

Vodka

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Extract

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Monday, 23 December 1991

Television newsreaders, metro workers, shop assistants and babushki in the market all said the same thing: “the Soviet Union is no more.” Eleven of the fifteen constituent republics had met in Alma-Ata over the weekend and agreed to dissolve the union, nine days short of its seventieth birthday. “The Soviet Union is no more”, indeed, but no two people said it exactly the same; the phrase came loaded with hope, fear, relief, apprehension, joy, anger, excitement and nostalgia, and each person’s mixture was different.

“No matter how much we hated the old system” – Lev never used the words ‘Soviet Union’ – “it provided a kind of order. It was predictable. But now the authority is gone, the police are weak and afraid to deal with the black-asses from the south – especially the Chechens. They’ve been allowed to establish a presence here in Moscow, and it looks like it’s up to us to send them back home, back to their blood feuds and their tribal armies. We haven’t survived communism just to let a bunch of niggers fuck us in the ass.”

There were three men at the table, Lev, Testarossa and Banzai, all of them vory – thieves-in-law who had abandoned their given names in favour of noms de guerre and relinquished their right to a home or family in favour of the brotherhood of criminals. Between them, they ran Moscow’s three largest Slav gangs. Lev was in charge of the 21st Century Association, Testarossa the Solntsevskaya and Banzai the Podolskaya. They had come to this dacha north-west of Moscow for a summit meeting. Each man had an ashtray in front of him. There was vodka on the table and smoked fish on the sideboard. Outside, the snow was falling again, whirling against a wan sky. Cigarette ends glowed like fireflies through the windows; three gang leaders meant scores of bodyguards.

Lev ran his hands over his head. In accordance with tradition, as the man with the most jail time (and the only one to have been officially designated an enemy of the state), Lev had seniority over the other two.

“As it stands,” Lev continued, his voice croaking, “we’re not organising ourselves in the most productive manner. We compete with each other for control, be it of Moscow districts or business sectors. Testarossa, you want some of my pie in Kitai-gorod; Banzai, I want your counterfeit vodka interests. In normal times, this is perfectly healthy; honourable vory come to a mutually acceptable arrangement, and if they can’t do so, then the strongest man wins. But these aren’t normal times, my brothers. If we keep fighting among ourselves, the Chechens will take over. They’re the enemy now. So I propose a truce; we suspend operations against each other and join forces against the Chechens.”

“Until when?” Banzai said.

“Until we’ve beaten them.”

“And then?”

“And then we take their interests and divide them up between us, equally.”

Banzai’s features – the narrow eyes and plate-broad cheekbones of Sakhalin, just across the water from Japan – arranged themselves into something the far side of scepticism.

Lev turned to Testarossa. “What do you think, brother? This can’t go ahead without your agreement; it’s your men and your firepower we’ll be calling on the most.”

The Solntsevskaya was the largest single gang in Russia, let alone Moscow. Testarossa could call on four thousand men and at least five hundred Kalashnikovs, one thousand machine pistols, fifty Uzi rifles and a handful of Mukha grenade launchers. The 21st Century Association had no more than half this capacity; Banzai’s Podolskaya only half that again.

“Do you even need to ask, brother?” When Testarossa smiled, his eyes were liquid smoke beneath a blaze of red hair. His hairline sat low on his brow, virtually nudging his eyebrows. In the prison camp at Magadan, he’d tattooed his forehead: *Fucked by the Party*. The authorities had pulled down his scalp to cover it. “A vor should support another vor in any circumstance; isn’t that our first rule? What have we become, if we don’t define ourselves against the enemy? We’ll band together against the narrow-films, and be proud of it.”

“Spoken like a true vor. I thank you.” Lev looked at Banzai.

“And you, little brother? You need this alliance more than either of us.”

“*Little* brother. That’s it, isn’t it? I lend you my men and my weapons, and when it’s over you two divide the spoils between you and I get fucked.”

“When it’s over.” – Lev’s voice was suddenly hard – “we’ll negotiate freely and fairly. We’re men of honour. I won’t let petty money-grabbing undermine the criminal brotherhood which we’re all sworn to defend. Remember, vory must always tell the truth to fellow members.”

It took Banzai a moment to recognise the implicit threat behind Lev’s words. “What are you saying?” he asked. “What truth?”

“There’s nothing you haven’t told us, little brother?”

“No, nothing.”

“A trip to Kazan, perhaps?”

Banzai’s head went back and up a fraction; back in surprise, up in defiance. The Tatar capital of Kazan was the processing centre for 3ME, trimethyl phentanyl, a dry white powder several times more potent than heroin and impossible to detect when mixed with water.

“The thieves’ code specifically bans traffic in drugs,” Lev said. “Whatever else we fight them for, the Chechens can have the narcotics, all of them. They’re animals anyway, so let them lose their souls.”

“The drug trade’s worth millions of dollars, Lev. Better *we* control it than them.”

“Banzai, have you forgotten what it means to be a vor? It’s not just money.”

“Don’t talk to me of what a vor should or should not do, Lev,” hissed Banzai. “A true vor should not co-operate with the authorities, right? But you’re a parliamentary deputy. A vor must never accept a job at a state-owned institution, *right*? But you run the country’s largest distillery. A vor must not fraternise with communist organisations, yet you have a KGB man, Tengiz Sabirzhan, as your trusted deputy.”

Lev pushed his chair back and stood. Upright, his dimensions came into sharper focus. He rarely used his size deliberately to intimidate; he knew that it usually did so without his having to try. He placed his hands on the table; then, suddenly, reached out and slapped Banzai across the face, the traditional punishment for a vor who’d insulted another vor. When Lev spoke, his voice was Vesuvian.

“The *Russian* parliament, whose resistance helped destroy the Soviet Union. The distillery whose appropriation was approved by

the vory at the Murmansk summit back in '87, because it benefited us and hurt the KGB, all at once. As for Sabirzhan, he's simply a tool to be used when it suits my purpose, nothing more."

He subsided back into his chair. "Everything's up for grabs – cars, weapons, haulage, prostitution, gambling, banking, vodka. *Everything*. Smuggling income's going to go through the roof; each successor republic will now exercise jurisdiction only within its own borders, so goods stolen in Russia can be legally traded anywhere outside. The central finance system's gone to shit, so there's millions to be had from currency speculation. We've a freedom of movement unthinkable even a year ago. The country's changing day by day. It's the revolution all over again. If we're to take our rightful place in the new Russia, *now* is the time to strike. But in order to seize this opportunity we too must change."

Lev fingered the home-made aluminium cross that dangled from his neck. The cross, like his habit of wearing his shirt outside his trousers with a waistcoat on top, was a deliberate homage to the vory who'd ruled the camps in the last years of Stalin's reign.

"No." When Banzai shook his head, his plaited dreadlocks jerked like a Turkish bead curtain. "You talk about the Chechens as though they're an organised army. They're nothing of the sort. They're ignorant, undisciplined psychopaths who'd as soon murder their own brothers as any of us. Their idea of refinement is to take their meat rare rather than raw. Thank you, but no. I prefer to take my chances alone."

"But you're outnumbered, little brother, and we can't have you outside the tent pissing in. By a margin of two to one, the decision is taken: we unite." Lev wagged his finger to emphasise the point. It was tattooed with a symbol: *In life, only count on yourself*.

"Over my dead body," said Banzai.

On the other side of Moscow, at the foot of the old hilltop royal estate of Kolomenskoe, three Chechen ganglords – Karkadann of the Tsentralnaya, Zhorzh of the Ostankinskaya and Ilmar of the Avtomobilnaya – were meeting in similar circumstances. They were not vory; Chechens never were. Instead, they styled themselves *avtoritety*, 'authorities', and they saw themselves as harder and more pragmatic than their adversaries.

The Tsentralnaya gang was the most powerful of the three, and so it was to Karkadann's house that Zhorzh and Ilmar had come; Zhorzh from his base at the Ostankino Hotel in the northern suburbs, and Ilmar from inspecting some of the South Port car

showrooms for which his Avtomobilnaya group provided protection.

“Be free!” they said as they greeted each other.

Karkadann’s face was rawhide, a tangle of crevasses and creases: cheekbones like raised daggers, shadowed holes for eyes, a bent nail of a nose. Here was a man who walked down the darkest avenues, wielding his face like a club. He took his visitors outside, despite the weather and his limp; his garden was vast, and he wanted to show it off. They talked while shuffling down pathways lit by undersized streetlights.

“I’m meeting with Lev tomorrow,” Karkadann said. “He’s seeing his vory now. I speak for us, he speaks for them; that’s what we’ve arranged. He may offer us a deal, he may not. If he doesn’t, it’s war, plain and simple. If he does . . .” He grinned, as sharp and menacing as a sword unsheathed; “if he does, it’s still war, even plainer and simpler.”

“You don’t know what he’ll offer,” Ilmar said.

Karkadann reached down into a bucket, pulled out a raw steak, and tossed it at the caged bear he kept to intimidate his debtors. “Whatever it is, it won’t be enough.”

“It won’t be everything, you mean.”

“Take it how you like.” Karkadann jabbed at the air with a gloved hand. “Even if we did make an agreement, do you think those bastards would honour it? Not for a moment. Why would they? They’ve hated us for centuries. They hate us, the police hate us, every useless drone in this city hates us. As far as they’re concerned, the only good Chechen is a dead Chechen. The *only* reason they tolerate us is because they’re scared of us. And if we make a deal with the Slavs, we’ve lost even that. So there it is. All or nothing, a fight to the death. If you have any doubts, speak now.”

He hobbled towards the walled garden. His right leg was ten centimetres shorter than his left, but no one was certain how this had happened; some said a mafiya attack, some a childhood deformation, some the revenge of a jealous husband. It was typical of Karkadann that no one knew for sure; equally typical that he chose not to enlighten anyone who asked.

Zhorzh shook his head. The white streak in his hair made him look like a cross between Trotsky and the devil in a medieval icon.

“The Slavs have got – what? I’m guessing five, six thousand men,” Ilmar said. “We’ve half that at most.”

“Ha! Then *they* should be quaking,” Karkadann shouted. “One Chechen is worth ten Russians! Have you gone soft, Ilmar? What’s

happened to your mountain pride? What is agreement, if not surrender? And when did you last see a Chechen surrender, eh?"

Ilmar had softer features and lighter skin than his fellow *avtoritety*. He rubbed at his chin and said nothing.

The singing fountain, which in the summer emitted different notes depending on the height of the water, stood in winter stasis. As they walked, Karkadann checked that there were no gaps in the wire or the netting around the perimeter fence. His guards made the rounds every day, but there was nothing like checking for oneself.

"All right," Ilmar said eventually, but his unhappiness was plain to see.

"You're not serious," Lev said.

"Over my dead body," Banzai repeated, and it was clear that serious was exactly what he was being. He'd made his name in the camps for attacking guards; the other vory had taken bets on when, not if, the authorities would give Banzai the bullet. Now, Lev's slap had marked not just Banzai's face but also his reputation.

"I want no part of this. I want simply to be treated as a vor." Banzai was agitated, speaking fast. "But you refuse to listen to me – you slap me." He shrugged extravagantly. "What choice do I have? I'm walking out of here, and the only way to stop me is to kill me."

"Banzai, you're being ridiculous," Testarossa said.

"Kill me," Banzai repeated. "And Testarossa, it's you that'll have to do it." Lev could have snapped Banzai's neck like a breadstick, but vory tradition dictates that the senior man present can't dirty his hands. "So!" Banzai's voice was almost jaunty. "Do you dare, Testarossa? Do you dare kill a fellow vor, for nothing more than disagreeing with you? Hah! The system's been dead two days, and already you're acting like the KGB." He pushed his chair back and it fell with a crash.

The bodyguards were outside, facing away from the windows. What went on within the dacha was not their business.

"This is getting out of hand," Lev said, realising too late that he had miscalculated badly in expecting Banzai to understand that his proposals were motivated not by self-interest but the good of the vory. The thieves' code had much to commend it – indeed, they would never have survived the Soviet system without it – but a creed that dated back to the days of bandits and highwaymen was inadequate to the demands of these changing times. The very inflexibility that had been its greatest strength would doom the vory to

destruction if Lev failed in his bid to drag the brotherhood towards the 21st Century. Banzai was willing enough to ignore the ban on drug-trafficking, but any alliance with the state – even when the vory had the upper hand in the partnership – was anathema to him. Now he was prepared to challenge Lev and risk death over a mere slap, because the code demanded it. And if Lev’s progressive leadership were to survive the challenge, he must deal with Banzai according to the code.

“You leave, Banzai, and you’re compromising the very future of the brotherhood,” Lev said.

Banzai started for the exit as if he hadn’t heard. He walked at normal pace, allowing Testarossa to reach the door and cut him off two paces short. Testarossa was ten centimetres taller and ten kilos heavier than Banzai; it would hardly be a fair fight.

“You really want me to do this?” Testarossa asked, pushing himself back against the door.

“Do you dare?”

Lev was sitting at the head of the table. Testarossa looked to him for guidance, as if seeking the emperor’s verdict on a gladiator.

“You have your knife with you?” Lev asked.

Testarossa tapped at his right hip. “Always.”

Lev’s head rose and fell: a simple movement, a death sentence.

Testarossa placed his hands on Banzai’s shoulders and began to spin him round, slowly at first, as Banzai resisted, and then with increasing ease. A full circle took away the victim’s soul and supposedly made it easier for him to accept death; it was the point of no return in the vory death ceremony. When he next faced Testarossa, Banzai’s eyes were wide, as though he’d been playing a game and only now saw that his brinkmanship had backfired. Testarossa manoeuvred Banzai against the wall; he was firm, but took care not to be rough.

Lev watched from the table, five paces away and as remote as Vladivostok.

“Die like a vor,” Testarossa said, only marginally more statement than question.

Banzai gripped his own collar with sweat-slimed palms, knuckles drained white, and ripped his shirt open. Neither he nor Testarossa was watching Lev; had they been, they’d have seen his face twitch in a momentary wince.

“Take my soul,” Banzai said, and Testarossa drew the knife from his belt and plunged it into Banzai’s throat, right up to the hilt, the way they’d used to kill people in the gulag.

* * *

Ilmar stood by his limousine and indicated his watch. "I'll miss prayer if I don't hurry," he said.

"Good for you," replied Karkadann. "I don't know how you manage it. I can never fit in my three times a day."

They hugged sideways, Chechen-style. "It's five times a day, actually."

"Oh well . . ." Karkadann's voice was bright. "The more the merrier."

The television schedules had been cleared for Gorbachev to announce his resignation – with the union gone, there was nothing for him to be president of any more – but when the television crews were allowed into his Kremlin office, they were greeted by an empty chair.

"It's all come as a bit of a shock to him," one of the presidential staff explained. "He needs time to get used to it, that's all."

They showed the empty chair on TV until it was time for the next programme.

2

Tuesday, 24 December 1991

There is in central Moscow an island shaped like a walrus moustache, bound to the north by the river which shares its name with the city and to the south by the Vodootvodny drainage canal, originally dug to prevent the city centre flooding in spring when snowmelt swells the river. The island follows the river's extravagant sweep past the Kremlin and down to Moscow's oldest monastery, the Novospasskiy. It's so narrow that the bridges on the north and south sides almost run into each other.

The river was frozen, of course; had it not been, Karkadann would have come by speedboat rather than his Mercedes 600, for it was much safer to travel on an empty river than on Moscow's increasingly congested roads. There was less traffic on the river, less chance of being ambushed by attackers who would pluck a mafiya boss's car from its escort as easily as one would pick lint from a lapel.

Karkadann's Mercedes was book-ended front and rear by Land Cruisers with tinted windows, and it wallowed low under the weight of its armour-plating. Mercedes had been happy to carry out the modifications free of charge, recognising a growing market