

**Crimson Kingdom** is another mouth-watering short story come novella from Jaffa Forbes. Much like *The Three Magniloquents*, *Crimson Kingdom* follows the strange mix of past historic folk glory and beauty fused with a lurking darkness and horror.

Crimson Kingdom  
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### **Crimson Kingdom**

Across this vast landscape the thunder rolled. It felt like raw power, breaking like a wave over the island. From the uppermost town of Trapani to the lowest vineyards of Avola, the whole of Sicily was engulfed in a hot thundershower that had burst out of the sticky afternoon.

All day long Alesandro had been waiting for this, and now he stood, a thin, grimy stick of man silhouetted against the falling dimming lights of the day and the anxious folding black clouds. The rain was starting to pound heavier and it bounced off the rim of his beige trilby with a sudden menace. Time to go.

“Come, Villi,” he said to the man standing next to him, “We have a death sentence to pronounce.”

At a distance, Villiano was almost exactly the same as his partner; both tall, both thin, both with scrawny, lined faces and thick eyebrows, both with as many scars as they had veins in their body. The one difference between them was that Villiano kept a pair of gold rimmed spectacles that he wore periodically, depending on the nature of the assignment.

Today he took them off briefly and dried them with a pure white handkerchief, before neatly storing both the glasses and the handkerchief in the pocket of his suit and walking forward, across the deserted square to a lurching, imposing white stone building and clock tower on the other side. The thunder rolled.

“It is rather fitting,” started Alesandro, “That his current lodging is here.”  
“The old town prison, yes, quite fitting. Poor man though,” said Villiano, “He knows his time is up. Can you hear it?”

They were silent for a second.

“Hear what?”  
“That sound. The violin!”

Sure enough, from one corner of the brick prison was a small window from which came a small glowing light. A beautiful, heart piercing song came resonating from a violin. It was a solo from Carmen, an old folk song. It was cry of a dying man. It was the song a man plays about his life when he knows he is about to die.

“He is certainly very good,” said Villiano with appreciation.  
“It will soon make no difference,” replied Alesandro, “Remember what you are, Villi.”

As the two men, old but determined, made their way up the creaking winding wooden stairs of the old prison, the music filtered away.

“This is it.”

They twisted the door handle and pushed into the door. It was the first time both men had actually seen their target, apart from in photographs, and the first thing that struck them was that he was so young.

“Caravelli?” asked Alesandro.

The man was perhaps in his late twenties, he wore the clothes of a typical working harvester, brown slacks and braces with a white shirt. The room was sparse, with dirty, chipped almost grey bricks and little furniture. It was, however, surprisingly light thanks to the window, despite the clouds outside still hanging heavy and black. The man slowly put down his scratched, beloved violin.

“That is I.” he finally said.

“Don Vittorio is not pleased with you, Caravelli,” said Alesandro, “You should have done what he asked.”

“I was not in a place to follow his orders.”

“Why not?” burst out Villiano, “You are a young man. You have your life ahead of you. Why could you not have been kind to us?”

“My orders come from a higher place than Don Vittorio.”

“Who?” shot Alesandro sharply

“He is...” started Caravelli, but he stopped short of finishing his sentence and turned a deathly shade of white, “What? Who... Who are you?”

Villiano looked at the man carefully; had the pressure and stress of his inventible future haunted him to madness?

“I am Villiano,” he said, “And this Alesandro. You must...”

“No! Not you!” whispered Caravelli frantically, “Them! Them! Who are they?”

Caravelli was looking beyond them, to the darkest corner of the room, staring intently into nothing. Villiano looked at the corner whilst Alesandro refused to take his eyes of the target. There was nothing there.

“What is it?” asked Alesandro, “What did you see? There is nothing there, is there Villi?”  
“Nothing.”

Caravelli paused for a second and breathed, he seemed to regain some sense of decorum.

“I... I saw, clearly for a few seconds, two girls. Ladies. Young girls. One held a basket full of... They were just standing there, there amongst the shadows, watching me. Two

ladies wearing, one with a red skirt, the other with a blue one. They were smiling. Gently. Smiling.”

Villiano turned once more to the corner of the grey room where Caravelli had seen these two girls. As he suspected there was nothing there but an old spider tracing his way up the shadowed bricks. Nothing there but darkness.

“Do not play with us, Caravelli,” barked Alesandro, “You will pay for your ignorance. You know that. Do you fear death, Caravelli?”

“I do not fear it,” said the young man, “But for my shame, I did until just now. Until I saw those...”

“Ghosts?” said Villiano, “Many young girls must have died here, Caravelli, and you may well be following them.”

“Angels,” finished Caravelli, “Surely they are angels.”

There was a sudden flash of raw lightning. It lit up the room with an electric flame. They hadn’t noticed it, but the night had crept up on the three like a thief. Come to steal time for Caravelli perhaps.

The flashing light illuminated the pale, but strangely calm, features of Caravelli, and the grim determined faces of the two old men. It casts shadows of the three along the wall, creating three pseudo-characters, framed for a second in life.

Villiano’s eye was drawn for some reason past Caravelli himself, and out onto the white cobbled street, now fading into darkness and covered in a sheet of glossy rain.

“It’s them!” he said suddenly, “Them. They’re there; the girls!”

Villiano had seen them. Just for a second. Exactly like Caravelli had said, two girls, one holding a basket, one in a red dress, one in a blue dress. They had been standing under the gas streetlamp, but now they were gone. The one in blue. She had... she had blown a kiss up to the window. A kiss? Love? Here? Now?

“Where!” screamed Caravelli, immediately turning to the window, “They’ve gone!”

“Villi!” shouted Alesandro, “Come back here. What are you playing at? There’s nobody there. No ghosts!”

“Angels!” said Caravelli.

“He’s right!” said Villiano, “He’s right! We can not fight this, Alesandro, let’s leave!”

“NO!” screamed Alesandro, drawing his gun, “We finish this now!”

In one foul swift move Alesandro had grabbed the young man sternly by the throat. His grip was incredibly powerful despite his age. Its power made Caravelli start to turn a shade of blue.

“Alesandro!” screamed Villiano, “No!”

“There... there they are again!” croaked the young man, now choking.

Alesandro raised a pistol to his head. Villiano looked in panic at his companion. He turned quickly to the darkest corner. He screamed and fell backwards. There they were again!

The girl in the red dress was slightly older than the taller girl in the blue dress; it was she who held the wicker basket. They weren't pale reflections or see-through counterparts of real-life. They felt real. They were full of colour and life and smiling gently. What ghosts then were these? What forces were at work? Were they angels?

“Alesandro, no!” cried Villiano, “We must leave! We can't do this! He's haunted!”

“Villi...”

“NO, Alesandro!”

“Villi...”

Caravelli was shaking violently, but the overpowering force of the old man's grip would not let him breath.

“WE CAN'T!” shouted Villiano, and launched himself at his partner in desperation. The sudden force of the man threw Alesandro of balance and caused him to stumble back, letting go of his grip.

Caravelli collapsed to the floor in desperation for air.

There was a shot.

The young man gasped heavily and screamed, but it was Villiano who was clutching his chest.

“Alesandro!” he cried, “You fool...”

Alesandro staggered backwards at what he had done. The crimson blood was pouring from the deep black hole. The bullet was still sinking in as Villiano breathed his last.

“Nobody...” breathed Alesandro, “Nobody... gets in my way... nobody...”

“What have you done?!” cried Caravelli.

“And as for you...”

The pistol turned towards to the young man.  
Caravelli closed his eyes and said a prayer. He waited for the shot.

But it never came.

He slowly opened his eyes and saw Alesandro pale and more like a ghost than the two girls who were standing behind him, one either side.

Alesandro felt a cold, shiver run through his veins. It was like every muscle, every nerve, every vein was struck at the same time with a silver dagger. Everything froze. He couldn't think. He couldn't move.

Then came the breath. It came softly, tickling and rustling the ends of his grey hairs and wafting passed his ear lobes. It was the breath of a mother. It was the breath of a first love. It was the breath of hope... but it sent Alesandro's brain into confusion and fear. Fear. Something he had never known.

"Cursed..." he managed, "You're cursed..."

"Angels..." gasped Caravelli, but Alesandro had summoned the courage to move again and without looking back he stormed out of the door and down the stairs.

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Morning came for Caravelli.

It was not the beautiful morn, it was not a wonderful scene because a man was dead, lying in a pool of his own blood. He had died saving him. The irony struck him coldly, but he was beginning to even doubt irony itself.

He felt cursed to be still alive. He cried out to God, asking him why he was still alive, surely heaven would be better than this? And those angels...

And yet, he was alive. The blood was pounding through his veins. This must mean something. It had been a miracle; somehow Caravelli had been pulled back from certain death to life. He had been left alive for something.

Slowly, and with great care, Caravelli walked outside onto the square and started down a seemingly endless road that would indeed take him to his future; whatever that might be.

Fine