

Moretta
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Trigger Warnings: Blood, gore

Venice is especially hot during the summer. The sun heats up the canal until the top layer vaporizes, forcing the streets to sweat. It's hard to remember my first summer these days, but glimpses of my past creep into my mind when I sleep.

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The dampness in this cramped room I've been forced to call home seeps into my bones, draining any thought of movement from me. Leaving had never been an option, but back in the beginning, I would entertain the thought. Now the only way I believe I'll escape is through death. I imagine the canal rising, its water flowing through the small crack of my window that lets in some light at least. To drown would be a mercy, though I don't believe she'll ever willingly let me die.

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Pain sears through my wrists, which have been shackled for too long. Even if I got out, I don't think the skin under the metal will ever return to the softness it once had.

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My limited range of motion has me crawling in the space I could claim as my own. I have no need for shoes in my state, yet I still mourn the fresh leather of my boots and the dagger I once concealed in them—the items she took from me our first night together.

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I crawl on my knees to the small cot I've come to know as a bed and flop over, allowing exhaustion to sweep over me. She hasn't come down to check on me yet and I know she will before the night's over, but I wish for a few moments of dreams before I'm startled once again.

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Sweat coats my body, and it takes me a second to realize it's not my own, it's the canal's. For a moment, hope fills me, expanding from my heart and traveling through my limbs. The urge to run on calloused feet, to get out of this wretched town and never return to Italy fills my soul,

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but I cannot move my body. The yellow walls of the buildings on either side of me feel too close, their breath sliding down my spine, forcing me to shiver.

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My feet eventually move, though not due to my thinking. Trapped in the husk of a memory, I attempt to force my heels into the cobblestone —if not to stop myself, then at least to stumble. I never lose balance, I never falter. There is nothing I can do to stop what has already happened.

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Horror climbs through my throat, gripping my soul. I watch helplessly as my feet carry me down a path I never should've taken, around a dark corner, and toward a door I never should've knocked on. The wood bulges in its frame, not from the water seeping into it slowly, but from the secrets it holds back from the outside world. My arm raises, knocking once, twice, on the wood, just as the stranger in the marketplace told me to do. I wonder now if she had been in on it too, with all those strange masks she was selling, or if she was just passing on a town secret she couldn't keep.

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The door swings open and I climb up those too narrow stairs to a floor filled with strangers. Their chatter rises above them, hanging over their heads like a thick cloud. It's too loud to distinguish any real semblance of a conversation, but I make my rounds, trying to find a place to fit in, someone to acknowledge me. The candlelight of the chandelier warms the space just enough to see the general outline of everyone, but it's too dark with the shutters drawn, and my eyes have not yet adjusted to see detail.

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As I move closer to people, I can make out their words, but not their meaning. I should've brushed up on my Italian before descending, but it is too late to turn around now. I wanted so badly to take in the moment, to remember as many details as possible, so I could tell

my friends about my escapades once I returned to England. There are moments when I remember their faces, frozen in time from when I left them, and ponder if they ever thought to look for me.

Someone grips my shoulder, forcing me to turn and confront him. He says something to me with a wide smile, but I shake my head.

“I’m sorry, I’m not quite well-versed in Italian.”

“Ah, an Englishman. Please, join us for a round of cards,” he says perfectly in my mother tongue, his accent dripping off of each word like the beads of water sliding down the walls.

I find a place at the table with four other men, hoping the coins in my pocket wouldn’t disappear too fast, and that I could hold onto some of them for the remainder of my trip. The idea that I wouldn’t even know the game being played didn’t cross my mind.

Wine somehow finds itself in my stomach and oozing into my brain, casting the world in a glaze I find funny. Every word coming out of the mouths of the strangers around me forces a laugh from my diaphragm, and soon I have the room’s attention. Every pair of eyes is on me. My table abandons their cards as I am urged to tell stories of my adventures across Europe.

For emphasis on a story about how I crossed the Alps on foot, I jump onto the table, scattering the game I was obviously losing across the floor. None of the other players seem to care as I continue my ridiculous rant that would sound absolutely abhorrent to any sober person. But the need for attention from a crowd—a cockiness I had learned to wield five years ago at fourteen—gripped me, forcing the exaggerations out of my mouth and over the crowd.

Only when I am finished, ending with my arrival into Venice by a boat that had caught fire, and I take my bow, do I see her for the first time. She is on the edge of the crowd, half-concealed by shadow. Something deep in my soul is rattled.

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With hindsight, I realize the rattling was my intuition, forced upon me by the future that was about to unfold. Back then, I believed I was only startled by a custom I hadn't been aware of.

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The woman's face is concealed in some type of mask I have never seen before, covering everything but her eyes. Her two wide, round orbs of enticement gripped at my soul, forcing me to inquire about her, compelling me to find out more.

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I let gravity take me to the floor, and I seek out the friend who had invited me into the game. His head is deep in his cup, but I manage to snag his attention for a moment.

"That lady in the back," I say as I gesture to the spot in the crowd she is hovering in, "she doesn't have a face. It's only darkness where her features should be."

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"Right, you're not from around here," He nods as if I'm being silly. "A moretta wearer. There are a few reasons a lady would want to wear one, especially here. For one, it conceals her identity so her antics aren't repeated in scandal across town. But I've also heard it helps protect the skin so it doesn't shrivel beneath the harsh Venetian sun. She's smart to wear it here, she wouldn't want her father to find out about her gambling." He looks at her again, taking in her full expression and stance. "Seems as if she finds you interesting. Look," He gestures toward her face. "She seems hungry."

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I open my mouth to ask for more information, but in a blur of shifting bodies, he disappears into the crowd. Shrugging off the interaction, I push through the crowd in search of her.

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She's not hard to find, as she is in the exact place I last saw her. Her eyes lock onto mine; mystery and intrigue expressed only through the small windows of humanity I have access to.

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I greet her in Italian, introducing myself, and pray she speaks more than one language, as the extent of my knowledge is exhausted. But when she says nothing in return, only tilting her head a little to the left, I repeat myself in English. Once again, I am met with silence.

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“She’s a moretta wearer.” A man steps in, his accent revealing he is not from Italy either, but in my drunken state I do not care to wonder if he is Spanish or Portuguese. “She’s not going to respond.”

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“Why not?” I turn my attention to him, hoping the lady forgives my rudeness.

“The lady must bite down on a button on the back of the mask. That’s what keeps it in place. See?” He gestures to the sides of the lady’s head as she turns so I can see both sides. “No straps.”

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“So she’s forced into silence?” The absurdity of the design makes me scoff.

“Oh no, she is not forced to do anything.” The stranger laughs. “The mask is her choice. She may remove it whenever she wishes. It simply leaves a man longing for more—a powerful tool when it comes to courting.” He looks the lady up and down, a smile creeping across his face that unsettles even me.

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The lady waves him and his look away, and he disappears with a bow back into the thralls of the gambling den. Her wide eyes, which I now realize to be deep brown, meet mine, and for a moment the room goes cold, even with the suffocating heat of all the bodies and candles.

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She gazes up and down my body, and ever so slightly crooks her head to the side. When she meets my eyes again, there is a newfound hunger in them. It’s a subtle change—one I would’ve missed if I hadn’t been so enthralled by her resting state. I feel my heart begin to dance in my chest.

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With one pale, long finger, she beckons me into a dark corner I had not realized evolved into a twisting hallway. Joy and excitement flit through me as I follow her without hesitation.

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I look back once, just to see if anyone notices our departure and find another woman wearing a moretta mask staring at us from across the room. From this far away, I cannot tell the expression she has in her eyes. The woman I am following stops and follows my gaze. I watch as the two of them nod at each other, a silent passage of a message.

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The swishing of her dress echoes off the cavernous hallway, and I turn back to continue my journey with her. She leads me to a set of descending stairs that go deeper than the ones that had led me up to the den. I didn't believe Venetians had the proper land to build basements, but I shrug off any thought of confusion as she tempts me into a room with a small cot.

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I lightly sway into the room and begin to undo the buttons of my shirt as she shuts the door behind me. I don't stop my own actions even as I hear the clicking of a lock slide into place.

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With my shirt unbuttoned to show off everything I love about my body, I watch her with a newfound hunger in my throat as she saunters over to me, pushing me against the wall. She clearly has experience, and I stiffen at the imaginings of every pleasure she would surrender.

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I reach up and place my hands on either side of her face, on either side of her black velvet mask, gently cupping her head to tilt it up. "May I?" I ask as a pinky slides between the mask and her soft skin.

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Her head nods gently. I wrap the remainder of my fingers under the mask, pulling it away from her face with ease.

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But as I take in her face fully for the first time, my soul turns frigid in my body. Her eyes and eyebrows remain the same ones I have grown familiar with in the last minutes, but she has no nose and no mouth. Her face is completely flattened beyond her eye sockets, as smooth as a

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newborn's skin. Instead of features, there is a slit down the middle of her face, starting just below where her nose bridge should've been and ending at the top of her chin.

She presses my shoulders against the wall, but I am able to shimmy my legs just enough to raise my foot and reach for my dagger. As fast as I can with my limited range of motion, I whip the dagger at her, toward the soft flesh below the ribs.

I do not even realize she has moved, has knocked aside my blade, until I hear it clatter across the floor, out of my reach.

Panic builds in my chest and up my throat, invading my mind, and forcing all rationality to leave my body. I am frozen stiff as I watch the folds of her slit open and close ever so slightly.

Drool pools at the bottom, slipping over the edge of the crack and inching down her chin until it gains enough weight to drip onto my boots. A guttural clicking emerges from her throat, escaping through the flaps, washing a hot breath over my face.

I scream, as there is nothing else for me to do. I let my voice break as it escapes my mouth, begging for attention from someone—anyone—upstairs. My feet try to move, I try to shove her off to run away, but she is too strong.

Her grip on my shoulders tightens, her nails breaking my flesh even through the fabric of my shirt. I yelp, but no one upstairs is able to hear my shouts before she lunges, pressing her face into my neck. Every sound I try to make dies in my lungs as needle-pointed teeth dig into my skin. She gulps down my blood until I begin to feel faint.

My body relaxes. I collapse onto the ground at her feet, blood and drool splattering my face as they follow me down. Finally, my hand goes limp and her mask leaves my grip.

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She bends over, and for a moment I believe she is going to pick it up, but instead she reaches above me to remove a stone from the wall. From the revealed pocket, she produces a pair of shackles, clamping them onto my wrists tighter than necessary.

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Once she is certain they are secure, she picks up the mask and places it back on her face, concealing her horribleness so that she may return to the den—the other patrons none the wiser. In her eyes dance delight and amusement, hand in hand, swirling outward toward me in the silence.

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The door to my cell slams, and hope rises—I am free, someone has come to check on me.

But the haunting memory-dream fades away in a blink, and it is only her, coming to feed once more. Faced with reality, I roll over in my cot to face her. With what little core strength I possess, I pull myself up offering my neck to her. My eyes, though, never leave hers.

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When she removes her moretta mask—the one I had met her in, the one that had led to my doom—she reveals a face which hasn't even aged a day since our first encounter. She is an unchanged being, while I have found my limbs shriveling little by little; it is the only way I can, perceive the passage of time beyond the rising and setting of the sun.

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Light clicks escape her throat as she pads toward me. I grit my teeth when she bends down to my level, preparing myself for her thousands of tiny needles.

She does not hesitate, nor does she, show a moment of remorse, as she pushes herself against me to steal my blood. Though, with how much time has passed, my blood has belonged to her for longer than it ever belonged to me.

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After she finishes, she wipes her chin. She stands tall, looking down what should have been the bridge of her nose to survey my state. A look of satisfaction sparkles in her eyes. I

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cannot stare at her for long. My fear of her face returns, and I force myself to focus on the basement door instead.

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A rattling of the knob comes. I fight against my exhaustion to see who has come to my rescue, but I am wrong. Instead of a savior, there is another moretta wearer—the one who watched me descend with the first all those years ago—dragging a young man behind her. He is so enthralled by her trance that he does not see us. I try to scream, but only a small squeak escapes my throat. It is enough to grab his attention; his eyes flicker to mine, but by the time he processes the state I am in, it is too late.

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The second woman removes her mask, revealing the same hideous face concealed behind it, and lunges at his throat. Color drains from his face as she feeds, forcing a wave of sickness over me.

When she is done, she shackles her food to the wall opposite mine. He flops over on his side, too weak to move.

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The women turn and face each other. Slow clicks rattle from their throats as they speak in a language no man could understand nor learn. Their conversation feels intense; they wave their arms at each other for emphasis, their gestures as guttural as their language.

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I look at the drained man and find his eyes wide, screaming for me to help, but there is nothing I can do. “What is your name?” I whisper. My voice travels across the space, barely audible above the clicking.

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His expression turns to confusion, and he blinks at me. He opens his mouth to speak, but I do not understand him; his words and accents are unfamiliar to me. Any hope I had shrivels away. I was a fool to indulge in it. There is only one way I can ever escape this torture.

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Once the women leave, drawing their masks, the sounds of the canal and the new man's labored breathing are all that are left. I turn onto my back to stare at the ceiling, for looking at the new man would only fill me with more despair. Despite the exhaustion, I force my eyes to remain open, for I cannot return to the memory of meeting her for the first time again just yet.

There is no escape from her, neither through my body nor through my memories. The only glimmer of hope I can hold on to is the belief that one day she'll be merciful enough to kill me—drink more than she needs and drain me completely. It would be beautiful to have that day come soon.

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