

THE PRICE OF IMMORTALITY
{a short story}
by Howard C. Dugan

Dead sat in his penthouse office, his fingers drumming a steady rhythm on the dark mahogany desk. The city below him stretched out, a maze of neon lights and endless streets, but he was no longer part of it. Not really. He'd transcended. Or so he told himself.

He had everything he could ever want - money, power, luxury - but there was something missing. Peace, maybe. Freedom. Dead had worked his entire life to get to this point, and yet, he had never felt more trapped.

His fortune had been built on the back of his friends, though he had always managed to stay just out of their grasp. They never quite had him. Not in the way they wanted. But the time was coming when that would change. He could feel it in his bones. His friends were getting close.

The phone on his desk rang, breaking his reverie. He picked it up without hesitation, already knowing who was on the other end. The voice was cold, mechanical.

"Mr. Dead,.". "It's time." (Dead smiled darkly.) "I figured you'd say that," he replied, his voice smooth, like the steel of a blade. "But I won't go down easy."

There was a pause on the line, then the voice spoke again, quieter this time. "We're sending someone for you. You can't hide forever. You owe us, Dead. All of it."

The line went dead, and Dead set the receiver down. He had known this moment was coming. His friends had never been content with half-measures. They wanted everything.

His life, his wealth, the very thing that made him who he was - he had stolen it from them once, and now they wanted it all back.

Dead rose from his desk, his eyes narrowing as he gazed out the window. The city below seemed alive, pulsing with danger, but he wasn't afraid. Not anymore. It was time to take his friends down.

His friends's emissary arrived in the dead of night - just as Dead had anticipated. A man named Vato Cosovich, tall and broad-shouldered, with eyes that gleamed like a predator's. He had been sent to bring Dead in, or better yet, bring his head back on a platter.

Vato knocked on the door of Dead's penthouse, his boots echoing in the empty hallway. No one answered, and yet, the door creaked open as though it had been waiting for him. His friends had underestimated Dead. As they always did...

Inside, the lights were dim, but Vato's keen eyes quickly adjusted. He moved through the spacious living room, taking in the lavish furnishings, the priceless art on the walls, the untouched crystal decanters.

Then, he heard the sound of something soft - a whisper - coming from behind him. He turned, drawing his gun in one smooth motion. Dead was standing in the shadows, his form barely visible. "You're too late," Dead said, his voice a low growl. "You think you're here to kill me? To take everything I've worked for?"

Vato smirked, the arrogance of his friends evident in his sneer. "You don't get to dictate the terms, Dead. Your time is up."

But Dead wasn't listening. He moved like a shadow, faster than Vato had anticipated. The next few moments were a blur of violence - Dead disarmed the man with a quick strike, sending the gun clattering across the floor. In one smooth motion, Dead drove his fist into Vito's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Vato staggered back, blood dripping from his mouth as he struggled to regain his footing.

Dead stood over him, cold eyes locked on his. "You were right about one thing," Dead said, almost matter-of-factly. "My time is up. But not in the way you think."

Vato looked up at him, confusion clouding his pain-stricken face. "I'm done running. I'm done hiding. You want me? You'll have to take everything."

And with that, Dead snapped his fingers. The walls of his penthouse cracked open, revealing the hidden passageways to an underworld sanctuary. His friends were coming, but Dead was ready for them.

Vato's eyes widened with realization, but it was too late. The trap had already been set. As Dead disappeared into the shadows, he finally understood what he had been searching for all this time. It wasn't the wealth or the luxury - it was freedom. A freedom from his friends, from the chains they had tried to place around his neck.

He didn't need their approval. He didn't need their fear. He was already dead to them. The only thing left was to live for himself.

And so, Dead disappeared from the world, his name lost once again to the underworld. His friends would search for him for years to come, but Dead would always be one step ahead, always in the shadows, always beyond their reach.

In the end, they didn't realize the one thing they had never understood: Dead was an immortal - not because he couldn't be killed, but because he just couldn't die dead enough...

{THE END}