

The Body in the Smoke

Hameed had barely stepped out of the ballroom at the Arlecchino when someone caught hold of his arm. Startled, he turned around. He was annoyed to see that it was a stranger. He hated it when someone tried to get his attention by touching him, and he despised those who were given to making physical contact with people before addressing them.

“What the hell...?” He looked the fellow over from head to foot and glared.

“Sir, I beg your pardon for taking the liberty.” The stranger’s voice was heavy and pleading. “But I’m a bit shaken up right now.”

Hameed took a closer look at the stranger. He was a fairly good-looking young fellow, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. He was well-dressed, and did not appear to be of a lowly status. But Hameed detected fear in his eyes. His face was pale, and he kept running his tongue over his dry lips.

“Sir, I know who you are,” he said in a near whisper. “That’s why I dared to catch hold of you. Your presence here is fortuitous. If you weren’t here, I would expect my life to be over within a few hours.”

At this, Hameed softened a bit. “I don’t understand...”

“I request the favour of your company for a few hours.”

“But why? Any reason?”

“My life is in danger.”

“Have you swilled one drink too many, my dear fellow?”

“No sir; I am entirely sober.”

“Just three or four days ago,” Hameed said, smiling, “right here in the Arlecchino, I heard a fellow saying that God had sent him to earth on a special mission, but he was unable to rise from his chair... There were two empty quarter bottles of gin on the table in front of him.”

“Sir, I am in mortal danger! For God’s sake, I need your protection!” The man spoke in a voice laden with fear, and he looked around furtively, as if his enemy might be lurking somewhere very close by.

“You say you know who I am?” Hameed’s tone was dry.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you may also know the consequences of wasting my time.”

“Please, dear sir, believe me, and hear me out!”

“Okay, come sit here.” Hameed gestured towards a table. “Let me try and discover the cause of your delusions.”

The stranger moved towards the table with uncertain steps. This convinced Hameed that he was indeed drunk.

Let’s teach him a proper lesson, he thought. The stranger sat at the table, and Hameed sat down opposite him. “I can give you five minutes. If you’re unable to give me a sound reason for detaining me like this, well, then you yourself will be responsible for the consequences. You say you know who I am.”

“I know very well, sir. As of now I have no means to prove the truth of my statement, but I assure you: My life is in danger.”

“Okay, let’s suppose that’s true,” Hameed said, looking the stranger in the eye. “So what do you want?”