

Deduction in F sharp minor

by mazaher

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The black (gray? white?) shadow is thinner than air.

It seems to appear out of nowhere, a sprawling bunch of floating wisps; then it gets tighter, denser, knotting in on itself as it alights next to the fallen man. An image of long ragged wings folding.

There is blood on the ground, spouting in small bursts from a chest wound.

A broken breath.

A fading.

But another life is coming, quick and piercing like a rapier.

"Go away!" he shouts, and he claps his hands. "GO!"

He crouches on the wounded (dying?), his knees and arms on either side of the supine body, shielding him.

His eyes are pale and dangerous.

The shadow waxes, swirls of fog twisting like ruffled feathers.

"He'sss mine," it whistles, wind down a chimney on a winter night.

The man frowns.

"Hydrogenated succinonitrile, decarboxylated lysine. A touch of sulphidric acid. Surprisingly, a layer of vetivazulene-- not that it helps much. Piss off, you got bad breath."

"Mine. Like everybody elssse." The fog stretches forward, hovers on the fallen one. Stifling.

The shining one shivers, his head lowered between his shoulders like a weight has fallen on him. But his voice is clear and strong as he says:

"Not now. Now he's mine."

"What'sss *now*."

The hiss vibrates, strange reverberations of sound. "Momentsss all alike."

"Not for the living. Not for us. Come back later. Much later. I'm sure you know the meaning of *later*."

The mist gets whiter. It lowers on the two men, chokes the one alive with a burst of coughing, turns the breath of the dying to a heavy rattle.

"No," the bright one growls, and he straightens himself, kneels up, head high, arms open in offering. Searching for a face among the curls of fog. "Take me instead."

The fog thickens into a fistful of dark tangled strings, quivering like snakes.

"Alcestiss," it says, buzzing of electricity along live wires. "Alcesstis all over again, and iss that Admetus?"

"I am his Alcestis as I know I am his Admetus, and Apollo and Heracles if I need to be.

Whatever you do, old carrion crow, I'll track you down and get him back from you."

"Ah, yesss, you would. You'd try. Let'sss make a deal. You tell me where I have just been in thiss time you humans float in, and I let you go. For a ssshort while."

"How short?"

"Five yearsss."

"Make it forty-five and I'll tell you the last three places you've been. You let him breathe easier while I think. And when you'll come back, you *will* be kind to him."

"A hard bargain is thiss you're driving, human. No game of chesss. And what if you fail?"

"You take us both."

"It'sss a deal. Now tell me."

The man stands up.

"Well," he begins "it's obvious..."

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Note: reference is made in the title to Angelo Branduardi, *Ballo in fa diesis minore* (listen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3UGmsy94_A).