

Lunetta

by Elizabeth Norton

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Would I still have done it, had I known how it would end?

We were coasting, spiralling downwards, ever faster, tragedy and ruin. Our stars were crossed: I should know, I had crossed them myself. I do not believe in fate. But I believe in my own heavy hand.

Behind me my gondolier slipped away, no sound except the lapping of water like whispered secrets against the side of the boat. I didn't beg him not to speak: he had his tongue cut out years ago, and it was my blessing.

The wooden door was pulled open. *Finalmente!* That voice: it coursed over my skin like holy water and washed the night off me. 'I thought you would never come,' she said.

'You say that every time,' I replied. 'And yet I always do.' She laughed, then pulled me through the door.

'That's true. You haven't disappointed me yet.' We reached our haven, a small room that had never known sunlight, and I bolted the door behind us. I fell into her arms. And whilst the moon wept radiant tears upon the canals of the city, we were one. We were incorporeal and blurred, an incandescent union.

We were so bright, I still wonder how we did not burn the city to the ground.

Or break the planet out of orbit.

Later, we lay tangled in each other, and the sheets of the bed.

'I have something to show you,' she said.

'As long as it involves you without clothes on, I am intrigued beyond measure.'

She laughed again. How I lived for that laugh, and the nights where it belonged: in the sticky summer heat, in candlelight, in that stone-and-wood room beneath the world. I watched her get up. She was soft, marbled-white, perfect.

She is not soft anymore. Her bones are desperate to escape her pale skin. She winces in the harsh daylight.

It hurts to look at her: it is like being jolted sharply awake.

From beneath the bed she withdrew a flat, rectangular object covered in a dusty sheet. Unease stirred within me.

‘My love, what is that?’

‘It is our future.’ She pulled the sheet away.

A painting, vibrant with colour, only made richer by the weak light. A naked woman lay across a seat with dark hair flowing behind her, a small bird perched on her outstretched hand.

‘No.’ It was the only word my lips could find. And then:

‘What have you done?’

‘What have I done? I have taken this from the people who have stepped over me my entire life, so that we can be together.’ She put the *Vendetti* down, missing from the wall of some nobleman’s home.

‘You stole it. You think we can just disappear and then sell it on? *What have you done?*’ I stood up, facing her from the other side of the tiny room, a chasm opening up between us.

‘*You said you wanted me!*’ She shouted, and it cracked me apart, tendon from muscle from bone. ‘And here I am, giving myself to you, giving us a future. But you have just been using me... All this time you visit me like a whore and return to your palace in the morning. You are a liar, and I am naïve for believing you.’

‘I have never lied to you.’

Had I lied to her?

My memories, they are weightless and wispy things: they fade in and out. I cannot hold them. They slip through my fingers like smoke. What did I say? What did she say?

What did I wish I had said?

‘You lie to me with every kiss. You have covered my body with your deceit.’

‘No, I have not. You know I would leave with you, if I could. But that painting is not our future. We are two women, and the world does not want to see us together.’

‘No. I finally understand: you do not want the world to see us together.’ She was terrifying, standing there before me, baring her body and soul. Candlelight flickered in her dark eyes.

She was so much more than her circumstances, and I was less than mine.

‘I do. I love you. But you must return the painting before they realise.’

‘No. Damn the world if it is not ready for us!’ Her angry words were somehow still soft, framed by those gentle lips. ‘I am tired. So, so tired. I cannot pretend anymore, that I am not poor and hungry. That the woman I love does not look at me with pity... And why wouldn’t she? You are the Doge’s daughter, and I am a sewer-rat.’

But she was wrong: I never pitied her. She was the shard of glass never blunted by the tides, never lessened or worn down. She glinted on the seabed, catching the only ray of sunlight, her edges distinct and sharp.

Intact, despite everything. Strong, despite everything.

I was weak. I am, still.

They did not knock when they came.

With the first kick on the door, she rose out of bed and pulled on her clothes, whispering an empty prayer. But who watched over us, in that damp room at the bottom of the world?

There was no struggle. She looked me straight in the eye, unflinching and unforgiving, as they dragged her away. Perhaps she was waiting for me to save her.

I could not move.

It ends here. With the crowds, in daylight and death.

Could I have backed away, and forgotten about the door in the alcove beneath the bridge?

No. There is no question, there is no forgetting. I could not stay away. I would go to the end of the earth to knock three times on that door, if I thought she might be waiting behind it.

In my dreams, she always is.

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