

A Death by the Sea: excerpt

by Cooper Renner

By the time I finished a second coffee and another chapter of Trollope, my ankle was throbbing. I bought ice from the cafe and started with it for the Upper Barakka Gardens. Many of the shops were now closed for their afternoon siesta, and late lunchers and young couples were scattered on the benches. I shared a nook on the east side of the Gardens, partially shadowed by the walls of the promenade, with a shirtless old man sleeping off a drunk. While he drowsed in full sunlight like a lizard, his skin a sandstone counterpoint to the pale limestone of the roofless walls, I wedged myself into a darkened corner, warm but not livid, propped up my foot and swaddled it with ice-pack and towel. I had had enough of Trollope for the day and had not brought my laptop. Unable to work on my conference notes, I tried to organize my thoughts, outlining the second section of my lecture, puzzling over which young authors might best exemplify the points I wanted to drive home. But I could not concentrate. There was the pulsing in my ankle whose beat seemed to underlie the snips of conversation and laughter that came my way from the other visitors to the Gardens, as well as the steady thrum of the boats on harbor cruise. From this angle I could not see south across the harbor to Cospicua, but a hazy rectangle farther to the east might have been the temple-like frame of the Great Siege Memorial near the peninsula's end, just across the road from the Lower Gardens. Between me and them reared a half mile or so of blue sky to the right and, to the left, the weather-stained structures, mostly four- or five-story apartment buildings.

I began to imagine the shadows, so rectilinear, were arcing and flowing. I saw shoulders moving, the sinewy upper shoulders of wolves running in a pack, brown fur interwoven with black -- or was that only shadow too? Wolves cannot have been wild on Malta for

many decades, I told myself, and yet here they were, loosed and marauding in the Gardens, harming no one but clearly at hunt, searching for what? Or whom?

"Aye, sir, that is a nasty sprain," a voice said.

My head jerked up so quickly I smacked the back of it against the wall.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were sleeping," the man said. "Now you'll be swollen at both ends."

I put a hand to my skull and said, "I don't think I hit it that hard. A small knot maybe."

"I disturbed your nap." He was a concise figure, shorter than I and possibly even thinner, in a postal uniform.

I snorted. "Well, I hadn't intended to sleep at all. I guess the medicine --" I turned to lift my ankle from the bench. "Have a seat."

"No, no. You keep that ankle elevated. You'll need more ice soon. This has been a warm May and June."

I removed the ice-pack and towed the moisture from my leg and foot. "I just fell this morning. We have to wait for the swelling to go down before the doctor can cast it."

"So it's broken then? Sometimes breaks heal more quickly than sprains."

"Yes, they do. Are you sure you won't sit? I need to get up in a moment anyway. More ice at least, and maybe I should just return to the guest-house anyway and have a proper nap."

He glanced at his watch. "I've got a quarter hour more. Why don't I get you some ice?"

"Only if you'll let me buy us both a drink as well."

He grinned. "Bargain. What will you have?"

"Any kind of soda but Kimmie." I pulled a few bills from my wallet and handed them to him. "Get yourself whatever you like."

"Very good. I'll return soon. The kiosk is only across the park."

Again the kindness of the Maltese impressed me. It was not a showy display -- indeed I suspect many tourists who came only for a day off a cruise ship never saw it at all. Many Maltese almost barked rather than spoke, an effect of living closely together, fighting the

persistent noise of the traffic as they sat out on their sidewalks, only inches from the passing cars, or at the outdoor cafes and kiosks overlooking the splash of the Mediterranean waves. A noisy people, yes; brash and belligerent sometimes; but still blessed with a slow enough sense of time to offer a hand to a stranger in discomfort.

"So what did you do?" the clerk said, coming back with a bottled soda and a fresh bag of ice in one hand and a steaming paper cup of coffee in the other.

I poured the water from the pack and poked in the fresh ice, then wrapped the damp towel around it. "I was on my way to Caffe Cafe -- down past the Co-Cathedral, you know -- passing on the east side of the church. I looked back for just a second and stepped right into one of those storm drains."

"Those damned drains," he said. "Tourists fall in them all the time."

I grunted. "I thought I heard someone say something in German no less, about a wolf hunting a butterfly. Something like that."

His eyes narrowed, but he laughed. "It sounds like one of Aesop's fables."

I agreed. "When the wolf hunts the butterfly, the cubs go hungry. How's that for a moral?"

"You should write it!"

"I think I'm already dreaming it. The painkillers. When you woke me, I was dreaming I saw a pack of wolves running across the Gardens searching for --" I shrugged.

"Wolves in Valletta! That would be something. They should have been here during the Great Siege. We could have eaten them."

"But you're not old enough --"

"No, no. But my mother and father -- especially my father -- have told me stories. There is still a lot of anti-British feeling among some Maltese, but when those ships arrived in the harbor, after Malta had been bombarded for years already, everyone loved the Brits except the Nazi pilots who'd tried to stop them. Most of the ships didn't make it, you know."

"Yes. It's a powerful exhibit at the museum."

"Yes, it is. As tiny and poorly kept as the museum is, it tells a frightening part of our history and does it very well." He slapped a brown hand against the bench next to my ankle. "Well, young man, it's back to work for me. Tend that ankle."

"Yes, sir, I will. Thanks for helping me out."

"Thank you for the coffee. And watch out for those wolves." He laughed and left me alone.

I finished the sweet cold soda, then got to my feet, adjusting the crutches to make it easier to hold the empty bottle and ice-pack. The drunk was gone, but there was a wet spot on the wall, as though he had taken a piss before he left. When had that happened?

I shook my head and made my hobbling way back to the inn.

