

Mausoleum

Blood oozes through my fingers, gleaming black under the stuttering strip-light. It's been quiet for minutes now. The sirens have stopped, but the blue light still stabs through the shallow windows up at street level. When the thudding starts on the heavy metal door, it's no surprise.

'Come out! You can't escape.'

They're right, I can't.

Pray God I'm dead before they break the door down. Don't let them take me.

How did it come to this? I've made bad calls before and survived. My luck's deserted me. Too late to mend matters now.

The stone floor is cool and dry to the touch. The air is dank, despite the heat outside. It must be a while since anyone's been in here, everything's covered in dust. There are racks, some filled with bottles, others with fine cloth, robes and vestments. If I could just sit up better..... . Ohf.....

Breathe.

Savage, griping pain.

Breathe.

Think of something else.

Think of better times.

Think of her.

Beautiful.

Vain and controlling, shallow and selfish, but beautiful, even now. Her mood could change in an instant from summer to storms and back again. And there was always that mysterious part of her soul which she hid from me. Something I couldn't quite grasp.

I hadn't been expecting anything. Passion is for youngsters, the unsullied ones, not for people like her and me. Neither of us looked for what happened, but we were both grateful when it did.

I remember the first time I saw her. She was with the boss and off limits. She had eyes for no-one else and the boss, well, she enchanted him, in so far as that was possible. But she must have noticed me, because she looked for me, once he'd gone. She sought me out.

Technically, I was married at the time, but that counted for little. I got divorced.

Yet when I married again it wasn't to her. My second wife was married for policy, part of an alliance. She took that badly, she'd put me under the harrow for that, no matter how often I explained, how much I'd tried to make it up to her. I don't blame her for what's happened, though others do, I know.

What did my second wife look like? I can't remember her face any more. She was a decent woman, honest and capable, but easy to know. She didn't stand a chance. I felt sorry for her, even as I betrayed her. And she tried to help me, despite her humiliation. Well, her brother will look after her now.

Breathe.

Breathe.

My brother-in-law.

The kid.

The boss's nephew.

There was a time when, maybe, I could have taken him under my wing, to advise and mentor, but I could never fathom the boy. He was a sickly boy, always too anxious to please his uncle. Yet he hunted down his uncle's killers just as zealously as I did, so perhaps there was affection there?

I under-estimated him, that's the truth. Then, after, I had no choice. I had to accommodate him. He'd scrambled a legitimacy, made allies and got the reputation of a coming man.

It's not like I wouldn't have understood. I was young once, I know what it's like. You have to be hard, because if you aren't, there are plenty who'll trample over you without a second thought. Oh, I was a tough. Sure of myself and full of swagger. I remember the dark back-streets of my education, the rubbish, piss and blood. My men knew it. I was like them, they recognised it. I knew where they came from.

But the kid, he didn't fight at all. He had his cronies do it for him. This, it seemed, was acceptable now. No-one questioned it, not even the old families. To them the kid was a parvenu, a hanger-on to his uncle's coat-tails, but they'd been weak and complacent, easy to out-manoeuvre.

Yet I'd been neither, I'd held all the cards and still I lost. How did that happen?

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The pain is lessening now. I can move my hand away. The wound is black and unctuous. The blade should have gone upwards, to the heart. Then death would have been quick and relatively painless. But it snapped and now I can feel the metal when I catch my breath. A lung punctured, probably, so death's on the way; just not soon enough.

They're banging on the door again. There's movement in the slivers of light through the small grille and beneath the door at the top of the stairs. I can't see any weapons here. Just dusty storage shelves and huge old chests. I doubt I'd have the strength to open. Sheet covered crates, robes hanging from stands like shrouds, racks of books and bottles.

A broken bottle would be better than nothing. I might just be able to reach....

Pain. A twisting, warping tortion of agony.

Breathe, slowly, breathe.

The bottle is a Neapolitan red, far from the soil that produced it, like I am. I heft it in my hand and smash the neck against the stone stair. Glass splinters fly and wine gurgles out.

All has gone silent at the door. I know they're listening.

I look at the jagged stump of the bottle in my hand. It'll do.

Hah! I remember drinking a bottle of this very wine to seal a deal, one of the many, with the kid and the others. The bodged-up treaty didn't hold for long, of course, but it was the celebration that I recall most. We celebrated not having to fight one another. We told tall tales, maligned our enemies and drank a skin full; a gaudy night. There were sore heads the following morning. The kid barely touched a drop.

We made our peace and kept our promises, more often than not. The alliances held for a time, cemented with the blood of others. There was even honour, of a sort.

What's that?

It's at the window in the corner, a scrabbling noise. Someone's there.

The small casement opens.

'Tony? Are you there?'

I would know that voice anywhere, but I can't see her.

'What d'you think you're doing here?' She should be well away by now.

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'We're finished, my love.'

'Don't be silly. You can bargain; they'll want your co-operation. Give it to them. You can trust old Bella, and Dom will remember he was our friend.'

'Dom's dead,' her voice trembled. 'Are you wounded?'

'I'm dying.'

A moan above, swiftly curtailed; no time for histrionics.

'Can you come to me? I can't see you. I want to touch you.'

'No, I'm done. Get out of here and go and talk to old Bella. It's not in the kid's interest to harm you, he'll want to talk.'

'He does.'

Something in her voice suggests that overtures have already been made.

She says: 'I'm to be humiliated and then... who knows?'

'It doesn't matter. Just do what he wants and you and the children will live.' There is silence.

'He's not threatened you?' I ask.

'Not me, no.'

'What then?'

'He wants my son.'

Of course. Her eldest son, the boss's child. He could easily be set up as a rival. The kid probably wants him dead. A good boy, although unexceptional, I could never see anything of his father in him. She will never give him up.

'Listen to me, love. You must get away, or at least buy some time until you can get to the off-shore funds.'

She growls. 'He's been told about those.'

'Who by?'

'Our accountant, who else?'

So. People are already lining up to do his pleasure, second-guessing his wishes. Maybe the gang outside aren't even his men. I might be dispatched by some lickspittle place-seeker. It's happened before and not so far away. I dreamed about that gory head drawn from the crude sacking, although I wasn't there when it happened. Another man of power who'd lost.

'Our bright days are done, my love. We're for the dark.'

'Stop it woman.' The icy misery in her voice scorches me. 'Listen. You must leave here now and start thinking. I know you'll find a way. You know

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better than to trust the kid, but he can't be seen to treat you badly. We still have some sympathy.'

'I trust nothing but my own hands and my own resolution.'

'Good. Now, go and'

'Yes?'

'We had a good run, we gave it a good shot. When you remember me, think of me as I was, then. Goodbye.'

There is no sound as the casement closes. After a few moments I exhale, carefully. There's no hue and cry, so she must have got safely away.

As the tension leaves, pain rushes in to fill its empty place. I can't see, everything's blurred.

Then.....I can see the sky. It's pale blue, clouds flow and form shapes, castles and mountains, horses, bears and lions. If only I could dissolve as they do.

The banging on the door is more insistent and louder. I'm back in the shadowy place again, praying that it holds until death steals me away. It's near now.

A pearly sun-tinged dragon rears in the heavens, but a wind rages, dispersing the white monster.

I would have liked to kiss her, just one more time.