



Zwischenzug:

A Pennidreadful Tale

Lorne Dixon

DOWN IN THE CATACOMBS, PENNI AND VASSILI PLAYED CHESS AS the luxury sedans rolled up the long driveway into Echo Meadow Cemetery. Between moves, they discussed the pest that had been digging up the south lawn, the oldest stretch of graveyard on the property. Penni knew that more than dirt was being disrupted.

“Sounds like company,” Penni sang in a bright, relieved voice, leaning against her only remaining bishop and rubbing her wings against its smooth plastic body. She always insisted on playing the queen herself. “Guess it’s an early night?”

Vassili clicked his tongue off the top of his mouth as the sound of car engines drifted down into the ossuary. It was a rare night—he was winning. Even if Penni was cheating by consulting the old sea-captains interred in the walls, he was only a half dozen moves away from cornering her king behind a line of pawns and the edge of the board.

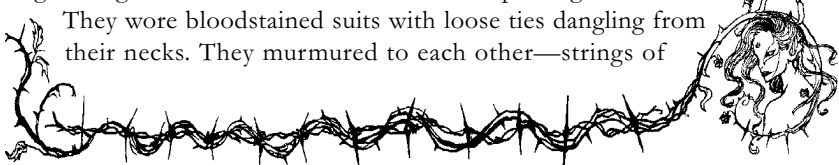
“Leave everything exactly as it is,” Vassili said as he stood and headed for the uneven carved rock stairs. “I mean it, don’t move anything.”

She smirked and kicked over his rook. “Earthquake.”

She flew after him, up through the ossuary gates and into the camouflage of night. She followed Vassili through the east lawn on the cemetery, past the stone mausoleum, to the reception awning in front of the funeral home. He stood silently on the curb and folded his hands.

Both front doors on the first sedan opened. The driver and front passenger flung themselves out and met at the rear passenger’s side door.

They wore bloodstained suits with loose ties dangling from their necks. They murmured to each other—strings of



nervous, hushed words—and opened the door. As they pulled the body out from the back seat, Penni heard a tiny gasp escape Vassili's lips.



Pawn to queen's knight four, Vassili thought as the body was carried from the car. He motioned for them to pass into the funeral home through a pair of automatic double doors. One mumbled a few words toward him as they passed, an apology or a condolence. It sounded like a word caught under the weight of a snore.

The driver's door opened on the second sedan and Niccolò stepped out. He dabbed at a single dot of blood on his lapel with a silk handkerchief. He spoke before he even raised his eyes from his jacket. "Uncle Antonio, I know it's late, but I didn't know where else to go."

Vassili turned and watched his brother's body disappear behind the white doors. They shut silently. "What happened, Nicci?"

"Don't call me that," Niccolò said as he stepped up, his adult face much harder than the boy Vassili remembered. "No one has called me that for a long time."

Vassili nodded. "Okay. What happened, *Niccolò*?"

His nephew lit a cigarette. "It wasn't what you'd think. This wasn't the Siffredi family or the Carracci brothers. We were coming back from the Island. We were hungry—and you can't find a decent greasy spoon on that side of the Verrazano, you know that, so we got off the bridge, took an exit, and found this buffet joint. Lo Mien and shit, y'know? Dad gets up to fill his plate. That's when this huge piece of shit comes up behind him and puts a fork in his eye—a fuckin' *fork*. Place is going wild and this lunatic is stabbing him and we rush up there and grab the guy. He just throws us off, so Benny D—he's the taller one—he pulls out his bip gun, just a little .22, and puts one in this guy's back. You know what he does? Fucker doesn't even flinch—he just throws Dad onto the desert trays and starts to eat right off the buffet table—with the same fork."

Vassili's eyes followed the glowing cigarette tip of the as it shook in Niccolò's fingers.

Niccolò nodded. "We jumped him and beat him down pretty nasty. Dragged him to the car. Got him in the trunk."

"Dead?" Vassili asked.

A smile crept across his nephew's mouth, left to right like a zipper sliding open. It wasn't a gleeful grin; it was a twisted smirk full of rage and ugliness. "Naw, I've got another idea for this cocksucker."



Vassili leaned over his dead brother and ran two fingertips over his face. His face felt cool and slick, a smooth plaster mask with a pool of red built up over his sunken right eye.

Niccolò stood in the doorway, shoulder propping open one of the white doors, his third cigarette dangling from his lips just below his threadbare mustache. "You'll fix him up good, right, Uncle Antonio?"