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Opening extract from

The Kiss of Death

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The Letter

I have only one wish now, one . . . desire.

I want to be near you. I want, and I need, to reach out to you across this dark water that divides us and touch you. I want to be close to you, once again. Surely you can let me get close to you one last time? You owe me that, and you can't be afraid of me, so why not let me come and see you?

And then, when I have you in my arms, I know you will lean in towards me, so your lips will brush mine, but I will hold you a little tighter, and then I will put my hands up to your neck, and I will begin to squeeze. I will hold you until your feet have stopped shuffling on the wet paving stones, and your hands have stopped scrabbling against my arms and my face, and I will go on squeezing until your lips have stopped twitching and you are no more.

I will drop you into the water, where, for all you have done, you can rot.

Then, and only then, my friend, will I let you go. Then we will be done with each other, you and I.

Then we will be done.

I'm coming for you,

A.

ONE

1

Death can come in many forms, but in Venice, death comes by water.

The boy held the letter lightly between his fingers, and read the words written there, as he had read them twenty times a day for twenty days.

Marko stared at the handwriting. It was his father's elegant script, and he knew it was genuine. He could almost smell his father's scent on the paper. Smell the medicines from his surgery. Smell his mother's fear as he'd left the house, six months before.

Grimly Marko folded the letter back into nine and slipped it inside his coat. His eyes lifted to the dark horizon, and only now did his senses return to the heave of the boat, the swaying of the cordage around him.

Water slapped at the windward side of the caravel as it turned the headland and made for the islands. It was January, the air was icy and seething with damp. He was cold. Cold and tired, but he had not even begun to think about these things yet.

One page of a letter, and a strange one at that. It was not addressed to anyone, did not begin with any formal

introductions, and yet it ended as a letter should. Everything not quite as it should be, and then there were the words themselves; words etched in thick rich splattering ink; words that spoke of hatred and bile, and the threat to kill. Marko did not recognise his father in among that violence, it spoke of a man so very different from the gentle doctor everyone knew him to be. But he knew the writing so well, as it was the writing he read everyday as he assisted in his father's surgery, mixing powders and dispensing potions for the sick of Piran.

The letter had arrived one day, almost three weeks ago, at their house in the hills. Marko had been wrestling with his eight younger brothers and sisters, trying to get at least one of them to wash, when his mother had come in clutching the letter. She'd broken the seal and was holding it out to Marko, a mixture of fear and curiosity on her face. It made no sense. Someone else, in a different hand, had written their address on the back of the paper, folded and sealed it to make it its own envelope, and sent it on its way.

There was another thing. A scrap of paper fell to the floor. Marko picked it up and read a few words, written hastily in the same hand as the address.

The doctor, Alessandro, has gone missing. We fear he may be dead. Come quickly.

I will wait at the Leon Bianco.

S. Bellini

That was all.

Now Marko's heart began to sound the time of his arrival, and it was a late one.

'Hour till landfall!' called the ship's captain from the low

deck behind where Marko clutched the rail.

'So long?' he asked a sailor who stood pulling on a rope near at hand.

The deckhand didn't bother to look round.

Marko tried again.

'So long as an hour? It looks so close.'

'But it's not,' spat the sailor in reply, too busy with his work to pay Marko much attention.

Marko looked out across the rail towards the horizon again. Dusk had fallen and all that remained of daylight was a faint green glow over the mountains way beyond the lagoon. He struggled to even make out the vague shape of the island city in the gloom. He didn't know much about the place, even though it was where his father had been born, where he'd grown up, trained as a physician, and practised medical arts for many years. Marko suddenly felt a stab of regret. Why had he never known more about his father? Should he have asked more questions, listened more? Perhaps, but perhaps the fault did not lie with him, but with his father.

So Marko only knew what his father had told him before he left, and the little he'd managed to glean from the letters he'd sent. Then the letters had stopped, for months on end, until the one arrived that had brought Marko here now, across the water in the gathering night, to Venice.

2

Words are not enough.

Marko could clearly remember his father telling him about this strange city, and, as usual, his father had been right.

Marko had often travelled with his father, especially as the years had started to slow him down. Once a month they made the journey on horseback, over the hills from their little port of Piran, to the great massing sprawl that was Trieste. There, Marko would idle away a few hours in the square while his father concluded his business. Then, their saddle-bags full of herbs, spices, stones and dried animal parts, Marko would tear his eyes away from the long-legged girl who worked in the tavern and they'd set off home, arriving well into the dark hours of the morning. Marko, therefore, thought he knew what a city was like, and that all cities in the world must be more or less the same, but when the boat slipped like a wet ghost into the Venetian lagoon, he knew how wrong he'd been.

'Yes Father,' he muttered to himself, as the caravel drifted silently alongside the first buildings, 'words are not enough.'

Someone slapped him on the back, and he turned to see Captain grinning at him.

'Think you're dreaming?'

Marko shook his head.

'I don't know. How does it . . . ? Why doesn't it . . . ? Who thought . . . ?'

Captain laughed.

'Of course, it's not the place it once was,' he said, mock serious. He was a decent man, Marko had decided. A spice trader, come to buy and sell in the city at the centre of the world, as he called it. He had a handsome face, but one that had fought the sun and salt for too long, and lost. Their journey had been three days from Trieste, and Marko had grown to like him, and like all the ship's hands, called him Captain. He'd been at sea so long he had no other name.

'Once they ruled the world, these people,' Captain said, 'Well, the seas, at least. If you wanted to trade anywhere from Barbary to Turkey you had to ask here first. Those days are gone, happily for me, but it's still enough to make most men weep.'

He sighed.

'What do you mean?' Marko asked.

'It's too much, this place. Too strong. It does for most people in the end. I wouldn't live here for all the salt in the sea. It's too beautiful, the wine's too potent, the stories are too frightening. The women are too friendly, the men too vicious. This city will suck you in and spit you back, inside out. I'm telling you this because you were a good passenger and earned our respect.'

'Telling me what?' Marko asked. The small ship drew closer to the walls of houses that seemed to stand right in the green-black water, thrusting up from the mud with elegance and indifference. In the half-light, Marko could see the outline of the rooftops, towers and domes of the skyline.

Torches flickered in windows and archways, and their redness danced across the dark mirror of the water towards him.

'What are you telling me?' he repeated.

'Just to be careful. That's all. Be careful.'

Marko smiled.

'I will. I can look after myself.'

'Sure of it? I hope. You're strong enough, for your age. But some things aren't about strength, are they? I don't know what you're doing here, but if I were you I wouldn't stay too long.'

'How long is too long?' Marko asked, grinning.

Captain laughed.

'That's for you to find out,' he said, as he left, heading aft to mind the steering into harbour.

Marko had said nothing about the reason for his journey. He had money to buy his way across the sea, and that was all anyone cared about. No one on the ship had asked him what he was doing.

It had been one evening, after days of indecision, that he'd finally convinced his mother to let him go and find his father. It hadn't been easy.

'What if you never come back too, Marko?'

She must have said it a thousand times in those days before he left. And he knew she was right. Supposing he never did come back, and left her with the eight little ones to look after? Tomas, the oldest boy, was only eight, and Irina and Elena, the twins were twelve. The others were just babes really, and none of them earning a living.

But in the end, Marko had won.

'You'd have us give him up? Never even try to find him?'

Five days ago, he'd got up earlier than normal, dressed in his best clothes and stoutest boots, and then joined his mother at the big table in the kitchen. They counted out all the money they had left from his father's safe keeping.

'We'll halve it,' his mother had said, making two piles. 'You'll need more than we will here. It's expensive to travel and to eat.'

'No, mother,' he said, 'there are nine of you and one of me. And the children need feeding.'

So they counted half of one half back into the pile of money that was to stay in the house in the hills above the port of Piran, and Marko had put the rest in a bag round his neck.

'You bring him back, Marko,' his mother said. 'Bring him back so I can wring his silly old neck.'

She tried to smile.

He kissed her, and she began to cry, then he waved at his brothers and sisters, who were fighting among themselves, and barely noticed him go.

3

Marko sat at a table in a gallery that ran round the high walls of the large open ground floor of the place he now knew to be the Leon Bianco. Below he watched the comings and goings of the hotel, and for the first time on his journey, he felt alone. Not only that, but a single seed of doubt germinated in his mind. What on earth was he doing here? There was no chance that he could find his father in this teeming, writhing city. He didn't even know his father's friend, the one he'd come to Venice to help. The letter had been from him, S. Bellini, the glass-maker. It occurred to Marko that the man could walk right past him and he wouldn't know him. All he knew was that he was in the right place, the White Lion, the Leon Bianco.

Captain had brought Marko as far as the hotel. He seemed to have taken pity on the boy.

While the deck hands had unloaded their cargo onto the quayside, Captain stood with Marko. He scratched his head.

'The Leon Bianco, eh?' He glanced around at his men, then back at Marko. 'Give me five minutes to sort this lot out.'

Half an hour later, well into the evening, Marko and Captain

had jumped aboard a long narrow boat, shaped like a sliver of fingernail, but painted black. They joined three other passengers, who each pressed a coin into the boatman's rough hand, and set off and out of the harbour. Marko noticed that one of these passengers, a tall man in a black cape, wore a plain white mask. Some disfigurement to conceal, presumably. The pox, or maybe a duelling scar.

The Captain chatted away single-handedly, and Marko took little notice. He stared as the boatman leaped up onto the covered stern of the boat and facing forwards, began to push on an oar held in some kind of ornate rowlock at his feet. In this way, he deftly flicked the boat from its mooring and into open water.

Captain caught his eye.

'He's a gondolier,' he explained. 'This is called a gondola.'

Marko nodded.

'See how he only rows on one side? So why aren't we going round in circles?'

Marko shook his head, then stared at the boat a little harder.

'It's not even,' he said. 'It's shaped like . . . '

'Like a banana!' Captain chuckled. He stopped. 'You do know what a banana is, don't you?'

But Marko shook his head again.

'Well, it's a type of fruit. And it's yellow, and it's shaped like a gondola!'

Briefly, Captain was pleased enough to stop talking, but then he was off again, uttering more words than Marko had heard him speak on their entire journey across the sea, and Marko realised the veteran sailor was excited by his return to

Venice.

A few more strokes and the gondolier was propelling them towards the mouth of a river that seemed to cut into the heart of the city itself. All around them were countless other boats; hundreds of the tiny gondolas, some slightly larger versions with two oarsmen, and large ships, as large as Captain's caravel, which glided through the water as if guided by a magical hand.

People were everywhere, in boats, standing in windows and doorways, but something bothered Marko.

'Where are the streets?'

'You're on the main one right now,' Captain said.

'This river is a road?'

'It's not a river. It's a canal, the Canale Grande.'

'It's artificial?'

'This whole city is artificial. They say it was built on marshes, over a thousand years ago. They were just simple fisher folk who lived on the mainland, until the Mongols began to rampage and murder along the coast. The fishermen went out into marshes and built some little huts on legs, and they never came back. Look! They're still here!'

He pointed at the extraordinarily magnificent buildings that stretched out of the water, five and six storeys high, and away down the length of the Canal.

'They built these houses onto the highest clumps of mud, building up, up, up, and they diverted the course of the rivers that flowed into the lagoon so it wouldn't silt up. That made the water deeper. Now look at them. The fishermen. The richest fishermen on earth.'

Marko nodded.

'You were right,' he said, 'What you said on the boat. I

am dreaming. It can't be real. But aren't there any streets at all?'

'Small ones mostly. What you're looking at is a series of tiny islands, joined by bridges. On each island, there are streets just like anywhere, but they're very small, because they used as much ground as they could for building the palazzi. The houses.'

Marko returned to his reverie, while Captain talked and talked.

'Of course, we don't usually stop at the Leon Bianco. Bit grand for us. We usually put up at a little albergo by the harbour. But it's been a good trip and I am the captain, so when you said you were headed for the Leon, I thought to myself, why not? You deserve it, I thought. Do the men good to be out of my clutches for a while, eh?'

He went on in this way, until the gondola put in right beside the front of the Leon Bianco, and they stepped onto a wooden landing stage, then straight into the chaos of the tavern.

Almost immediately, Marko was on his own. The captain met a woman who he seemed to know very well, as they disappeared somewhere upstairs within seconds. Marko heard him talking to the woman as they went.

'Why not, I said to myself. You deserve it.'

A girl whisked by with a tray of glasses and a large wine jug held high above her head. Nearly bumping into her, Marko stepped back and fell over someone's boot. He landed flat on his back and lay winded for a moment. He stared up into the face of the owner of the boot. A very tall, very old man, dressed in black, with a black cape, pure white hair, and a

deeply lined face towered over him. As Marko's breath returned, the man stooped and with one hand took Marko's arm and pulled him to his feet. Somehow, before he knew it, the old man had with unlikely strength set him upright again.

He spoke quietly.

'Take care how you fall.'

It was a strange thing to say, and he spoke too with a strange accent to his Italian, an accent that reminded Marko of his mother's home tongue far away in the mountains to the east. Then he was gone, and Marko decided to stop drawing attention to himself. He found a table up above the noise, in the gallery, and clutched the wine he'd bought from a serving girl, a girl who was actually a woman twice his age.

'You want to watch it,' she said, as he fished in the bag at his neck for a coin.

Marko glanced up at her, and saw she meant well. She smiled.

'You shouldn't flash all that around. Not if you want to keep it. Hide it.'

Marko groaned to himself, as he pushed the money into her hand. His first night in the city and he was behaving like a fool from the countryside. He knew better than that. This place couldn't be any worse than Trieste, he told himself.

He watched the life of the Leon Bianco hustle by. The whole ground floor opened into one large tavern, with plenty of drinking, tables for eating, but also tables for doing business. Even at this late hour, he saw money changing hands between all sorts of different people. Something else struck him. He'd assumed the masked man in the gondola was hiding some deformity, but now he saw that almost one of every three

people in the hotel wore a mask of some kind. He could remember his father telling him about Venice suffering from the pestilence. Marko had asked him if that was why he'd left Venice, but he'd simple shaken his head and changed the subject. Could all these people bear the ravages of plague?

No, he saw now that many of them removed their masks to drink, eat, or simply to chat, and held them by the ribbons which secured them to the face. He watched as people came and went – some taking masks off, some putting them on. Some never removing them at all.

The whole place reeked of seedy affairs, of bad business, of violence, sex and money, and Marko wondered, if this was supposed to be a stylish place to stay, what the Captain's place by the harbour was like.

People drifted to the first floor and to the rooms of the hotel above and behind the waterfront, and almost hypnotised by the flow, Marko suddenly realised that he was tired.

His eyes grew heavy, his head fell forward onto his crossed arms, and he began to doze.

He woke to the sounds of laughter and shouting. People were jeering and sniggering. Marko looked down over the balcony and saw a rowdy group pushing someone around. He could see the figure in the centre now. He was clearly drunk, reeling around the circle of people, swinging his fists wildly and ineffectually. He shouted incoherently, and then someone pulled the hood of his cape from his head. With a shock Marko recognised the old man he'd bumped into earlier. It was hard to reconcile his powerful calm with the drunken creature swaying on the tavern floor. The laughter

rose and rose, and then as the old man landed a punch on someone, more by accident than skill, the laughter turned to ugly taunts.

Marko looked around the room. He felt sorry for the old man, but it was none of his affair, after all. He couldn't afford to get involved. Across the room, at the bar, he saw someone pointing straight at him, leaning over and talking to a girl dressed in black.

He felt uneasy, slightly sick from his broken sleep. Standing up, he began to push past the other tables in the gallery. The ruckus below grew louder and he heard two young men discussing the entertainment.

'What did he say?'

'Same as before. His Italian is dreadful, but he keeps shouting about vampires. Vampires in Venice!'

They broke into fits of laughter and Marko doubled his pace for the exit. He was too late. The girl from the bar stood at the head of the stairs blocking his way.

'Who are you?' she said. She was young, but not *so* young, Marko saw immediately, and was finely dressed; a black cape over a black silk dress, with long sleeves. She wore a hood to cover her head, but underneath he saw her black hair was braided in elaborate patterns.

'No one,' he said. 'I'm just leaving.'

He pushed past her, not caring this time that he was being rude, and set off down the stairs, but she called after him.

'Do you know Alessandro Foscari?'

That stopped Marko dead. He turned and made his way slowly back up the stairs towards her.

The noise from the fight downstairs was reaching a climax, and there were shouts from the street now too.

'Do you know Alessandro Foscari?' the girl repeated. 'Answer me quickly. We don't want to be here when the police arrive. They'll arrest anyone they don't like the look of.'

From her stare, she clearly meant Marko.

'Yes,' said Marko, 'I know Alessandro. He's my father.'