



Death walked up to the maître at the entrance to Il Marinaio, a small restaurant off the Rio De Trasti, but well known in certain circles. The restaurant backed up to the canal, embracing it in a series of terraces. The man stood frozen in place as the tall, shrouded figure advanced on him, soundlessly sweeping up the broad, flat stairwell, a scythe on one shoulder. Despite the heat of an unusually warm September evening the maitre was pallid and sweating.

“Do not worry,” Death said in his whispery voice, “I’m not here for you.”

“Grazzi, Mio Signore,” the maître managed. “Mille grazzi.”

“Enough of that,” Death said. “Groveling does nothing for me. I’m here tonight to meet an old acquaintance. One who has sought to escape that meeting for 177 years. Pauline Altiera has a reservation for one for nine o’clock at the little table in the alcove over the canal.”

“Si, Mio Signore,” the maître said. “As she has every year.”

“A regular habit, how unusual and unfortunate. Seat me there, I will wait for her.”

“Si, Mio Signore, but the other customers won’t they--”

“No one shall see me or if they do they shall see only a handsome man sitting with what appears to be a pretty lady. I appear to you only as a courtesy as I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“All shall be as you wish,” the maître said, trying to still the shaking in his knees and wondering if he had already departed the land of reason and science for the country of madness and death.

At ten minutes to nine a tall red-haired woman in a fashionable black dress appeared on the bridge leading to IL Marinaio, she walked up to the maître and nodded without actually looking at him. The maître led her past other couples with their candles, delicate glasses of wine and tinkling laughter, to the small, isolated table in the terrace that jutted over the Canal. If she noticed that the maître was taciturn and that his hands shook as he pulled out her chair, she said nothing.

It wasn’t necessary for her to see a wine list; every year the bottle was the same a Bardolino from a small village in the hills. The maître had opened it and placed it on her table,

waiting for her. He poured it as the elegant woman brushed her dark red hair out of her eyes. He lit the candle with shaking hands as she lifted the glass and drank from it. She settled back into her chair with a sigh, her eyes only for the canal outside as he slipped away. Outside, a gondola slid by, a pair of young lovers embraced in its seats. The gondolier sang softly as he poled.

Suddenly a man stood at her table. He was tall, blond and good-looking, wearing a formal suit that was an excellent compliment to her dress. He pulled back the chair opposite her. “May I join you, Paul.”

Perhaps her hand trembled the tiniest bit as she put the glass down and raised her eyes to Death’s more pleasant incarnation. But she knew him as Death, as do all humans who see the Lord of Darkness. With the air of someone long resigned to face something, she said. “I am sorry, Signore, but my name is Pauline.”

“Is it?” Death said, sliding into the chair.

“I usually dine alone on this night,” she added.

“Because this is your birthday, Paul,” Death said, “your private celebration of having outfoxed me for another year. And you have been a sly old fox, haven’t you?”

“Vixen,” she corrected.

“How long is it since you were born in the Navajo country of New Mexico, Paul? Is it 177 years. How long since your mother made that deal with the last of the true medicine men? The deal that let you run, unseen by me, so that so long as you left no mark, no record, so long as I, operating in the world of men and bound by its rules, could not find you, that you would live?”

“Fascinating story,” Pauline said. “Do you write in your spare time?”

The maître showed up with a second glass, which he placed in front of Death. Pauline did not spare him a glance, or a harsh word for his betrayal.

Death reached for the bottle but she waved him off and took the bottle in one elegant hand. "It's bad luck to pour your own."

"A Japanese custom," Death said with a smile. "You were Japanese for quite a while, hiding out in another race."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, replacing the bottle. "I'm five foot-ten, red-haired and green-eyed. How could I be Japanese?"

"Oh Paul, you are so malleable. You've learned every trick of disguise and artifice. You are brave too, all those horrible surgeries to make you taller or shorter. It helped that you were part Mexican and with minor work could pass for Japanese, especially with contact lenses.

"But year after year, country after country, name change after name change you felt me closing in. Didn't you?"

"What nonsense," she sighed. "Death finds all men wherever they are."

"Not always. Shall I tell you why?"

"Well if you must, you must, but you are ruining my birthday. So tell me, why would I be an exception if I was this Paul?"

"Even Death needs a challenge once in a while," Death said, raising his glass in salute. A reason to get out of the crypt in the evening. Sometimes a bit of magic left over from the beginning times manifests and a human is given special powers to defy me."

"I can see what's in it for the huntsman, but what does the vixen get out of all of this?"

"Oh there must be a prize, otherwise this would simply be too cruel. My quarry ages very slowly while the chase is on. Not only am I limited to the tools and devices of men in searching for you...for Paul Altiera, but if I place my hand on the wrong person believing it to be Paul, he escapes my dominion forever. Immortal."

“Are you prepared to put your hand on my and claim that I am this Paul Altiera?” Her eyes glittered. Looking at them closely, Death could see the fine wrinkles of age, cunningly masked, the work of the best surgeons making Pauline look younger. The body too had been worked on; no middle-aged woman had breasts that firm and high.

“Not just yet,” Death said. “Tell me Paul...well, Pauline for now. It was brilliant this last time, hiding in a different gender. But tell me, was it worth it? All these surgeries, the pain, the mutilations? How much of the original you is even left? You’ve never married, never had a child, never stayed with any woman or man long. Was it worth it, just to avoid me?”

“My father used to say that, “In life there is pain and suffering but in death there is nothing.”

“That would be your father, James.”

Pauline smiled and drained her glass. “I lied. I never knew my father.” She gestured at Death for a refill and he poured for her.

“You know I almost had you in Bergen-Belson.”

“Horrible place,” she shuddered. “Nazis.”

“You remember it then.”

“I watch the History Channel on American TV.”

“Shall we order?” Death said.

Pauline shook her head. “I’m sorry, but on this night I always dine alone. Do not think me rude, but I am a woman of regular habits and I have kept this ritual for a long time.”

“Yes,” Death replied. “A very regular habit and it was the only way that I found you. I have agents, oh countless agents that it has taken me time to assemble who are looking through the world for signs of you. Then they told me of a woman who always came to this one place on

Paul's birthday. Tracking you backwards but you in places I know Paul had been, to doctors I know he had seen. This solitary dinner is your undoing."

She shrugged. "Much of my life has been solitary, would that it wasn't so."

"It need not have been," Death said sadly, "had you been satisfied with a merely human life. I am the way out of time and space. The door to other places, perhaps better than this one. You were a fool to have squandered your whole life for this game."

Death stood. Now he was shrouded and the hand he projected from the sleeve was bony. The scythe rested in his other hand. Pauline stood frozen staring at Death revealed. His bony hand came to rest on her shoulder. "I name you and I claim you, Paul Altiera."

A cold wind whipped up the canal. Gondoliers cried out as a skein of ice formed on the waters. Lights flickered and candles guttered. The other patrons and wait staff fled Il Marinaio from the outside terraces.

Only Death, Pauline and the maitre remained. Death with his bony hand on Pauline, who was frozen, clutching her shawl about her shoulders, the candle from the table in her other hand.

It was the maitre who broke the tableau with a maniacal laugh. "Free," he shouted. "Free, free at last. "Thank God Almighty I am free at last." Every word he said came out in a different language but flowed from his mouth in one easy sentence. Paul Altiera had been speaking for a long time and thought in many languages.

Death stared at him aghast.

"Don't take it so hard, Poor Dear," Pauline said.

"But how?" Death said. "I traced you from Bosnia, found all the accounts, traced the money for the surgeries--"

The maitre stared at him and giggled. “Pauline is my greatest creation,” Paul said. “I found her in a Bosnian concentration camp. I rescued the surviving part of her family on the condition that she become my stalking horse, that she be prepared to face death in my stead. I pinned the few scraps of my identity to her, knowing that eventually one of your agents would come across them. We faked her death, not even her children knew.

She and I had every surgery together, only I had the one to reverse it. She became taller, I stayed short. I changed genders and back.”

“I knew that someone celebrating my birthday, every year, in the same place would draw you to this day...you would come and...I...would be FREE!”

Death raised his scythe in wrath. All through, Venice people felt sickened and weak but only for a moment.

Death sat back at the table, again in his guise as the handsome man. Pauline replaced the candle on the table. The temperature rose to normal and the skein of ice began to crack. People still shouted in confusion but their voices faded. Somehow they knew that this part of Venice belonged to dark forces tonight.

Paul glared at Death as if daring him to break the covenant.

“Go, Paul,” Death said in a mild tone. “Live free of me. Just remember should you wish to invite me back, as the long years mount up to millennia, stand in the dark of the moon and call for me. I will hear you.”

“Never,” Paul screamed. “Never. I am free.” His eyes rolled back in his head. He began to laugh wildly and tear at his clothes. He fled the restaurant, racing into the darkness of the Venetian night.

Death looked at Pauline. “You suffered much to protect Paul.”

“He got my daughters out of the Bosnian camps before they were raped. One is a doctor now. The others are married with children of their own. Every year on this day, money arrives at their homes and will for as long as they live.”

“Interesting. Of course you realize I must punish you. I am Lord Death; I cannot be made sport of.”

“You were not,” she replied. “This was a desperate battle, right up to the end. But I do not plead with you. I lost my husband and son in the camps. Paul did not find me in time to save me from the Commandant’s men.”

“Poor frightened, Paul,” she sighed, “So very afraid of you. He was a good little man. Maybe someday he will be sane again.”

“To fear me too much or too little is the same sin,” Death said.

She smiled at him. “I’m sure you are right. Well, before you take me-- shall we at least finish our wine? Though its flavor will not be better for the chill you threw into everything.”

Death laughed a huge rolling laugh. All the cats of Venice fled, dogs quaked under their master’s beds, men cursed and women prayed that this strange night might end.

“You know,” Death said. “Perhaps I should take a holiday occasionally. Venice is lovely this time of year. Will you relent in your reluctance to have a dinner companion?”

“Yes,” Pauline said, but she bit her lip. “It would not be very lordly of you to toy with me. On the matter of my punishment...”

“Oh that,” Death said. “Well it does even the best chess player some good to lose occasionally. Reintroduces zest into the game. Really it was quite well played, particularly by you. I admire sang-froid.

“So shall we say that you shall live for so long as you do not leave Venice? Rise or fall, your fortunes will mirror that of the city.”

“Well it could be worse,” she said. “You could have confined me to New York.”

“Even Death has some scruples, my dear.”

The owner of the Il Marinaio peeked out from the interior, apparently astonished at the sight of the tall handsome man and the elegant lady still at the table high in the back. He looked for his maitre but did not see him. Finally, he grabbed up two menus and walked up the small stairs to the terrace.

In the distance, as if in defiance of all dark things, a gondolier began to sing.

The End