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REFLECTIONS OF AMONTILLADO

By Ty Drago

With respectful apologies to the master

Forgive me if I lack the fine lyrical style of my friend and most foul murderer, Monstresor. I am a man of means more so than of learning, and I lack the felicity of expression which has become so fashionable in the world of poets and authors. When one's days are spent keeping ledgers and authoring bills of lading, niceties of pen and clever turns of phrase hold little import.

Nevertheless, I must set this down. For I am Antonio Santino Argestelli Fortunato, a merchant of some success and a student of no art save the art of business. If the truth is to be told, and I now believe that this is the case, I must humbly admit my place as the wealthiest merchant in this region. For this, I have earned respect and a certain measure of trepidation. This is northern Italy, after all, and nearly all gentry in these fertile lands owe their fortunes to a single pursuit.

I speak of wine, the magnificent virtues of the grape. I am a patron of these wines, most often in quantity, to be exported abroad on a fleet of merchant ships that I own and maintain. I have conducted my affairs wisely, and my interests have flourished over these many years. My competitors are few, and as such I am afforded a certain position in this society of wine makers and vineyard masters. I can, and have, made some men wealthy and others destitute through my purchase choices. Though I pride myself on fairness, still I am told that there are those who fear what I may do to their fortunes and their families on a whim.

This is not to say, however, that my only passion is business. I am also a collector of rare vintages, which I keep locked lovingly away in a dry corner of the cellars in my home outside Milan. At present, I hold nearly two hundred labels, the finest of which is a rare Chateau Ausone Bordeaux.

But do not think my love affair with the fruits of the vine ends with its mere collection. The art of wine, after all, lends itself to the palette as well as to the soul and over the years I have become a taster of considerable skill. I can, with confidence, identify the year and birthplace of nearly any respectable European vintage. To be sure, there are some men to whom I cannot and dare not compare myself in this field of expertise. Yet, with each passing year, this number decreases. Soon, I expect to excel in this pursuit as surely as I do in my more profitable ventures.

If all this sounds boastful, I should make it clear that I am a man of small stature and unbecoming features. My nose is too sharp and my hair too thin. I still suffer the scars of small pox, which nearly finished me at a young age, but was beaten back by an attentive and fierce-

spirited mother, who lay now ten years in her grave. So, without the benefit of a boastful visage, may not I be permitted my other, modest vanities?

Yet, was it not those vanities that nearly put an end to me?

Therein rests my tale.

Admittedly, when Monstresor approached me at the carnival, I had already drunk too much. My wife, the Lady Fortunato, had left me to my own devices, having become impatient with the giddy smiles and thick speech with which my inebriation had cursed me. Our driver had left to return her to our villa, after which he would rejoin me. In the meantime, however, I found myself alone and free to wander the grounds, feeling youthful and silly, adorned in festive colors and sporting a cap of bells upon my head; a sight indeed.

It was in this state that I happened upon my friend Monstresor. In fact, it was he who approached me, materializing as a ghost from the crowds of peasants and tradesmen. As always, he wore a smile the way another man wears a beard: so often present as to be finally seen not at all. Monstresor was a tall man, far taller than I, and built lean and long limbed. His hair, once dark, had gone gray in recent years, a result both to the advance of age and to the tribulations which fate had forced upon him as the last member of a once wealthy family.

He greeted me warmly, shaking my hand until my wrist grew sore, all the time praising the good fortune of this chance meeting. The cause of his delight, beyond, of course, the pleasure of my company, was this: during a previous night's visit to the carnival, he had purchased a bottle bearing a label unheard of at such peasant festivals.

“How?” I asked him. “Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival?”

“I have my doubts,” he replied, and proceeded to describe the foolishness with which he had purchased the wine at full Amontillado cost without my advice and delicate palette to guide him.

“Amontillado!” I exclaimed, the lightness of my head heightening my interest. Here was a wine little seen anymore, much less on carnival grounds. Named for the Montilla district in Cordoba, Amontillado bore a richer flavor than the wine for which the area is known, though it shared both its dryness and its unique amber color.

True, it was no collector’s wine. Yet, I fancied it greatly, and had been distressed at its recent unavailability. It was a distress to which I lent much public attention.

“Amontillado!” I exclaimed.

“I have my doubts,” he said again.

“Amontillado!”

“And I must satisfy them.”

“Amontillado!”

I must have sounded a fool, indeed, prattling on like a fishwife. But Monstresor only smiled. “As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me...”

Had I been untouched by the alcohol, I should have laughed at this. Luchesi owned a prosperous Cordoba vineyard and fancied himself a meritorious taster. In truth, his untalented palette could not easily distinguish between Amontillado and a cooking Sherry. I told Monstresor as much, though he assured me that many ranked Luchasi’s skills above my own!

After that, there remained no hope of refusal. Blast my driver. He could look for me in vain upon the grounds of the fair until I returned. This was, after all, a matter of honor.

Monstresor objected, perceiving that I was suffering a cold. It was true that my face felt heavy and a troublesome cough plagued me. Yet, it was not a cold, but an affliction that came upon me often at this time of the year, when autumn had settled in and the leaves had begun to turn. It made me vulnerable to the whims of nature; on wet, cold nights, such as this one, I often suffered. “The vaults are insufferably damp,” he told me hastily. “They are encrusted with nitre.” Nitre is a white fungus that clings most often to the damp, cold walls of stone cellars and crypts, and which can irritate the lungs and throats of those ill-witted enough to come within range of its spores.

But my drunkenness had heartened me, and I would have none of it.

Monstresor himself piloted the carriage that drew us along the roughhewn, narrow road and wove its dangerous path up to the gates of his family’s ancient keep. This had once been a vineyard of note. Its vintage had been none too grand; certainly no masterpiece had ever worn the Monstresor family label. Still, it had been a prosperous, respectable enterprise in its day, although that day was now more than twenty years past.

The last great Monstresor had been the father of the man who was my host. The elder Monstresor had been an old master of the ways of the grape. I’d known him briefly in my early days, only two or three years before his death by influenza. The old man had loved wines, and I had respected him for that love. Yet it was love without resource. The lands around his winery were dying, the fertile soil giving way to marsh. Each year, I had found less and less to recommend among his product. Out of respect, I had continued purchasing a good portion of

their better labels and, in the first years after the old man's death; I had become the principal market for their goods.

Unfortunately, inevitably those goods lost their remaining virtue, forcing me at last to withdraw my patronage. The new master, my friend and driver this very night, had taken this decision rather badly. He knew, as I knew, that my support was the last his poor, aged vineyard could hope to receive. Through a decision of business, I was, regrettably but unavoidably, sealing its fate. Monstresor had come to me at my villa and had humbled himself before me, beseeching me to give his wine another two year's patronage. I had felt compelled to refuse. Another year, he'd implored. Again, I had been forced to deny him.

If there were ill feelings, he had never shown them to me. In the years that passed, his fortunes were all but exhausted. This glorious manor, which had been so full of life in its day, seemed now dark and empty, a great and ominous crypt. I had heard that Monstresor had been required to release all his servants but two, and that these were rarely paid. Yet, for all these sorrows, Monstresor never once spoke ill to me or of me to others. He remained cordial and respectful, even considerate. When we met at wine tastings or at sales, an event that grew increasingly rare with the passage of time, he always conducted himself with dignity and respect. I sympathized with his predicament: selling off more land each year to meet the costs of maintenance cost and assessments levied upon his ancestral home. I even admired his determination not to sell the old estate for what he could get. It never occurred to me that Monstresor's dogged tenacity was born less of pride than of vengeance.

So as I stepped from the carriage and looked up at the dark battlements of the keep set, as they were, against the starlit sky, I attributed my sudden chill to the bite of the autumn evening.

The harrowing journey from the carnival had sobered me. Yet, as Monstresor led me up the unkempt walk to his threshold, I felt that my affliction had worsened. A brief fit of coughs stifled me momentarily. Monstresor looked on compassionately.

The ancient house seemed empty of servants and I wondered if my friend's fortunes had suffered so badly as to force him to fend for himself within these walls. For the sake of courtesy, I did not ask him of this, and he made no mention of it. He collected two torches, handed one to me, and then proceeded to lead the way through a number of ill-appointed rooms and finally to the very threshold to a narrow archway.

Moving carefully down treacherous stairs, we proceeded into the Monstresor vaults. I found myself regretting the silly cap I wore upon my head, but felt too abashed to remove it. It jangled insistently with every new step; a sound lent more foolish than festive by my sobered state.

Before long, fluid was filling my nose and throat, drowning me and urging from me the most horrendous fits of coughing. I should have stopped. Indeed, Monstresor asked me if I should wish to go back. I refused. To warm me, he produced a bottle of Medoc, from which I thankfully drank. It did aid me, though only slightly.

"These vaults," I said, my voice sore from coughing, "are extensive."

"The Monstresors," he replied, "were a great and numerous family."

We proceeded, and I watched with distress the nitre that covered the walls in an expanding tapestry of white webs. Yet, the Medoc continued to steady me and, when this pipe was spent, Monstresor offered me a flagon of De Grave. The dry bite of this new wine immediately reminded me of my standing as a free mason. De Grave was often served at

brotherhood functions. As I finished it, I automatically threw my hands up in a mason's salute that Monstresor did not comprehend.

I asked him if he were not a mason, though I knew he could not be - his father, perhaps, but not him. Then, he said that he was. I demanded from him a sign of this and, smiling, he produced a trowel from under his robes.

"You jest," I said, though I could see little point in the humor.

We continued on, Monstresor leading the way. I held my torch high, though its light had grown dull, and I battled down yet another bout of coughs. The nitre was everywhere, and it seemed that we walked for a very long time indeed. I began to wonder if my honor were indeed worth such agony as this. The plea to return was on my very lips when Monstresor stopped at the mouth of a recess, formed between two great stone supports, its interior as black as coal.

"Proceed," he said. "Herein is the Amontillado. As for Luchesi..."

"He is an ignoramus," I said sharply, pushing past him. Why would a man put a good bottle of wine in so distant and obscure a place as this? But it was a matter to which I could spare little attention. My head felt too heavy and my lungs too filled. The flush of the Medoc and the De Grave still burned warm in my cheeks, but left the rest chilled to the marrow. I held my feeble torch before me as I stepped to the very rear of the niche. There was nothing.

In truth, Monstresor moved far too quickly for me. In my weakened state, he might have taken twice as long to conduct his dark business and I still would have been powerless against him. A chain, which had hung from an iron spike set into wall, drew tight around my waist and was then padlocked to a similar spike no more than two feet from its brother. The result was a

tight, terrible bond that pressed my back against the cold, wet stone. Monstresor stepped back, key in hand, grinning as a gleeful lunatic.

“Pass your hand over the wall,” he said. “You cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is very damp. Once more let me implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power.”

“The Amontillado!” I said, still lost in my astonishment.

“True,” he replied. “The Amontillado.”

I stood rooted in my place, my hands exploring these impossible bonds, my mind still on the Amontillado. The events were so striking, so unlikely that for several minutes I could make no sense of them. It was not until he set to work at the mouth of the alcove, not until he began smearing the stones with mortar and locking them, one upon another across the entrance with the very trowel he had used to jest me, that I began to comprehend.

I uttered forth a wretched moan, of which Monstresor took no notice. Wordlessly, he worked, adding tier upon tier across the entrance to my niche. His familiar smile had fled, and his face bore a tradesman’s look; lost, he was, in the rhythm of his task. My body felt detached and numb, as though I were merely a watcher of these events, an uninvolved observer rather than at the very center of things. For long minutes, neither of us spoke. The only sound the regular slapping and clacking of mortar on stone, stone on stone, on and on and on...

What little drunkenness still shielded me fled at last. With it, went all remaining confusion over my plight. Seized now by a fresh, wholly sober terror, I let go of a scream more fierce and terrible than any I had ever before produced. To my brief satisfaction, Monstresor recoiled in surprise, dropped the trowel and drew his rapier. He held it out before him, his eyes

wide, as though he expected me to break suddenly my chain and have at him with all the strength of a madman.

Instead, I only screamed. I screamed until my throat felt sore and hot. I screamed until the sound echoed around me and ached in my ears. After a bit of this, Monstresor approached again, a quizzical look on his face, visible by the torch that lit his work. Then he sat himself down beyond the wall and listened to my pleas in perfect, appreciative silence. Still, I did not stop.

Finally, Monstresor rose to his feet and shrieked himself, matching me. For a time, we screamed together in a strange, horrific harmony, our voices filtering through the vast empty catacombs of this accursed vault until, at last, my voice failed me. I slumped back against the wall, spent and lost in despair. Monstresor ceased his screaming also and resumed his dark business, setting stone upon stone once more.

Toward the end, my knees buckled, but the chain bit sharply into my abdomen and would not let me fall. Before me, Monstresor had nearly put an end to his work. But a single stone remained to be slid in among its brothers. He struggled under its weight, and his face seemed drawn and sad.

It struck me that he might be regretting his actions, and that if I were to offer him an easy escape from blame, he might be tempted to seize it. So I laughed as well as I could manage. I chuckled sourly, unable to do better, and spoke of what a fine joke it was, what an excellent jest. I promised that we would drink together and share a good laugh.

His response surprised me.

“The Amontillado!”

I could fathom no meaning in this, other than to force my attention back to the deception that had lured me to my fate. So I resolved to agree with him. “Yes, the Amontillado! But is it not getting late? Will they not be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.”

It did not occur to me until later that my wife surely rested in bed at this hour, and that my driver must be half-mad with distress.

“Yes,” Monstresor said in reply. “Let us be gone.”

My facade of good humor melted away. What remained pierced my soul almost as to make it bleed. He meant to do this, I thought. He meant to drive in that last stone and to leave me in this place, trapped in the dark, nearly stifled from the dampness. This was to be my death and my tomb and who would know that I had even come here? No one at all. Such had been his intention from the start.

“For the love of God, Monstresor!” I cried.

“Yes,” he said, and his voice sounded to my ears as cold as the stone around me. “For the love of God.”

Then I fell back against the rear wall of the alcove, my eyes fixed on the tiny light that shone through that final, fleeting space, as the last foul stone slid home.

The darkness around me grew profound and then more profound still as I swooned.

I cannot say how long I suffered there, slipping in and out of wakefulness. I could not, after all, lie down or find even the smallest measure of comfort on the cold stone. My chain would not permit it. The best I could do was collapse uncomfortably against the wall and let fear and exhaustion carry me where it would. In the hours that past, often I would open my eyes, still

fighting to breathe, and think myself dreaming. I felt certain that, with enough effort, I would awaken to find myself safely tucked beneath my own covers, a fire dying in the hearth and the room warm and dry. Then I would remember Monstresor, and the Amontillado, and I would groan in sorrow and despair. Sometimes I would try to straighten up before feeling the pressure of the iron links around my middle. Once, I actually managed to take half a step before the punishing harness stopped me and that terrible wave of understanding bore itself down upon me once more.

The only release was death, but it seemed loath to come. After a time, I waited for it, at first furtively, and then impatiently, and then urgently as a child awaits the Yuletide. I wanted only to be free from this place and into another, be it Heaven or Hell. I wanted to leave behind the cold and the choking misery that filled my lungs, making every breath a new agony. But still, the reaper did not come for me and I suffered on.

I did sleep finally: a deep, dreamless sleep that left me with a back wracked with pain from the angle at which I had been forced to seek rest. My feet tired from supporting me. My knees threatened to buckle beneath me. Yet, my chest felt a little clearer, as if the simple act of rest had rendered me the smallest measure of strength. All was darkness, and so I had no measure of time. But I ventured to guess that I had slept for some hours, as my mind seemed clearer now and my focus more precise.

My thoughts turned to escape.

With a blind man's fingers I investigated my prison. The alcove was small and, if I reached out against the chain that held me, my fingers could just brush the wall that Monstresor

had so recently erected. There was, of course, no food or water, much less a bottle of Amontillado.

As I have said, the chain met the wall at two points, with a lengths of perhaps two feet between. To one station the chain had been forged into its place. To the other, a heavy iron padlock made the final link. The snare, though simple, proved tragically effective. The chain drew too tight across my middle to allow me to worry myself from its grasp. Any such effort merely sent the ragged links digging into my midsection, until the hot agony forced me to abandon the attempt. Several times I tried, and each time I came away chafed and sore.

Surely, I could not bend or break the links. They were forged of thick iron and bore no hint of corrosion. The padlock was the same. Monstresor had planned this well, and the realization dismayed me. I had no key with which to work the lock and no means to summon help. Was there air enough to sustain me? How long would it be before my eyes darkened and I hung suffocated by this dread tether? And if there were some small passage that permitted my breath to escape, might I then only wait to die of thirst or fear?

A recollection came to me then, a dark memory that had not revealed itself in many a year. I was a boy in my bed, wracked with fever, my face and body a mass of pox. My mother had water by my bedside, and blankets wrapped one upon another around me. My face was wet with perspiration, though my mother never so much as cooled my brow. Instead, she dipped her rag in the water and squeezed it into my mouth, which seemed to absorb the splendid moisture before I had time to swallow. Then, as now, I slipped in and out of wakefulness, oblivious as the tides. All the while, my mother never left my side, but instead spoke to me in soft, firm whispers.

“Never let it take you. No matter how weary you become or how ill. You must fight, my little one. You must do what you must do.”

The memory left me a measure of confidence and a degree of inspiration. The chain was unbreakable, but mayhap stone could be worked upon. The spikes that held my tether to the wall protruded from a mass of rock. By the touch of my fingers, which were now becoming quite nimble in the dark, I observed that these spikes had been wedged in place, perhaps driven into a hole chiseled into the stone. If I could free one of them...

I turned myself around as best I could and took hold of the rightmost spike with both my hands, propping one foot awkwardly against the wall. The nitre proved slippery and took several attempts before I found purchase. Then, holding my breath, I pulled with all my might, pressing my teeth together and throwing all my weight against the sole of that foot. I pulled until bright ribbons of agony burned in my shoulders and back. I pulled until flashes of light played behind my eyes and my head swam. I pulled until I felt sure my heart would burst, and then I pulled a little harder still.

It moved.

At the same instant, a terrible fit of coughs seized me and I fell forward against the stone, wheezing and fighting for air. The exertion had served to fill my lungs with fluid, to ignite my affliction anew, and to steal the very breath from me. It was some minutes before I felt strong enough to even assess how far I had come. Finally, with moist, trembling fingers, I reached up and felt again the iron spike, and my heart sank in my chest.

Yes, it had moved, but no more than the barest fraction of an inch. Even if I could again mount such an effort to free it, it would certainly gain me no more ground than this before another attack of breath overcame me. A third attempt would certainly finish me.

I closed my eyes, darkness upon darkness, and labored to breathe. My head was still spinning, and at that moment I should have given all I had to but lie down and rest, even on this unyielding stone. My fingers now felt thick with perspiration, and great drops of it traveled a slow dance down my arms or dropped to the floor of my prison.

That observation lent itself to yet another play of memory.

I was older now, having recovered from the pox that had nearly done for me. My mother was working to free a spinning wheel, which had come stuck with age. She bade me fetch her a handful of lard from the pantry. This she used with tender, nimble care, working it around the axle that turned the wheel. When I inquired as to her purpose, she smiled and offered as her answer a press of her foot upon the pedal.

The spinning squeal groaned softly and then sprang to life.

“It can be done with butter fat as easily,” my mother had said. “Or even with water when nothing else can be found.”

I felt my hands. There seemed a good deal of perspiration there, gathering between my fingers and filling my palms; a miraculous amount of sweat. I reached out once again and ran my hands around the shaft of the spike, working the fruit of my own labors into the rough metal and deeply as I could manage. Then I seized the shaft and rested the weight of my body upon it. I pushed, bemoaning new agonies, until the shaft snapped back to where it had been at the start.

My wheezing returned, but this time I paid it no mind. I waited a ten count, and then resumed my original position: both hands on the shaft, one foot up against the slippery stone. I pulled, and this time was rewarded with the spike emerging a bit more. My hands ached and burned, but the small success had heartened me. Working now with renewed vigor, I again bathed the shaft in my sweat, which seemed now to be coming in thickening waves, and reasserted it into its place in the wall. Another wait and then another pull and, in this way, was a full inch more of blessed freedom gained.

Again and again I performed this duty. On some occasions I met with considerable progress. On others I gained nothing at all. I counted the first twenty attempts, but abandoned the count after that, concentrating on my work, on my breathing, which grew shallower with each new effort, more strained with each turnaround.

My head felt light and I could no longer breathe. But I did not stop. Even when the air in my lungs gave out, I did not cease for a moment my efforts. Circles of color clouded my vision as I seized the spike one more time, pulling with a mighty effort, placing both my feet up against stone until I stood precariously perched on the angled wall, my back twisted down toward the spike.

Consciousness and the stone yielded together. I perceived my freedom a moment before I toppled backward as a rag doll, my wakefulness fading. My head met something that would not yield, and terrible blackness swallowed me up. So, I thought, with this small victory I lose the campaign. There seemed a measure of relief in such knowledge.

But, I did not die.

Instead, I awoke, sitting on the floor, my back propped up against cold stone. I tried to move, but waves of vertigo insisted that I remain where I was, at least temporarily. Still, the chain's pressure had gone from my abdomen. I closed my eyes against the darkness, smiling. Free!

But at what cost? My hands felt nearly numb beneath the layer of perspiration that clung to them still. Never in my life had I known so great a measure of pain and exhaustion. Yes, I had won a modest battle. But there remained a war yet to be fought, and my arsenal had grown meager indeed.

It was some time before I judged myself strong enough to move again. When I did, the vertigo returned, though this time more manageably. I climbed slowly to my feet, using the wall for support.

Slowly, my hesitant hands against the darkness, I groped ahead of me. On my first step, my foot settled upon something that jangled in protest. I jumped back, uttering a cry of alarm. Then, hesitantly, I reached down into the darkness and brought forth my belled cap. Had it fallen from my head? Obviously so, though I could not recall when this might have happened. Had its bells been ringing all through my work with the chain? How could it be that I did not notice?

How far was I now from insanity? After all, was I not a man buried alive; walled in under the crushing weight of an eon of stone? Had I not been left to die, fluttering as a butterfly under a collector's pin? Yet, though I had freed myself from that pin, still a wall stood between me and true liberation. Could I not expect madness to finally seize me? Would I at last sit myself down on the damp, uneven floor and partake of unseen Amontillado until death finally claimed me?

No, I resolved. This would not happen. Closing my hand over the cap's soft fabric, which had already grown wet with my perspiration, I turned back toward the mouth of the alcove. With my unoccupied hand, I felt the stone until I came upon the masonry work that Monstresor had so recently completed; the barrier between myself and the world beyond.

Monstresor.

Where, I now wondered, had the madman gone? Did he sit in some darkened study above me, toasting my fate with yet another bottle of his family's inferior label? Did he laugh at the image of my suffering?

How long had this hatred brewed within him? How could I not have become aware of it over these many years? Surely, there had been signs: a word, a look, a gesture that was not as it should be. Could he truly blame me for the death of his family's good name, and the loss of his wealth? How so, when both these things should have happened with or without my involvement? Resentment of my rising fortunes while his own suffered: with this I could sympathize. But to carry it as far as murder, and in a cruel and wicked a manner as this?

I was seized then by a terrible indignation. My crimes, if indeed there were any for which I need answer, did not merit such retribution. I had been wronged, and the depth of that wrong; the very injustice of it, weighed heavily upon me. Freedom now lent with it a fresh flavor. I wished to be gone from this Hellish prison for more than its own sake. I wished to find Monstresor and confront him with what he had done.

I began to explore the mortared wall, seeking a place where the stone was weak, or ill-set among its brothers. But Monstresor had done his job well, and the wall stood so solidly against me that, after a time, despair once again threatened my fragile morale. I faced it down, taking

heart in the remembrance of the spike which had held me shackled to the wall, and of my conquest of that dread obstacle.

Do what you must do.

Mortar, I thought, was naught but a mixture of things: a paste of water and gravel and sand. This I knew from my childhood. My father, who died when I was very young, had been a brick mason. At the time, I was too much a boy to learn his trade, and surely did not miss it in my life of wines and leisure. Still, as I grew to manhood in my mother's widowed house, there came a time when I longed to understand this father I had not known. So, in summers I sought the company of others in his trade, and even suffered their employment for brief periods. I recalled little of their art. But the nature of mortar returned to me now with the clarity of fresh knowledge, eagerly learned and lovingly remembered.

So, would mortar not need to dry before fully exercising its bond among the stones? Down in this place, where the rock felt cold and wet to the touch, might not such drying come slowly?

I dug my fingernails into the mortar. It felt solid enough. Over the next many minutes, I busied myself about the stone, searching for places where the mortar might be thinner or weaker. At length, I lay on my side in the darkness, probing, with fingers ever more shaken by fear and exhaustion, the bottom-most tier of stones.

Yes! Here, where the wall met the floor, the mortar felt less formidable. With my fingernails, I could even scrape at it and hold the small trophies of success in my numbed palms. I needed a tool, something with which to worry at the stone. I sat up, struggling to breathe. The nitre had again cast its evil spell upon me.

I coughed harshly, sending spasms of agony through my body. At length, the seizure passed, and when it did I lay upon the floor of my prison, trembling with weakness and misery. Yet, as I did so, my hand settled upon something on the floor, something I had not before noticed: a shaft of wood that felt familiar to me. A torch, its head long since cooled, but a stout bit of timber nonetheless. Surely this had been mine, carried into the alcove with me, moments before Montresor triggered his snare. I fancied a vague memory of his pushing something through the wall just before setting the last stone, of feeling something strike me, causing my bells to jingle, even as I slipped over the precipice and into unconsciousness.

Eagerly, I began working with my prize against the hated stone, driving its hard, unburned end against the soft place that I had found. Then, when this offered nothing, I turned instead to trying to dig clumsily at the mortar with the edge of the wood. Alas, the mortar, soft though it was, proved still stronger than the poor wood of Montresor's feeble torch. Nothing came of it.

Nothing at all.

A chisel! I fancied; something of stone or metal with which to work upon the mortar! Eagerly, I groped in the darkness and took hold of the spike, the very staple which had tethered me. It was long and pointed, an iron rapier perfect for my needs. Grinning in the blackness, I turned and set myself to place the blessed point against the mortar around my target stone.

No! The spike stopped fully six inches from its target! I pulled at it, but it would come no further, still fastened to the rear of the alcove by the very chain which had bound me, inexorably linked to its brother, wedged in the back wall.

I let the spike clatter away and sat back, bowing my head in defeat. The agonies and exhaustion set upon me one again, and I wished yet again that death would take me from this. No visions of memory comforted me this time. No phantom mother offered forgotten advice that I might mold to my own predicament. I was a man alone, walled away in my own grave, my only mourner he who put me here.

Monstresor.

Yes, he who had lured me here in the name of friendship. He, who had chosen to murder me in so cowardly and cruel a way as this. I felt my hand close around the thick, strangely comforting circumference of the torch. In my mind, I was free of this place, seeking Monstresor out within the walls of his keep. In my mind, I approached him slowly, stealthily, and brought down upon his head this very torch.

Indeed, a vision worth chasing and, with it, inspiration settled warily upon me once more. I drew forth my belled cap, which I had absently tucked away in a pocket of my garment. Carefully, I explored it until I came upon one of its small tin bells. This I ripped free.

I placed the bell on the floor and brought the torch down upon it: once, twice, thrice. Then I felt with hesitant fingers for the result. The bell would ring no longer, having been flattened into a blade of soft tin. This I picked up and, with fresh resolve, set upon the mortar around my target stone, digging the tin into the rough seams.

The sharp tin edge penetrated the soft bits of mortar as I chipped away in earnest. I would scratch and dig for a time, and then give ten strikes against the stone with my torch. Then more scratching, and then more striking. Thus it went, for time beyond my reckoning, my mind on no purpose other than freedom, and the opportunity for vengeance that freedom would afford.

Then, in one glorious instance, I both felt and heard the stone shift in its mounting. I whooped a victorious cry into the darkness and set about my task with renewed vigor. Deeper and deeper did my stout torch penetrate, pushing its stone before it; inch by precious inch. Until...

Air, sweet nectar, filled my tiny prison as the stone passed out from under the wall. The remaining space stood a foot-and-a-half wide and half that high. I stood no hope of crawling through it, so I immediately set to work on the one above.

The second stone fell to my urges far sooner than the first, tumbling away into the darkness beyond the wall, which seemed, to my accustomed eyes, just slightly more lighted than my own miserable cell. The gap was now a foot-and-a-half square. I felt around the opening furtively, wondering if I could force my body through and out to freedom.

I resolved instead to widen my exit by a final stone, and set upon the wall with my stout torch one final time.

But with a single strike, the entire wall suddenly trembled as though shook by the hand of God. With a gasp, I retreated, stumbled and fell, striking my head upon the chain that still hung from the rear wall. There I listened, dazed and helpless and blind, as the fruit of Montresor's labors shuddered and moaned as a thing alive.

Then, from high in a wall, a stone fell and clattered to my feet, easily crossing my shallow prison and settling at last on the floor beside me. A cold terror gripped me then. The wall before me would collapse inward, crushing my life away under its weight. Before me, as a great beast in the dark, the wall shuddered and bellowed menacingly. Then, shadow upon

shadow, by the dismal light that filtered through the hole I had so painstakingly devised, I saw Montessor's creation lean sharply toward me.

In desperation, I hurled myself from my place, crawling on my belly toward where my exit should still await. My hands groped at the wall, searching its trembling, collapsing expanse for that blessed opening.

There! As a snake, I slithered into the hole, my legs pumping against the floor, my arms thrust out before me. Above and around me, the wall leaned inward as a cresting wave. The sounds of its demise roared in my ears like thunder, as my eager hands burst forth into freedom.

I scrambled for some purchase and felt suddenly a length of wood in my hands, thinner and smoother than that I had used for my wedge. I seized it in both hands and pulled upon it, dragging myself through my opening. Above me, Montessor's wall gave a great final groan and then poured itself forth upon my meager prison.

I emerged and drew myself away. Dust rose in great, choking clouds as stone pummeled the back wall of my cell, burying my accursed tether beneath its girth. Then, abruptly, all fell silent, and I lay in the dark with the rod of my salvation still clutched in my hands.

Free!

The word touched me as a prayer, and I embraced it as I might a savior. A spasm of coughing came, summoned forth by the dust in the air, and this time I let it come. When, at last, it had passed, I rose unsteadily to my feet and pulled at the length of smooth wood in my hands. It remained firmly connected to something I could not see, so I left it and found my way from the corridor.

The darkness was great indeed, though not as profound as that to which I had grown accustomed. Such was I able to find another torch, this one mounted high in the wall around the very next corner, unlit, but with flint ready in a niche beside it. The flint I took and, with it, set flame to the torch.

Instantly, light burned my eyes, forcing me to shut them. It was, for those first few minutes, as if I were looking at the sun itself, washing everything around me in glorious clarity. For sanity's sake, I waited until the sight of it no longer pained me, and then I took the torch from its place and carried it back to the mouth of my prison.

Astonishment befell me as I gazed at the alcove. Nothing remained of my prison but a mass of shattered stones. Then I looked for the rod that had saved me, and gasped aloud. This was not wood but bone, the leg of an incomplete skeleton that lay among others in a pile outside the mouth of the alcove. Were these the forebears of he who had been my murderer? How had they come to be there, at the very moment when I might use to then to spare my own life? Slowly, reverently, I withdrew my belled hat and placed it once again upon my head, where it felt no longer foolish, but exultant. I tipped it at those who had rescued me, and left them in peace.

The night, if indeed night still held sway beyond these walls, grew long and I had a single appointment yet to keep.

My journey through the labyrinth proved arduous, and several times I was seized by the very same throat seizures that had so threatened me previously. Each time I would stop and clutch my chest, heaving until I tasted blood. Thirst had begun to assert its urgent presence, and

I sought out pools of water, which occasionally dripped down from the marshes above, to quench it. Still, the steps up to the house itself eluded me.

Then, even as my exhaustion convinced me to seek a few hours rest, I came upon them, rising as steps to Heaven itself. I stood at their foot, gazing up their steep facade, and finally wept. I wept for my terror and my triumph, shedding tears that I could ill afford to lose. I wept until my nose and throat filled again and another fit of coughs threatened to finish me. My arm felt as heavy as lead from bearing the torch, and perspiration, which still soaked my limbs, now ran in thick rivers down my forehead and into my eyes. How then, could I still feel so terribly cold?

Finally, this last seizure passed and, on legs barely strong enough to support me, I ascended from the pit.

So it was that I rose forth from the darkened alcove and into one of the many chambers of Keep Monstresor. From the windows against the far wall I could see that night had not yet receded. All outside remained dark. But light was there. A lamp had been lit in a nearby chamber and, from within, I could hear the crackle of a fire. I turned and dropped my torch back down the stairs and then made my way in short, shuffling steps toward the threshold, vowing, despite my weakened state, to kill my tormentor with my own hands.

The portal stood partway open, and through its gap did I see Monstresor at his writing table, dressed in a fine velvet robe. In his hand, a pen busily scratched upon paper and his head was bent in concentration. He knew nothing of my presence.

I pushed open the door.

He turned abruptly, his eyes wide and blinking against the shadows that engulfed me.

“Who is there?” he called, his voice quivering slightly.

I did not answer, but only stepped forward, so that he could see me more readily by the firelight.

There are no words to describe the shriek that escaped his lips. His face grew white before my eyes and he rose from the stool so swiftly that it tumbled to the floor beside him. The quill in his hand snapped in his trembling fingers, raining soft down upon his slippers.

“Be gone from my house!” he cried.

“Monstresor,” I said, and stepped forward.

“A demon! A demon stands before me!”

“Monstresor,” I said again.

I reached out toward him, to seize him and pull him close. Yet he recoiled, pressing himself against the desk, his arms flailing. “Be gone from me!” he shrieked. “For the love of God!”

“Indeed,” I said. “For the love of God.”

Then, as I neared, Monstresor moaned and fell, his eyes so wide that I thought they might burst forth from his skull. He landed at my feet a corpse, clutching his chest beneath his robes. His hair, by the firelight, appeared as white as ash.

I looked down upon him, satisfied and yet perplexed. It was not until I turned, and saw my own visage reflected in the glass of a window, that the quality of his terror became clear to me.

What I had taken all this time for perspiration had, in truth, been my own blood. It filled my hands from a thousand rips in my flesh, and dripped to the floor beside me. My clothes, once

festive and colorful, no bore only that hideous crimson, and my shoes left their mark wherever I stepped. But my face! This was the worst! My head, as did most of the rest of my body, bore the marks of my torment. Blood had run down from a gash high on my forehead, smothering my face in hideous, ever-moving rivulets of color. Even the cap of bells, itself soaked with blood, hung limp upon my scalp, its two points jutting forward as a devil's horns. I looked as Death, himself.

It was as if I wore a masque for some autumn dance.

A masque of red death.

Repulsed, I turned away from my reflection, and happened to glance down upon the words Monstresor had been writing. It seemed a chronicle of sorts; an careful recounting of my very murder. The date, which he had placed upon the top of the page, struck me as a thunderclap.

This was not the night in which I had first entered the tomb. It was not even the night following. Two full days had come and gone as I had suffered in my agonies. It seemed suddenly clear to me that Monstresor had not received punishment enough.

At the bottom of the page, I read his final words:

“...I forced the last stone into position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones...”

For a long time I considered this. Then I reached down and took the remains of the quill from Monstresor's dead hand, wondering, as I did so, if he had yet arrived in Hell. If the devil bore whims half as cruel as my own, then my friend's fate at his hands should be horrendous

indeed. The thought bade me smile, as I dipped the pen in ink and wrote: “For the half of a century no mortal had disturbed them. In pace requiescat!”

So, did I resolve to find rest and, when I was ready, to take Monstresor down to his vaults and to leave him in the very fashion he had meant for me. Then, I would take this paper and be gone from here, and never tell of my coming or of my torments. If servants remained in this house, they had not, it seemed, heard their master’s death agonies. So I allowed myself until morning to do my work and be gone.

But first to rest.

I went to the hearth and sat upon a heavy chair. My blood soaked its linen, though I cared not at all. That would only deepen the mystery, which would please me greatly. Let him be wondered over, but never mourned. Yes, indeed.

A sifter of wine stood on the table beside me. I picked it up and, with the practiced gesture born of another life, sniffed and sampled its contents. As I did, a wicked smile touched my weary lips.

Of course: Amontillado.