is best to ask the newlyweds. That is it. I wish you a good day and will see you tomorrow.’

Iossif hang up and smiled maliciously, then immediately dialed Nada. He was quick and to the point - Altinovs were coming to the wedding, but he would prefer Mitzi not to meet them before that. “I am not quite

sure I like that father-in-law of mine", he smirked. Nada politely informed him that it was an opinion shared by many.

The smell of fried eggs reminded Iossif of his childhood. Behind the table, with a red-and-white checkered kitchen towel tucked in the collar of his shirt, Riste was finishing what looked like scrambled eggs remnants. He swirled his last morsel of bread around the plate, swallowed it and grinned at Martha.

'Thank you, Mrs. Vassileva, that was very tasty!' the boy wiped his mouth and untied the towel that was protecting his attire.

Iossif winced inwardly - he would be doing Riste a very doubtful favor if he would bring him to the bank looking like that. No matter how clean and good looking he was, his shirt had seen better decades. They would have to stop along the road.

Half an hour later Riste was dressed like an average schoolboy his age and if he was missing the hat of one of the boys' schools it could pass for an omission or decision not to show off. He had tried to resist the purchase. Iossif had insisted that Riste would probably do more chores for him in the near future and should consider the clothes a uniform of sort and could keep it at Iossif's house if he wished so. The professor was astonished what a difference a change of clothes could make - the lad was positively good looking young man with all the chances to become an outstanding specimen of masculine beauty once the coming of age stopped playing him tricks. But the bone structure was there, the high forehead, the level eyebrows, the straight nose above the chiseled mouth and the square jaw that was mellowed by the elongated oval of his face. His voice had already reached the velvety baritone register where it would remain. Yet, the most striking feature were his eyes, they were somewhat too old for that young face. Inside the serenity of their blue Iossif could see the goodness that was Riste's nature, and the storms that he could weather. These were the ideal eyes of a card player, reflective pools that allowed the opponent to see whatever he wanted, but that whatever would have been just the reflection from the surface while the depths still guarded their mystery.

'Riste, do you play cards?'

'No, Professor, I don't play. Mom always says that cards are devil's invention as Dad is constantly losing when playing. I know that the devil has nothing to do with Dad's luck, but I don't play something I don't know. If you like, we can play marbles instead!'

The seeming innocence of Riste's offer made Iossif laugh and he gave the boy a second look. He had to admit, he had missed something there. He shook his head. 'I am not quite sure where I had put mine for the moment, so I will refrain. But I think that this winter I will teach you to play cards as not to lose, if your mother would agree, of course. Card games are a lot like mathematics, you need to think and calculate fast! Now remember what we discussed about the bank!'

The bank director was a square-built man, who personally came to meet Iossif. He called one of his clerks to guide Riste through opening of his bank account and invited Iossif to his office for a cup of coffee. The professor refused the drink, but requested several things. He opened a bank account at the name of Mrs. Maria Spassova and deposited a sizable sum there. He took some cash in gold and authorized an access to his safe for the said Mrs. Spassova. The banker's eyebrows were reaching almost his hairline as he had never heard of any Mrs. Spassova for as long as he had taken care of Iossif's finances. It was as if he had kept her in his home safe, the man thought. He had to ask his wife, she knew everyone and his brother and everything that was to be known in town. Then his client picked up his bag, said his goodbyes and collected Riste on the way out. He dispatched the boy to Mitzi and leisurely strolled to Shlomo's office.

The document that Shlomo had rereading was a statement of the old fashioned chivalry that was not to be found in the modern society, thought the notary. In view of their upcoming nuptials, Iossif was leaving all his possessions to his wife, Mrs. Maria Velyanova Spassova, born Maria Velyanova Altinova, including moveable and immovable, present and future royalties of his work published or to be published in Bulgaria and abroad, art collections, safes' contents, to her complete discretion with the understanding that upon her demise the remaining possessions if any would devolve to the issue of their marriage, share and share alike. One might just admire the chutzpah of the octogenarian professor to talk about issue in plural, thought the notary. The will was a bulletproof one - chances of anyone daring to dispute were negligent. Oh, that would annoy great many people and institutions. It was miles apart from Iossif's previous will which

distributed his substantial wealth among various noble causes up front, thought Shlomo. The new will included a list of charities and organizations that lossif recommended to his wife to support, but the amounts - if any - were left completely to her discretion. She was named the sole trustee and executor with powers far exceeding the limits of the law. The will made provisions that the legacy could not be ceased under any pretenses from a third party and stipulated that it constituted a provision of spousal and child support. The document contained explicit clauses that the legacy should remain personal property and would never be considered a common one should Mrs. Maria Spassova remarry after the death of the testator. Shlomo thought that it was a testament of trust beyond the standards that he had recently seen. Usually the wives and daughters were getting a mere nod in the wills with the lion's share going to the sons. Upon lossif's demise Mitzi would be one of the wealthiest women in town, most probably the wealthiest with disposable income of gross proportions even if she never touched the principal parts of the estate. The will contained an addendum listing the properties that lossif held in his name with the instructions the titles to be transferred to Mitzi immediately upon his death. The flighty socialite would become a woman of substance, and probably a target of every gigolo in town, no, in the country perhaps. Shlomo hoped she would trust him to be her notary. He hesitated to mention it or not to lossif. Maybe he would say a word to her?

For a second time since the morning lossif refused the courtesy coffee. He read the document and the addendum twice, found it to his liking and looked Shlomo in the eyes.

'Earlier today I was reminded of my age in the most indelicate of manners. but may be it was a good thing at the end. I have lived a long life and there may be people around who might decide to question my abilities posthumously, as I doubt they will do it before I start helping flowers grow from there under. I would like to spare Mitzi the trouble to rebuff them. Shlomo, I would like you to invite two of your most prominent neighboring lawyers or notaries from your alley and they will attest that I signed this paper in sound mind and good health. Anyone could dispute your signature alone, don't get me wrong, you know the amount of money involved. There will be hounds which will try to get a piece. But if we have three independent witnesses and every one of them keeps a separate sealed copy, it will make the hounds' life miserable. We are not going to read them the entire testament, they will sign after me and each one will go with his copy. I

will sign the envelopes over. They can charge me their hourly rate and I want the receipts attached to my copy. Will you do that for me?’

Shlomo started to get up, but lossif motioned him to stay.

‘One more thing. This will is not to be read publicly. The only one interested is Mitzi, and she will know its contents. The other one to know is you. You father had been an epitome of discretion for all the years I had been his client and I have seen the same from you since he retired. I trust it will continue like that. In that case I will advise Mitzi that she may continue to work with you, as she will need guidance. Don't take it for granted though. Now, please get your two colleagues and ask them to come with their invoices ready. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can go and have dinner.’

‘Vassili Nikolayevich, don't you dare mention coffee!’ lossif entered the modest antique shop and looked for the owner, who was at his usual place behind his highly polished dark desk. The shop looked more like a library or a lawyer's office rather than a pawn shop. There were several old brocade chairs, few glass cabinets full of delicate china figurines, a bookshelf containing predominantly Imperial Russian china plates and cups, a bookshelf of rare volumes and a dainty display of watches under the glass of a jewelry cabinet. The shop did not have a sign to advertise his fare, as the people who visited it were well aware of its trade. Vassili Nikolayevich rarely bought something for his shop. He was mostly the middleman between the presently rich and the formerly rich. The man spoke several languages on top of his native Russian, was expert on fine china and antique trinkets, knew where one could find a rare jewel, and for what price it could be bargained. His clients were happy to pay his no- nonsense commission as the transactions were discreet, chances of fraud minimal and the buyers had the money up front. Seemingly reclusive, he had a sprawling network of contacts, starting from the ordinary treasure-hunters through the people who were not afraid of ancient curses while digging ancient graves, through the impoverished European nobility, through the nouveau-rich who had amassed fortunes on war supplies. He kept it by never revealing his sources unless he was sure that the object was obtained criminally, but his definition of criminal was a little bit different from the police one, encompassing the murder, robbery or extortion from a living and breathing person. Robbing an ancient grave made little difference to its owner, he was convinced, and old bones were indifferent to extortion tactics. He fastidiously avoided dealing with anything remotely related to church

artifacts, insisting that one had to "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's". Vassili Nikolayevich made rare exceptions if ecclesiastic authorities approached him to find a looted treasure, and in most cases the relict would be anonymously returned in exchange of no questions asked. Iossif had obtained through him several rare foliants on the history of art, some unique jewelry and had negotiated a purchase for the National History Museum of a Thracian gold that would have otherwise gone into private hands. He enjoyed the quick mind and the vast encyclopedic knowledge of the merchant and was a relatively frequent visitor to his shop, even if only for a pleasure of kibitzing over rare book. The professors had helped date some coins recently as well as confirm the probable origin of a necklace of blue glass beads ("A horse, my friend, and a recent one, hundred years to the most!").

The merchant took off the magnifying glass from his eye socket, put down the watch he had been studying when the professor entered and stood up to greet him.

'I am positive that you would like something stronger to celebrate your wedding tomorrow, but how about some tea if you are so adamant about coffee? I have the samovar properly heated and will call Vera to bring it here.'

'It would be marvelous. So I will have the pleasure to enjoy a cup of tea with you.'

'Dear Iossif, something is telling me that you are hardly here to enjoy tea only, but let it be, I will wait until you repair your parched senses. Vera! Tea here, please! And bring an extra cup, Iossif is thirsty.'

Vera, the merchant's shy daughter, brought the heavy tray with the steaming samovar, its tall tube full of live coals, then ran to bring another tray with the teapot and two cups, sugar bowl and a bowl of jam. Vassili Nikolayevich took his time to pour his guest a cup, and then offered him the sugar bowl. Iossif looked into it and picked a small piece of rock sugar. As the conversation was conducted in Russian, it was only natural that the tea would be served Russian style. He refused the jam however. The host filled his cup and leaned back in his chair.

'Now that we are comfortably sitting, will you spill what is on your mind? How I can help you?'

'You see, I am looking for a wedding gift. As you nicely pointed, I am getting married tomorrow.'

'I will be honest that the news came to me as a certain surprise, but upon reflection, I saw your point. Are you not afraid of the jilted boyfriend?'

'At my age there are few things to be afraid, you know.'

'I am not talking about you, I am talking about Mitzi. He does not have the reputation of someone letting go easily.'

'You are right about that, but, first, we are going abroad for a honeymoon, then she will be either at the university or with me in public for the beginning, I have a nice housekeeper at home, should be fine.'

The merchant passed a hand through his grey hair, 'I wish you would be lucky!'

Iossif flinched. Vassili Nikolayevich saw it.

'Did I say something I should not have said?'

'No, no, it just happened that I have heard this phrase today already.'

'So I am not the only one concerned... Well, do your best and let it be whatever will be. Do you have any idea what you would like for a present?'

'With such a short notice I will take whatever you suggest is best.'

'She is a glamorous girl; do you want something glamorous or something more mature?'

'It is a wedding gift, let us make it mature.'

'Any particular color? What is the color of her eyes?'

'Pretty unusual. Sky-blue around the irises with a dark gray circle around...'

'Fairly difficult but not impossible. Very strange... Not so long ago I was offered to sell a full parure of blue topazes. Unique set, by all means, I doubt it had surfaced since the marriage of His Imperial Majesty Nicolas II, God bless His martyred soul. The owner was ready to sell it in pieces, as the price is pretty high, but I advised him against. It will be real shame to part so meticulously selected stones. It is in platinum, a low tiara, earrings, necklace, paired bracelets, one big and a pair of small brooches, a ring, of course, and the most unusual, a full pectoral bouquet of forget-me-nots. In fact, the entire parure theme is of forget-me-nots. There are few leaves of carved jade, but most leaves are enameled. I am pretty sure it is Lalique, but made to order and never seen in the catalogs that I know of. I don't know much about its story though... These are dark blue stones, almost violet, they don't come often and may not be completely innocuous. It is a miracle that the set is intact, but it may be a blessing or a curse, I don't know... And it will cost you a fortune, of course, even in these times.'

'I have always trusted your judgment, Vassili, would it be possible to see a part of it today? Tell me the price and I will decide.'

'I am pretty much certain that I can arrange for you to see it within the next hour,' the merchant said and wrote the price on a piece of paper. It was a steep one indeed and Iossif felt better about the quality of the set he was going to see. If the jewelry was up to the price - and he was sure it was, as Vassili Nikolayevich had a reputation of being eminently fair - it would be a showpiece. Luckily he could afford it without much hardship, he mused, and he was not marrying that often. The thought made him smile. Forget-me-nots, how appropriate. Topazes were supposed to bring prosperity and wellness. May be it was the right time to obtain them for the right person. Iossif thanked his host for the tea and asked him to bring the entire set, as he was going to get the money for it.

The carriage left Iossif at his doorsteps. He brought his bag and a beautiful simple birch box to his sitting room and went downstairs to meet Martha. She reported that Riste had delivered everything that Mitzi had given him, which had not been a lot, gave him the change that the boy had left and confirmed that the requested light supper was already in the cold box. Iossif offered her to take the rest of the day to repose and prepare for the big day. Martha actually smiled at the thought, who would paid attention to her when there would be so much to watch. She accepted that few hours of relaxation would not do any harm and left.

The birch box laid on the sitting room table and Iossif looked at it for few minutes before turning the elegant key. It was unusual setting, specially prepared for the parure inside. The lining was white velvet on which the stones showed even darker than they had on Vassili's desk - the blue topaz petals of the forget-me-nots, their wine topaz centers, the exquisitely carved jade leaves, the veins in the semi-translucent enamel of the rest of the delicate stems. Box's first layer was dedicated to the items that were supposed to be worn more frequently - the earrings, the bracelets and the brooches, as well as the ring. Four satin ribbons allowed this layer to be lifted to show the tiara and the spectacular pectoral. The craftsmanship was unmistakably Lalique, although not a sign on the box proclaimed it. Such a set was a show-stopper. It was hard to imagine that the woman who owned it had exercised such a restraint to never wear it in public. Admittedly, there were few places where the tiara or the pectoral could be worn, but the rest of it would have been a talk of the town by themselves. Iossif searched his memory in vain, no, he could not recall anyone mentioning such jewels. Even if his memory did not have it in the registers, the fact that Vassili had no records of the set

either spoke volumes. And why the merchant had dated it towards the marriage of the last Russian Emperor? Iossif looked at the set more carefully, examined every item, but still there was no sign of neither the maker, nor the owner. Highly unusual, yet not unheard of, if the jewels were made to a custom order of an extremely wealthy or extremely powerful patron, who would prefer to remain anonymous. The professor was intrigued - he doubted the secret order was of Bulgarian origin. People who could have done it at the approximate time the jewels were dated, were few and far apart, and if they had gone to the length to order such a set, they would have flaunted it. There was something in the blue stones that was both sweet and disturbing. A legend insisted that the Child Christ was sitting on the lap of his Blessed Mother and He wished the people to be able to see her gentle eyes forever. He touched the Virgin's eyes and then transformed a small unpretentious flower into their color. Medieval Germans associated the flower with enduring love but also tragic fate. That was the flower of the people who would not be forgotten by their lovers. Was it the very twisted way of Faith to warn him about Tashev? He had not paid much attention to him by now, and may be he should. But first things first - he locked the box in his safe and went to enjoy his afternoon nap. He set his alarm clock for six, as it was hard to believe that either Boris or Lambri would show before supper.