

# SOUTH OF JERICHO

## Africa

**“It is our vodka you drink.”** A brutish man with a pock-marked face told Ziki as the maître d’ under Awujami’s watchful eyes escorted him to his seat.

“Local stuff’ll kill you,” Ziki responded in Russian, raising his glass, *nazdrovia*, and climbing over stray legs and empty tumblers toward the waiting *fottel*.

“Trust me,” the man added, “ours can kill you too.” He tilted his glass and downed the rest of his drink in three, accentuated gulps. Coming up for air, he capped off the gesture with a raucous, “Ha!” It drew Ziki’s attention to a pock mark on his chin that looked more like half a bowl of scar tissue than a leftover from the man’s acne years.

The Russian must have noticed Ziki’s lingering eye. He raised a finger to his chin.

“Young S.O.B. Old injuries. But you can bet the other bastard now has a hole like this sitting on top of his neck instead of a head.” Offering a twisted grin and a stubby hand, he introduced himself.

“Ivan Stoyvich.”

Ziki took the hand and gave a polite nod. “Ziki Barak. How’s—”

Before he could finish, Stoyvich let go, turning his attention elsewhere. “Hey! Vodka!” he called behind him. His eyes, already hazy from liquor, swung around and consulted briefly with Ziki’s glass. “Just bring the bottle!” he added, once again, in the general direction of the bar.

Stoyvich shook his head in disgust. “Jesus Christ—” he started, before pausing to look Ziki up and down.

Ziki had stuck with the Israeli delegation’s standard uniform that evening: stiff, oversized black leather car jacket, black cotton pants, and tightly laced black leather boots. The pants flowed a few inches below the knee, the jacket a few inches above.

“You’re with the Jews, right?” Stoyvich asked, the now familiar grin creeping back across his lips.

Ziki took in the burnt orange rayon concoction of Stoyvich’s pants and sport coat. He knew the KGB was never short on funding and wondered why they’d buy their men suits that looked anxious to unravel at the first snag.

Shrugging, he answered Stoyvich’s question. “Sure, Ivan, I’m ‘with the Jews’. And you’re with the circus, yeah?”

The wool, fur, and crushed velvet of Mother Russia wouldn’t fly in the African tropics; the KGB must have raided an American manufacturing warehouse in China to compensate.

“Ha!” Stoyvich delighted, clearly amused by Ziki’s dig. “No, the Russians, but close enough. Ha, I like this Jew.” Now standing, he turned to face the bar. “And I would like to buy him a fucking vodka!”

Ziki noticed Avi had moved to a spot directly behind and a few feet closer to the Russian. He gave a nod to let him know things were fine.

“Jesus Christ—Jews don’t mind ‘Jesus Christ,’ right?—I spend all day babysitting a hundred Cubans who don’t know the holes in the barrels of their guns from the holes in the barrels of their asses and all I want is a decent round of drinks and some decent

fucking service!

“So,” he said, motioning behind himself, “where’s your mask?”

Stoyvich was referring to Avi and a pair of wire-rimmed sunglasses with black fiberglass lenses. Ziki had gotten so used to seeing him wear them that he hadn’t even noticed them attached to the man’s face even in the dimly-lit club. A dozen IDF men and women—Ziki included—had bought the glasses at a Parisian flea market several months back and now wore them en masse while making their daytime rounds to African politicians’ offices, government buildings, and neighborhoods. He chuckled to himself. For a guy who wanted nothing to do with spook work, he sure did his best to look like one.

Ziki patted the top left side of his jacket. “Right here,” he told Stoyvich.

“Ah, pockets on the inside.” Stoyvich raised an eyebrow. Half his scars shifted upward a quarter inch. “A big coat like that must have quite a few of those.”

“Nope. Just the one.” The Mini UZI on Ziki’s right side sat in a holster strapped to his shoulder and chest. The jacket only helped cover it up.

Stoyvich’s jabs and inquiries were pretty tame for a Russian. Especially a drunk one. First impressions told Ziki Stoyvich wasn’t a die-hard countryman. He was in this business for its perks; free liquor, free hookers, free weapons, and the occasional opportunity to put a bullet or a blade through another man’s midsection. Devotion to Russia and KGB duties were secondary to the power that came with being KGB.

This probably meant the tier of information he had access to was median, but the chances he would talk were high, so Ziki decided to stick around and keep the “*drink in*” Ivan Stoyvich for the night.

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