

Dirty Ice

"You can understand, then, that we have a problem here." The waitress set two drinks before the older man and his associate, then fled the room. She knew that when Ivan held court in the old bank vault, she was always tipped handsomely to keep out of the way. "Three months we've given you, and I think that I, personally, have been very kind to you and your establishment. Wouldn't you agree, Freddy?" Freddy sat hunched, as though hoping that the large walnut table between them would keep him safe from the black-suited man.

"Yeah. Yeah Ivan," The three large men who stood at attention along the safety deposit boxes focused on Freddy for a moment, and he shrank deeper into the leather bench. "Mr. Ivan, sorry, sorry. I, er, you've been great to me. Wouldn't have gotten off the ground if I hadn't got your number, but the thing is, the show's getting a little slow and folks are starting to

ask questions." Mr. Ivan leaned across the table and plucked the small plastic sword from Freddy's martini glass. He put an olive into his mouth and chewed with apparent relish.

"What kind of questions, Freddy? This is the first you've mentioned of questions." Freddy opened his mouth then closed it again, unsure. Sweat dripped from his thinning hairline, collecting in the pouches beneath his eyes. He coughed and searched the table for water. Finding none, he took his martini and began to drink. He coughed again and tried to settle himself.

"Age questions, Mr. Ivan. People are starting to ask about their age." Mr. Ivan arched a thin black eyebrow. He ate another olive and then plunged the sword into his gin and tonic.

"Well, Freddy, why didn't you say so? This is the simplest thing in the world to resolve." He smiled, and slowly, so did Freddy.

"Yeah?" He said, and sipped at his martini, finally able to taste it.

"That's right," Mr. Ivan said archly, "We'll just have to bring in a different crowd. The kind that won't ask questions, and will pay handsomely to enjoy the wares you have to offer for the cost of their silence and patronage."

"What? You can't-"

One of the large bodyguards, whose bald head reflected the steel walls of the room, stepped forward and took Freddy's drink from him, still half full. Freddy smacked his lips and coughed. His bottom lip split and a small bead of blood began to form. He smiled gingerly at Mr. Ivan and continued more carefully. "I- I mean, wouldn't it be better to just er, hire older girls to

dance instead. Let the girls we have now go, y'know, back to their families and um..." He trailed off, uncertain under Mr. Ivan's gaze.

Mr. Ivan did not reply immediately, and the techno music pounding from the club outside the room began to invade the closed space. There were girls there that Freddy had been encouraged to take off the street. In payment, they danced for an appreciative audience. Freddy hadn't had a problem with it until one of Ivan's associates had gotten greedy and he'd had to step in. Freddy wasn't a violent man, but he could pretend to be one. It was a useful trait in his business. Now, though...

"How is your family, Freddy?" Mr. Ivan spoke quietly and brandished his own olive-skewered sword, sucking the pimentos out of their green flesh before eating the olives themselves. "How is your daughter? How is little Terra?"

Freddy held his breath before answering, hoping that God would finally show his face and save him. But God wasn't there, not in this vault with Mr. Ivan. "She's thirteen, Ivan... she likes ballet, she just had her Bat Mitzvah. You were there Ivan, please, please I'll let them touch the girls just don't-"

"I'm afraid we have passed the point of negotiation, Freddy. You owe me a sizable debt and when I invite you here into my grandfather's vault to settle the matter, you argue with me. I can't have it Freddy. It's bad for business."

Mr. Ivan drained his drink and passed it off to one of the three men who called the waitress back. She came and gave a fresh drink to the man as she took the old one. She was eighteen this month, and was lucky to work here, instead of in any of Mr. Ivan's other establishments. Mr. Ivan took the new drink and drained it as well. He took an ice cube and gestured for Freddy

to extend his hand to him. Freddy did this, and Mr. Ivan took Freddy's shaking hand into his steady one. He spoke slowly and carefully, holding the ice cube against the second knuckle of Freddy's pinky finger.

"You will offer your daughter a position at your establishment. She will accept. You will allow my associates unfiltered access to your wares, including your daughter. Alternatively, little Terra might vanish on the way home from school one day. She might end up in Seoul, or Beijing, or Pakistan. You want to keep an eye on her, don't you?" Mr. Ivan motioned at one of the men with his free hand, and a thin sharp knife dropped into it. Freddy recoiled impotently, snot leaking from his nose and his split lip dripping blood down his chin.

"I'll keep an eye on her, Mr. Ivan."

"Good. Then we have a deal." Mr. Ivan sliced off the tip of Freddy's pinky in one smooth motion. Freddy bit down on a scream, bloodied spittle spraying onto the pristine walnut table. He was helped to his feet by one of the three men. "Do not cross us again, Freddy. Clean yourself up and go home to your family." Freddy stumbled from the vault, cradling his bleeding finger in a silk napkin. Mr. Ivan took the ice cube that had a single drop of Freddy's blood on it and put it in his mouth, crunching it between his teeth. He smiled.