

I.

STHA VTAK ZYESK

the hired man

If his client was gonna insist on the location, the least they could do is get here on time.

The hired man breathes a smoky sigh, kicks his feet up on the table, burns the last of his cigarette on the red leather of his booth. Swingy Tamonik jazz crackles from a busted-up jukebox somewhere in the restaurant, which reminds him how much he fuckin' hates swingy Tamonik jazz. Not too bad a meeting place otherwise. Sleazy, but real easy to keep on the down-low—staff don't care what you're doin' or who you're talkin' to, long as you pay your check at the end. Tamonik places are like that. God knows the staff get paid enough for it. Luckily that means they don't mind if he smokes, so might as well light another for the wait.

This time round, client's stuck him in a dead-end booth way in the back. Not unheard of in his line of work, but goddamn if it doesn't make the wait its own special kind of hell. Didn't even want him talking to the waiters on his way in (which meant he'd had to snatch a spare menu from the snappy-dressed fat cats two tables over.)

He breathes smoke out through his nose and flips open his menu to scroll for the cheapest shit they got—buried under flashy four-course dinners and authentic Tamonik liquors he couldn't afford a glance at even on his best weeks. His options get less and less

edible the cheaper it goes, but this place still had some half-decent *zhlukavjet shovyik* and salt rice last he was here (good as dirt-cheap *zhlukashov* can be, anyway.) And what the hell, a rum-n-coke cocktail's pretty hard to fuck up so he might as well get one of those too—

“You’re early.”

He looks over his menu.

She’s sitting across from him, arms crossed over the table, staring at him with empty white eyes. A gaunt brown woman with hollowed-out cheeks and cheekbones that could cut glass. Rows of pale North Vitavrian braids, dark at the roots, hide her face from the passing waiters like vertical blinds on a motel window.

He lowers his menu and grins at her. “You the client?”

“You’re drawing too much attention to yourself.” Her voice is clipped and cold. He can’t place anything about her accent besides that it’s not common, and definitely not Tamonik. “Put the cigarette out.”

He pricks up an eyebrow. “Oh, really?” he says, black cigarette rolling idle between his fingers. “Not often I get clients askin’ me to—”

“I’m not asking.”

Her eyes are white: no irises, no pupils, just pale white all the way through. Like he’s being stared at by nothing. Something about that stare makes him break eye contact and put his smoke out against the leather of the booth. “There, fine,” he says. “Happy now?”

The pale-eyed woman doesn’t answer. Just checks her watch and scans the surroundings.

“Wastin’ a lotta good smokes on this booth, y’know that?” he mutters. “Just lit that one...”

She ignores him. Not even lookin’ at him, actually; her eyes are locked over his shoulder. He turns to see a stray waitress collecting plates in the booth behind them. Once she’s gone, the pale-eyed woman makes eye contact with him again.

“You need a menu?” He extends his to her.

“Not eating,” she says. “Don’t have time.”

He eyes the wrist bones jutting out from beneath her wristwatch. “You say that a lot, huh?” he says under his breath. He slides his menu to her side of the table and leans back. “Doesn’t matter anyways. I already know what I’m g—”

“A medium-rare *zhlukavjet shovyik* with salt rice and a rum-and-coke cocktail,” she says, “I know. It’s already ordered.”

He stares at her. “How—” he starts, then stops. “Lady, I decided on that twenty seconds ago.”

“It’s your usual,” she says, with the same empty cold expression.

“...Huh,” he says. He looks her over. “Don’t remember tellin’ you my usual.”

“You didn’t.”

A pause. “*Deyinakt*,” he mutters. He slides his feet off the table and leans forward on his elbows. “You one of them *vikaoi*?”

“Not exactly.”

“You’re bullshittin’ me. What’s your—?”

“I have a job for you.”

He grins and slings an arm over the back of his booth. “I figured,” he says. “People don’t usually hit up a guy like me just to chit chat. What’s—”

“Be quiet.” She does another check over her shoulder for waiters, then interweaves her fingers in quick, practiced, one-after-another type patterns. The surroundings outside their booth deaden to a blur, and the restaurant’s noise to a distant hum.

Right, he shoulda expected this with the whole, ah, North Vitavrian thing. He’s always wanted to be able to do this. Definitely makes the “keep outta sight” part of his job easier. (Shame he won’t be able to wave down any waiters for appetizers, though.)

“*Now* we can get to talkin’,” he says, barrelin’ up to the table like a gambler at the game. “A’ight, what’s ya poison, then? Bodyguarding, killing, loan collecting, general

all-around terrorizin?”

“Don’t like limiting myself,” she says, which sounds like it might’ve been a joke except she’s not smiling when she says it. “Everything you do, I need.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Everything?” he says, and flicks his eyes over her. “Now tell me, sweetheart, what kind of an operation are you runnin’ that’d need every one of a *vtak zyezk*’s services?”

“Details of my operation are not relevant to you and never will be. All you need to know is what you’re being paid to do.”

“Uh-huh,” he says. “And how long am I bein’ paid to do it for?”

“Around a hundred days,” she says. “Might be shorter. Not longer.”

He chuckles low. “Gonna be a pretty hefty price tag, sweetheart. Anythin’ federal? Anythin’ that’ll get me in the line of sight of the, ah... big men upstairs?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Which ones we talkin’?”

“If you do your job right, all of them.”

He narrows his eyes and grins. “You a terrorist?”

Her expression is unreadable. “By some definitions,” she says. “Not mine.”

He kicks back in his chair and lets out a low whistle. “Pretty risky stuff for a guy like me to get mixed up in, doll. Price tag’s runnin’ up and up. What’s your offer th—”

“250 *chetzkazi*.”

He barks a laugh. “2-fuckin-50?”

She hisses and snaps her fingers. “*Quiet*,” she says. “You’ll break the barrier. What part of ‘keep a low profile’ do you not understand?”

“And what part of ‘hefty price tag’ do *you* not understand, doll?”

“My price isn’t up for negotiation,” she says. “125 up front, 125 when we’re finished.”

He scoffs a laugh and shakes his head. “You don’t know who you’re messin’ with. Let’s see if we can haggle that price up, huh?”

“No haggling. 250.”

He half-laughs. “300.”

“250.”

“...275.”

“250.”

He rolls his eyes and tips back the brim of his hat. “All right, all right, I see how it is,” he says. “Foreigners who come in here knowin’ nothin’ about the business thinkin’ they can get me for whatever they want. Well, sweetheart, lemme learn ya somethin’ here—250’s chump change to a guy like me, ok? I’ve been in this business so long, I pick my teeth with 250 *chetzkazi*.”

She sighs through her nose and checks her watch while he’s still talking.

“So either you agree to raise your offer price,” he says, “or this li’l deal of ours isn’t gonna work ou—”

“Your real name is Jasavoth,” she says.

He stops.

“You’re bluffing,” she continues. “You’ve never even had 250 *chetzkazi* in your bank account. You’re lucky if you can pull in a *chetzka* a week. You’re strapped for cash right now, living from check to check. I know you, Jasavoth.”

He scoffs—with just a little too much hesitation. “You don’t *know* me,” he says. “What, you think you’re hot shit cause you asked around a li’l about my work history, that’s—that’s not—”

“You’re the second child of a single mother,” she says, “name of Kwojya. Your father walked out on you when you were six, and your mother died when you were thirteen. You grew up on the streets of Tamon. Poor.”

He’s thankin’ god nobody can hear them. He closes in over the table and brings his

voice down hush. “Look, lady, I don’t know who you think you are but—”

She just keeps talking past him, unfazed. “Your prices are overinflated, and you know that. Your business model relies on overcharging gullible foreigners. That’s not going to work with me. I know you’re living off the money from your last job right now. It’s running out fast. You can’t afford to turn this down, and you’re not in a position to negotiate prices.”

He just stares—left stranded in vacant silence. If she’s a *vikaoi*, she don’t look like any he’s ever seen. “How...” He flicks a strand of dark hair out of his eyes and dips the brim of his hat over his face, hopin’ that’ll cover the cracks in his composure. “How the hell d’you know—”

“I know you, Jasavoth.”

“I sure as hell don’t know you.”

“You will,” she says. “Are you in or out?”

He leans back in his booth and looks her over.

She stands. “Pretend to think it over some more.” She grabs a pen from her pocket and a napkin from the table, scribbles somethin’ down on it. “Contact me here. Don’t take too long.”

She lays her hands flat on the table and leans in close.

“Tell anyone you saw me,” she says, “and the agreement is terminated, you get nothing, and you’ll have more to worry about than the big men upstairs. Clear?”

He lifts his hands. “Crystal.”

She sets a half-*chetzka* coin down on the table with a *clink*. “I’ll carry the check.”

He eyes the coin. Shit, he’d have ordered a lot more if he knew it was on her dime. “Leavin’ so soon?” he says. “Food hasn’t even—”

She shakes her head. “Not enough time.”

He just laughs, scraping together the last dregs of his cockiness. “I got all the time in the world, sweetheart.”

She looks up and meets his eye. “Do you?”

He holds her eyes for a long moment; then has to break contact under the white stare. He checks out the napkin. Number and a name: “Tullianne Bobiaton” with the Tamonik word for *target* scrawled across it.

“Who the hell is...” he says, looking up.

But the restaurant surroundings have gone back to normal, and the pale-eyed woman has already disappeared.

TAMONIK GLOSSARY

Tamonik (tay-mon-ik) – of or relating to the country of Tamon

zhlukavjet shovyik – “scorched beef”

deyinakt – “goddamn”

chetzka – unit of Tamonik currency, equal to \$98.3 USD

chetzkazi – plural of *chetzka*