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Under a Sky More Fiercely Blue
by Laura Resnick
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Fictionwise Contemporary
Alternate History

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In July of 1943, the Allies invaded Sicily, and the Fascist government toppled five weeks later. Despite two decades of decline under Fascism, the Sicilian Mafia quickly stepped into the power breach -- with notable help from the Americans.

Charles "Lucky" Luciano, who was serving a thirty year prison sentence in America, was paroled in 1946 due to his "extensive and valuable aid to the Navy during the war." The most powerful figure in organized crime, he was immediately deported to Italy, where he lived in reluctant exile until his death in 1962.

Luciano is officially recorded as having used his influence on the New York waterfront as part of a counter-intelligence effort to prevent anticipated sabotage by the Nazis. It is rumored, however, that he did far more than that. Although Luciano denied it until his death, legend has it that he was personally smuggled into Sicily in early 1943 to convince Don Calogero Vizzini and the Sicilian Mafia to assist the Allied invasion, in exchange for which they would be given the run of the island after the war.

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The almond trees were in bloom the day he fell out of the sky. Their blossoms were puffs of pale pink, their appearance strangely similar to the round, sunburned faces of the German soldiers. My mother always said that the almond tree, the first of all trees to flower each year, was a symbol of hope. But in February of 1943, Sicily was a place where hope had been eaten alive by foreign invaders. And not just the Germans; the Nazis merely stole whatever the Fascists neglected to take.

We ate what little was left over, rations which were not fit to feed a rat -- and which were barely plentiful enough to sustain one, anyhow. All that winter, oranges were our main sustenance. And so at thirteen, I was a small, skinny boy with sunken eyes and sallow skin. How pathetic and sickly I must have looked to him, a man who had lived like a king in the gold-paved streets of America.

At first, I ignored the airplane as it soared above the ancient hills of Western Sicily. But when the parachute blossomed under a sky more fiercely blue than any other, my heart burned like the heart of a fire, and I hid behind some rocks to watch its slow descent. I knew that a solitary man falling out of the sky and landing secretly in this rocky, barren landscape could only mean one thing: the Allies had finally sent someone to Sicily.

Of course, one man was not an army, and I quickly began to suspect that _this_ man was not even a soldier. He fell to earth with a harsh crash and

cursed fluidly in Sicilian dialect as he rolled downhill, getting tangled up in his parachute. I watched as he finally fought his way out from beneath its folds, rose stiffly to his feet, and gathered the billowing heap of silk into a careless bundle which he then hid beneath a prickly pear. That made me grin, for I knew no Germans would want to look for it there; I had seen them howl like children after trying to pick the sweet fruit of the *_fico d'India_*.

Having hidden the parachute, he retrieved the small knapsack he had dropped upon landing and looked around, as if trying to guess where he was. Who knows how different the shape of my life might have been, had I stayed hidden and let him go his way? But I realized that he was Sicilian, despite his foreign clothes, for such things are clear to the ear and the eye. I was a more curious boy than my mother had taught me to be, and, hoping the stranger had food with him, I cautiously came out of hiding.

He was as alert as a wild animal, for he fell to the ground, rolled away, and drew a pistol out of nowhere in one smooth, swift movement. I crossed myself and tried, with a dry, sluggish tongue, to confess my sins before God.

"Holy shit," he said in English, and I frowned at the strange sound of the words. "A kid."

He rose slowly from the ground and looked around again, more carefully this time.

"Are you alone?" he asked. His Italian was guttural, like my mother's. I nodded. "Where's your father?" he demanded, as if he supposed I was lying.

I found my voice. "Dead."

"Ah. Then where are your brothers?"

I was silent until he cocked the hammer of the gun. "Marco and Rosario are dead. Tommaso has been in Africa since 1938." I looked at the ground and admitted, "He might be dead, too."

There was a long silence between us, and it grew so heavy that I finally looked up. Our gazes locked, and I couldn't have looked away if my life had depended upon it. In that moment, his eyes were as cold and flat as a snake's, utterly indifferent to my youth and my fear. I did not tremble or beg for mercy, for I had been raised to be a man; but I know that I could throw myself into the fires of Mount Etna more easily than I could face a look like that again. If I live another century, I will never forget the expression in his eyes as he decided whether or not to kill me.

Finally, perhaps seeing how harmless I was, he lowered the pistol.

"What's your name?"

"Toto."

"Short for Salvatore?" When I nodded, he smiled beguilingly and said, "That used to be my name, too."

"Used to be?"

He nodded. "Salvatore Lucania. But I changed it." He stuck the pistol into the waistband of his trousers, at the small of his back where it was hidden by his dull brown jacket. "Where are we, Toto?" he asked.

I stared at him without responding, for nothing is given away lightly in Sicily, least of all knowledge.

"Jesus," he muttered at last. "Welcome home, Charlie."

He sat down on a rock, pulled out a packet of cigarettes, and lit one. I crept closer and looked at the packet.

"Want one?" he asked.

I shook my head but said with interest, "American cigarettes."

His eyes went cold again, and I looked down rather than be caught in his web. A moment later he laughed softly, startling me. "Yeah, I know. Not too smart, if I get caught with these on me. But fuck it. Nobody is pushing me out of a goddamned airplane and dropping me into fucking Villalba without a pack of cigarettes."

"This isn't Villalba."

"Well, they weren't just going to drop me into the main piazza for all the Germans to watch, kid." He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, then asked,

"How far away are we?"

I shrugged.

"Fucking typical." He looked disgusted. "Look, I'll make it simple for you. If you started walking right now, how long would it take you to get to Villalba?"

I shrugged.

"Guess!" he snapped.

"A long time, I suppose. I heard once that Villalba is almost thirty kilometers from Caltanissetta, which is already a long walk from here."

"What?" He looked at me strangely. "What is the name of your village?"

I looked away again, for I knew better than to answer anyone's questions, particularly the questions of a stranger. But then, he was not just any stranger. He had fallen out of the sky to land at my feet, and he had chosen not to kill me.

"My village is Serradifalco," I said at last.

"_Porca miseria_!" He threw his cigarette to the ground and put his head in his hands. "Can't those assholes get anything right?"

"They were supposed to drop you near Villalba?" I guessed.

He nodded. "Goddammit! And people wonder why it took those bastards twenty years to catch me! Hell, they didn't even catch me -- the motherfuckers set me up." He sighed and lit another cigarette. A fresh one, not the good one he had thrown to the ground. Such waste amazed me.

"You were sent by the Americans," I said. "But you are not American."

He didn't agree, and I saw then that, unlike my neighbor Signor Cataldo, this was a Sicilian who had never intended to come back home. He closed his eyes and admitted, "I was born here. In Lercara Friddi."

"Then they should have sent you to Lercara Friddi, so your family could help you."

That made him grin. "You could say I've got family in Villalba, too."

"Oh." I thought it over. "If you're going to Villalba, you'll have to be very careful. The soldiers are very strict."

"I'll need help."

"You're a stranger here. Who will help you?"

His smile was more subtle this time, as if I had said something very naive. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

He said it formally, in good Italian -- *_Lei non sa chi io sono_*. His tone almost made a joke of it, because he was confident that if my eyes had not been so dazzled by the spectacle of his parachute, I would have seen immediately, as anyone could see, that he was a man of respect. A friend of the friends -- *_un amico degli amici_*. My face flushed with shame at my foolishness.

"You are of the Society," I whispered, afraid to say it aloud. Then I frowned. "You live in America?"

"Well, that remains to be seen." His voice was rueful.

"Born in Lercara Friddi..." It was as if the Madonna whispered his name in my ear then, for I knew instantly who he was. My throat filled with awe as I cried, "Luciano!" Then, horrified that I had thrown his name so carelessly to the wind, I clapped a hand over my mouth and backed away.

"Hey, it's okay, kid, calm down. If there's any spot in Italy more godforsaken and lonely than this, I'd be surprised. No one heard you."

I let my hand drop and continued to stare in wonder. "*_Luciano_*," I breathed. "*_Il capo di tutti capi_*."

"Cut that shit out." He shook his head and grinned again. "Ain't you heard, Toto? I modernized things in America. We don't do things the old way anymore. There's no boss of all bosses. I'm more like a chairman of the board."

I bit my lip, embarrassed at my indiscretion. No matter how they did things in America, there were many things which we never even said out loud in Sicily. This was my first encounter with such a powerful man, and, wishing to make a good impression, I searched for something to say. "Signor Cataldo

returned to our village the year before the war started," I told Luciano. "He was in America for twenty years and came home a wealthy man. He owns a car."

"Uh-huh."

He was clearly unimpressed. I decided not to mention the signore's other fabulous possessions, and said only, "He has told us many tales about you."

"Oh?" Luciano didn't bother to look at me, but I could tell he was interested now. What great man does not enjoy hearing his own legend repeated and embellished?

"Signor Cataldo says that by the time you were eighteen, you were already a man of respect. He has told us stories of the Night of the Sicilian Vespers and other great victories. And once, your enemies attempted to kill you, but by a miracle of God, you survived; the knife left a scar on your face, and you bear a new name in honor of it. It's... an American word."

"Lucky. Charlie Lucky Luciano."

"Yes. Signor Cataldo says that while still a young man, you organized all the... the friends in America, and you became the most powerful man in the whole country."

He grinned. "Not quite, kid. Just the most powerful man among my friends."

"Oh." I frowned. "But why did the Americans drop you out of the sky? Don't they want you anymore?"

He actually laughed, and the expression on his face made me remember the tales Signor Cataldo had told of Luciano's legendary charm. Finally, still looking amused, he said, "They sent me to do a job for them, a job nobody else can do."

"You're going to kill the Nazi capo!"

"Hell, no. That kind of thing is for soldiers -- jerks who run around happily killing each other for a dollar a day."

"But if anyone could kill him, you could," I insisted, forgetting my manners, relishing the thought. How I hated the Germans!

He shook his head. "We don't need to kill no Germans, kid. The Allied soldiers are coming here to do it for us. Soon, too."

I sat down on a rock, not sure what to think. The old men in my village had argued ferociously about this for months. Some longed for the invasion we all believed the Allies were planning, for Sicilians had suffered under the Fascists and Nazis for so very long. But, officially, we were Italians, part of the Axis, so the Allies were our enemies. Moreover, the Nazis and Fascists would not give up Sicily without a fight, and many of us might well be killed in the battle the great powers would wage for control of our country. Given a choice between the invaders who ruled us and the invaders we awaited, who could say which was the greater evil? We all knew that Roosevelt and Churchill, like Mussolini and Hitler, made their plans without concern for us, our families, or our empty bellies.

I asked the only important question. "Will this end the war?"

"The invasion?" Luciano shrugged. "They expect it to, but not right away. This is still a long way from Rome, kid. Not to mention Berlin."

"My mother says that Rome is on the other side of the moon."

He squinted against the harsh sunlight and looked around. "She's right." His voice was bleak.

"So if you're not a soldier, why are you here?" I had by now asked him more questions in a few minutes than I had asked anyone else in a year.

"The Allies want to save their strength for the mainland battles they'll have to fight. They want a warm welcome here, so they won't lose too many soldiers at such an early stage. The Americans sent me because they want help from my friends."

"But such friends are..." I tried to think of a phrase that would not insult him. It wasn't easy, for power is everything to such men, and theirs had been stripped away like flimsy garments. "Many such friends have been jailed, and others, though they are respected, have little, um... The Fascists

changed many things here," I concluded awkwardly. "Your friends may not be as influential as they once were."

"So I've heard. But nothing ever changes that much. Especially not here."

"So you are going to Villalba to see Don Vizzini?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "You know him?"

I shook my head. "But everyone knows of him. A man like you would have no other reason to go to Villalba."

"Toto, do you know someone reliable? Someone who can take me to Vizzini?"

Suddenly excited, imagining myself in a heroic scene, I said, "I can take you!"

"Forget it. You're a kid. Anyhow, you've never been to Villalba."

"You'd have trouble finding anyone in Serradifalco who's older than me and younger than my grandfather. Trouble, too, finding anyone in my village who has been to Villalba."

"What will your mother think when you don't come home?"

I had thought he would ask, since no man, not even a man like Luciano, ignores his mother's wishes. "When I come home, she will be proud if I can tell her I helped you."

"But think of how she'll suffer until then."

"She has suffered before," I said with the callousness of youth.

"Since she lives here, I don't doubt it." He rose to his feet. "Are you sure you can take me to Villalba without getting caught?"

"For three years I have stolen fuel and meat from the soldiers without getting caught. I've smuggled cheese and grain through these mountains to my family, and I've traded on the black market." Pleased that he seemed to take my accomplishments seriously, I concluded, "I can get you to Villalba safely."

He agreed to let me guide him, and we set off toward Villalba. As the hours passed, I discovered that he enjoyed conversation, though he preferred to ask questions rather than answer them. I explained that, when he appeared, I had been on my way to the estate of a latifondista -- a landowner -- to steal a sheep.

"Of course, many latifondisti are not as wealthy as they once were," I said as we followed a dry riverbed through the hills, heading north. "First the Fascists, then the war... Still, they are richer than we are, and I think this one can certainly spare one sheep for my family."

"There's just you, your mother, and your grandfather now?"

"Yes. And my grandfather is very ill, so it's my duty to make sure we have something to eat."

I could see that he was no longer a young man, and he obviously wasn't used to hiking through rough terrain, but he didn't complain or ask to rest. Nevertheless, out of respect, I slowed my pace when I saw he was tiring. We stayed far from the roads, of which there were very few anyhow, and encountered no soldiers. When the sky began to darken, we decided to find shelter. Whenever I travelled by myself, I slept outside and ate what my mother had packed for me, since no one would want to shelter or feed a strange boy from another village. But sheltering a man like Luciano would obviously be another matter.

"We will stay the night with contadini," I said. "They will give us something to eat."

"Peasants? Do you think they'll have anything to eat?"

"For you, they will find something," I said with confidence.

Just as night descended, we stopped at a stone dwelling perched atop a parched and stony hill. As we approached it, the door opened and a man greeted us with a lupara. My blood ran cold as I looked down its barrel and thought about how a simple movement of his finger could rip open my flesh. But the man, whose name was Piersanto, put aside the lupara when Luciano spoke. His words revealed nothing, except that we needed food and shelter and could pay for it. But his tone, his proud stance, his aura of command... Well, even in

the dark, this miserable contadino could see what kind of man Luciano was. He welcomed us into his home then, silent, unsmiling, respectful, a little afraid.

Piersanto, his pregnant wife, their three surviving children, a donkey, a goat, and four scrawny chickens all lived together in one dark room with a dirt floor.

"Jesus," Luciano muttered. "Jesus, I'd forgotten." I looked at him questioningly, but he only repeated, "I'd forgotten."

The bread was brown, coarse, and dry, and the minestrone was thin and strangely bitter. And the oranges, which I had grown to hate anyhow, were bitter, too, as if no sweetness could enter Piersanto's home. Still hungry, I curled up in a smelly corner, with Luciano's jacket thrown over me, and fell asleep on the hard ground as he enjoyed a cigarette with our host. When we departed before dawn, Luciano left behind a yellow silk kerchief with a black "L" on it, as a mark of his favor. Who knew what respect, what advantage, Piersanto or his sons might someday gain through ownership of this souvenir?

We encountered two priests that day, and many people saw us enter Villalba that night and approach Vizzini's home, but it didn't worry either of us. Although we didn't wish to flaunt our presence or be seen by soldiers, we had no fear of betrayal. Even those who hated Vizzini would cut out their own tongues before they would reveal Sicilian matters to outsiders, strangers, foreigners.

We were spotted by Vizzini's men long before we reached the gates of his house, and the first man to recognize Luciano couldn't have looked more surprised if he'd seen the Blessed Virgin standing there in the chilly night air. Upon being told who wished to pay him a visit, Vizzini himself came outside and greeted Luciano as a father would greet a son. As a sign of trust, Luciano was permitted to enter the don's home without being searched for a weapon, though they must surely know he had not come without one.

Vizzini's house was the grandest place I had ever seen, though I suppose it looked humble to Luciano. Vizzini himself was already quite old, a fat, wrinkled man with thick features.

"And who is this?" he asked Luciano, upon noticing me.

I returned his gaze boldly, feeling my own importance. I had guided Lucky Luciano through the mountains!

Luciano introduced me and added respectfully, "Toto's father and brothers were killed in the war. He's the man in his family, now."

I looked up at Luciano and started to say that my father and brothers hadn't been killed in the war, but Vizzini was speaking again, his voice too loud and rumbling for my own thin one to be heard. Then the don guided us into the kitchen and offered us food, and I forgot about everything except the gnawing pain in my belly.

Luciano grinned as I fell upon the bread and pasta like a ravening wolf, swallowing before I had chewed, taking huge bites before I had swallowed.

"Careful, kid, or it'll come right back up."

I didn't care. The taste of last night's bitter meal had fouled my mouth all day, and the sauce I was eating now was spicy and delicious -- almost as good as the sauces my mother could prepare if the ingredients were available.

"Only at Easter, once a year, do we eat like this," I sighed, shoving more pasta into my mouth.

A woman -- Vizzini's wife, I supposed -- fussed over me then, putting more food within my reach, taking off my cap and ruffling my dirty hair, remarking on how thin I was. I tried to smile politely and thank her for this feast, but my hands could not seem to stop reaching for more. Fresh green salad, olive oil, cheese, thin slices of prosciutto! It was a banquet of ecstasy.

I was finally full when Vizzini sent the woman out of the room, but I continued to slowly savor the sweets she had given me, sitting quietly in the

shadows as the two men talked.

"Do you like the cannoli, Toto?" Vizzini asked jovially. I nodded, and he grinned. "All boys have a sweet tooth, eh?"

I nodded again, my mouth too full to respond, but I suddenly remembered another boy with a sweet tooth. The previous year, my family had travelled all the way to Agrigento, the farthest from home I had ever been, to celebrate Easter with my mother's sister. I remembered walking past the bakery and seeing a boy, perhaps eight or nine years old, being thrown out of the shop by the baker for having attempted to steal some sweets. The boy stood crying in the street as a man came out of the bakery carrying a box of cannoli. He was fat and well-dressed; a man such as Vizzini, a man of respect. The boy threw himself at the man's feet and begged for something to eat. Even at Easter, his family had no money for sweets, and he pleaded for one, just one of the man's precious cannoli. The man hit him and walked away, never looking back to see the boy's tears, or the blood which gushed from his nose.

I suddenly wondered, as I sat in Don Vizzini's kitchen amidst the remnants of that meal, why did they always seem to have enough to eat, while the rest of us went hungry? Why was Vizzini's wife plump and nicely dressed, while my own mother wore rags and grew thinner every day? Why did they have hot and cold running water in their houses, while the rest of us had to carry water home from public fountains which often ran dry?

I continued to chew, but the creamy ricotta cheese and crisp pastry lost their sweetness and grew bitter on my tongue.

"I thought you were in jail," Don Vizzini said to Luciano, now that his wife had left them alone. "Did you escape?"

"No."

"You can't mean to say the Americans simply let you out? They sentenced you to thirty years!"

"The war has a way of changing the best laid plans. Hadn't you noticed? The Americans called a sit-down and came up with a deal. If I help them out with their war, they'll let me go free."

I listened in surprise, for Signor Cataldo had neglected to mention that the great Luciano had been imprisoned in America. I was astonished that the Americans, whom everyone knew were very strict about such things, had actually released him. I wondered why they had sent him here alone, without a guard. Didn't they know he could disappear forever in Sicily? Not even his enemies would betray him to foreigners.

"They said they'd free you? Let you go back to your business?" Vizzini stared at Luciano, clearly torn between amusement and disgust. "And you believe that? Have you grown stupid over the years?"

"You don't know the Americans. I do. They keep their word, even to guys like me."

"And how do they expect you to help them with the war?"

Luciano removed his pistol from the waistband of his trousers, laid it on the table between us, and leaned back in his chair, looking relaxed and confident. "I started off by using my influence on the New York waterfront to prevent Nazi sabotage. That got me a reduced sentence." He swallowed some more wine. We had not had wine in our house since my oldest brother's wake. "Then they came to me with another deal."

The proposition was simple, and it was clear why they had chosen Luciano. What other man in America had his connections? What other man from that country could wield such influence here?

"You help them out, you make sure the population of Sicily offers them no resistance," he said to Vizzini, "and they will return the favor."

Vizzini listened as Luciano outlined the promises of the Americans, who were offering to hand over the country -- our country, my country -- to Vizzini and others of his kind, the very men who had controlled Sicily before the Fascists had taken over. Special privileges, control of the black market, official government positions -- whatever these friends of Luciano's required, the Americans would give to them, provided they used their influence to ensure

civilian cooperation during the invasion.

I knew without being told that Luciano's friends would willingly assist the Allies, if for no other reason than that they were all passionately anti-Fascist, many of them having spent years in Mussolini's jails. The promises which Luciano was making on behalf of the Americans were merely added inducements.

The cannoli seemed to turn to paste in my stomach as I stared at Luciano. He wasn't a great man in America, I realized. He was just a criminal, not a warrior or a hero. And the Americans had thought it appropriate to send a criminal here to speak on their behalf, as if there were no Sicilians worthy of negotiating with a real American hero.

And, as Luciano spoke with Vizzini, I realized that, worse than being a criminal, he was also a fool. He truly believed that the people who had dropped him into German-occupied Sicily were going to take him back to America after the battle was over and let him return to his former life as "chairman of the board." Vizzini knew it would never happen, but he made only one attempt to tell Luciano, for, in the end, a man believes what he chooses to believe.

I realized then how clever the Americans were. Of course they could send Luciano here alone -- they knew he had no desire to remain in Sicily. His longing to return to America was so evident in his face, it almost made him look like a child. And, if he failed to fulfill his bargain with the Americans, they could simply betray him to the Nazis, who would hunt him down like an animal; it would simultaneously waste German resources and make Luciano's life a misery. Yes, the Americans had left Luciano very little choice when they made their agreement with him.

Having listened to Luciano, Vizzini finally said, "I feel certain I can accept on behalf of all our friends. Do you have some way of notifying the Americans?"

Luciano nodded. "They'll be waiting for my signal. Two days from now."

"And then you'll leave?"

"God, how I would love to! I can't stand this shit-hole, and I should daily bless my father for having emigrated. But, unfortunately, it's a lot easier to drop someone off in hostile territory than to pick him up again. I'm stuck here until the American forces arrive."

My eyes clouded as he spoke, and my heart grew heavy. He was not the only fool, I realized. I had seen yesterday that he had no love for this devastated land, but I had thought nothing of it. After all, which of us had not cursed the merciless sun, the dry river beds, the rocky hills? Which of us had never longed to leave the certain poverty of life here for the riches which awaited a man in America? But, like my father and grandfather before me, I had, deep in my heart, continued to love Sicily throughout every moment that I hated her for draining away my life before it had even begun.

And here was a man who didn't love her, who had clearly never loved her, and he spoke on behalf of men who had never even seen her, but who were now deciding her future.

"I'll have to get to the coast," Luciano told Vizzini.

"Will you need a guide?" Vizzini asked.

Luciano smiled at me. "No, I don't think so. I have a feeling this kid can get me just about anywhere, and he's a lot less conspicuous than any of your men. You think we could pass for father and son?"

Only that morning I would have been honored to pose as Luciano's son, but now I found the idea distasteful. "No," I said rudely. "Anyone can see you're an outsider."

He looked at me in surprise for a moment, then turned his attention back to Vizzini. My father and brothers would have been ashamed of me for speaking to Luciano like that. But then, they were dead, and I couldn't afford to worry about what they would have wanted me to do.

Luciano and Vizzini continued to make plans, deciding whom they should contact, which men should be placed in which positions, and which commodities

they most wanted to control.

"It'll be like the old days," Vizzini said with relish.

"It can be better, if you plan ahead. Think big. You don't have to just milk the latifondisti and squash the peasants," Luciano said contemptuously. "Think like a businessman, like a politician. Once the Allies hand a little over to you, you can take the rest. Who's going to stop you? Not the Italians; they'll be busy losing the war. Not the Americans; they won't give a damn what happens here once they've begun their invasion of the mainland." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and said, "Listen to me. You can own this whole damn island if you use your heads."

And when would we own it, I wondered angrily. If the Americans kept their promises to the friends of the friends -- and, as Luciano had pointed out, they had no reason not to -- nothing would change for people like my family. When the war ended, there would be a little more food, but no more than there had been before the war had started. As much as I hated the Fascists and the Germans, I suddenly hated the Americans more. The old men who said that none of the great powers cared what might happen to us during the battle for Sicily didn't know the half of it. We were worth less than dust to them.

I wished hotly that the Americans would never invade, even if it meant living under German occupation forever. But then, a thought occurred to me. What if the Americans arrived and found that Luciano had failed? What if they couldn't find Vizzini, the capo di tutti capi, and didn't know who else to contact? Without organized cooperation from the amici, the battle for Sicily would be longer and bloodier, but perhaps the Americans would drive out the Fascists and Germans and leave Sicily to the Sicilians -- for the first time ever.

I felt the hand of God on my shoulder, the whisper of His breath in my ear. This was my destiny. This was why Luciano had fallen out of the sky to land at my feet, why he hadn't killed me when he'd had the chance, why he had taken me with him to Vizzini.

Vizzini went to a cupboard and pulled out a map of Sicily. Luciano rose from his chair and rounded the table so that he and the don could study the map together. As terrified as I was, I knew this was another sign. He was making it so easy for me, I knew that I had to do it. I stared at the two men, willing my hands to move, feeling my dinner churning in my stomach as I pictured the act in my mind.

Luciano glanced up, as if he felt the intensity of my gaze. He studied me speculatively, his expression slightly puzzled.

Vizzini finally looked up, too, and smiled lazily. "You're listening with interest, aren't you, Toto? You're a smart boy, and brave. Some day, you will be one of us. Would you like that?"

I shook my head slowly. "I don't think so. My father was one of you, and that's why he's dead."

Luciano straightened, holding my gaze. "Your father was of the Society?"

I nodded. "And my brothers, Marco and Rosario. Not important men. Not rich men, like you. We were always poor. But they were men of honor. Of loyalty."

I think Vizzini guessed the truth before Luciano -- maybe because they did things differently in America. Vizzini said, "They didn't die in the war, did they?"

"No."

"Did the Fascists kill them?" Luciano asked very quietly.

I shook my head again. "Vendetta."

Luciano's eyes grew cold and wary. "Why are you still alive?"

"I killed their killers." To my shame, my voice broke as I remembered the explosion of the lupara, the men's abrupt screams, the splattering of shattered bone and mangled flesh, the stench of blood and death. "They were the last ones. There's no one left in my village except women and children and

old men. Now it's over. We would leave, but my brother Tommaso might be alive. He might come home from the war someday, and I don't know how he would find us if we left."

Luciano's eyes flashed uneasily to the pistol which lay on the table, so near to me, so far from him.

"I can't leave," I said.

"Toto..." Luciano said slowly. "We could -- "

"No! It's over." I picked up the pistol before he could move. "No more." My hand shook as I cocked the hammer. "You want to make us all live that way, your way, my father's way." I shook my head and whispered, "No."

"Toto." Luciano's voice was commanding, threatening. He took two steps toward me.

"Stop!" I shouted.

I smelled their blood even before I shot them. I think they both died from the first two shots I fired, for I had a good aim and they were only a few feet away, but I kept pulling the trigger until the chamber was empty. Then I dropped the gun and was instantly, violently sick.

It's a miracle that I escaped the house alive, but I was a small, pathetic-looking boy, and I doubt if Vizzini's men realized that I, and not an intruder, had killed both men until long after I had slipped out of the window and melted into the darkness.

I disappeared into the hills, stole a sheep two days later, and returned home to my mother, who clutched me so fiercely I could scarcely breathe, then beat me for being gone so long with no explanation.

The Allies invaded in July of that year, and there was such confusion and chaos that the battle for Sicily took over three months. Palermo and Messina, as well as many villages, were devastated by Allied bombing, and we were left to clean up the mess by ourselves; since the invasion of Sicily had taken twice as long as expected, the Allies were practically running after the retreating Nazis in order to make up for lost time and to adhere to the plan for the Allied offensive on the Italian mainland.

Tommaso did survive the war, and he eventually came home. He had been a prisoner of war in Kenya since 1939. Although the experience had taught him to hate the British bitterly, he had fallen in love with Africa. He stayed in Sicily only long enough to marry his childhood sweetheart, then he took her back to Kenya where he started farming.

After my grandfather died, I took my mother to live in Palermo, leaving behind Serradifalco and its bitter memories -- as well as Signor Cataldo and his enduring stories about the great Lucky Luciano and the gold-paved streets of America. I returned to school and eventually became the first man in my family to ever attend university. After receiving my diploma, I worked for the government as a civil engineer, developing modern methods of distributing water throughout Sicily, so that no ordinary man would ever again have to carry water home from a public fountain because the water supply was controlled by certain "friends."

I was still a young man when the Americans, for reasons known only to themselves, decided to seek out and prosecute Charles Luciano. They didn't have much luck, despite their repeated requests to the government in Rome to assist in Luciano's extradition from Sicily, where he had "escaped to" during the war.

Naturally, no one ever bothered to tell the officials from Washington or Rome that Luciano had been dead since 1943. They were, after all, outsiders.

-- The End --

* * * *

In July of 1943, the Allies invaded Sicily, and the Fascist government toppled five weeks later. Despite two decades of decline under Fascism, the Sicilian Mafia quickly stepped into the power breach -- with notable help from the Americans.

Charles "Lucky" Luciano, who was serving a thirty year prison sentence

in America, was paroled in 1946 due to his "extensive and valuable aid to the Navy during the war." The most powerful figure in organized crime, he was immediately deported to Italy, where he lived in reluctant exile until his death in 1962.

Luciano is officially recorded as having used his influence on the New York waterfront as part of a counter-intelligence effort to prevent anticipated sabotage by the Nazis. It is rumored, however, that he did far more than that. Although Luciano denied it until his death, legend has it that he was personally smuggled into Sicily in early 1943 to convince Don Calogero Vizzini and the Sicilian Mafia to assist the Allied invasion, in exchange for which they would be given the run of the island after the war.

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