

The Night Was Theirs

by Violet Keteyian

Calpurnia Constantine was not the most dangerous prisoner of the Prison degli Angeli was she the most beautiful.

She hadn't murdered a man, nor had she stolen his fortune.

All she did was sit in the corner of her cell with her torn, once-silver dress and her kohl-ringed eyes.

They were fearsome eyes, all empty and cold and looking right through you to something worse.

No one knew quite what she had done.

No one dared ask.

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She sat there, as she always did, on a day that perhaps was a Saturday and perhaps wasn't.

If you said that she might once have been beautiful, then you were seeing the Calpurnia of the rumors.

If she were not in shadow, if she were not halfway to the ferryman with nothing but the fringe on her dress to pay for the ride, she would have been beautiful.

But somehow, no one quite got past those eyes.

* * *

Well, there came a day, as there always does.

It was raining, but the rain might have been in a different world.

In Calpurnia Constantine's cell, it was always a clear, cold midnight.

She's standing on a beach, and the pitch ocean reflects stars the sky doesn't wear.

Calpurnia Constantine stares across the water, but across the water is nothing but more night.

And oh, how that girl sparkles. She sparkles like the starless sky is her dress and the stars wink everywhere the dress isn't.

Her reflection shows nothing but the stars and the scars, the ghost of a showgirl.

"Lovely night," greeted a voice at her elbow.

"It's never anything but," rasps Calpurnia in the voice of someone who sang far too much and then far too little.

"Calpurnia," replies the voice.

"Stella," replies Calpurnia.

The voice who is Stella twirls with her face to the sky. It looks as though you could rip through it as easy as paper if you could get that high.

Calpurnia raises a wineglass in a toast to the sky and the sky shines starkly in response.

"Come with me." Stella reaches out a hand.

Her tailcoat glimmers with millions of tiny frozen tears.

Calpurnia takes her hand, for in this place you can't refuse anything.

They whirl faster than the stars and are gone.

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On the shadowy beach, a sequin sparkles before being swallowed by the sea.

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They don't speak, for what is there to say?
The dance hall's stage is deserted even by the ghosts.
And so Stella tips her hat to Calpurnia.
And they dance.

They dance for forever and a day, all high-kicking and fast-stepping and twirling skirts and tipping top hats in a complete silence.

And when they are done, the ghosts take their place, performing a silent and deadly Charleston for an invisible audience.

The city matches Calpurnia, cold and sparkling and silent and dark.

They sip drinks in silver and turquoise and smooth black from crystal glasses, and when this tires them they slip outside and blow smoke rings high into the clouds.

Here, the night is long and glittery and forever.

The perfect city for a pair of poisonous showgirls.

And it is theirs.

Their shoes click on the pavement as they glide arm-in-arm down the serpentine streets.

A cat slips pure white and shadowy across their path and drapes itself over Calpurnia's bare shoulders.

And poetry pours from every step they take every turn they make.

They skip in iambic pentameter, Calpurnia's skirt flying up.

They rhyme as they dance, and their glances set the meter.

And neither speak, for to open your mouth would be to ruin this place.

* * *

They tire, more out of preference and fashion than necessity.

There is a hotel at the end of the never-ending street, rising crimson above the night.

They fling open the glass doors, and it is the only place with occupants, practically bursting with them.

The hotel is alive with the dead.

Full to the brim with ghosts, and Calpurnia wonders whether she isn't one as well, because this city is something like heaven and something like hell.

Room 24 is bigger than the world, and it's got more glitz than a pair of poisonous showgirls could ever dream of.

Stella takes off her hat and pulls out a violin

She winks at Calpurnia and glides up the spiral staircase to the roof.

And she plays show tunes and love songs loud enough for the whole city to hear.

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It echoes out over everything, and Calpurnia can't help wondering if it carries to the sea.

Stella stops playing and comes back down, and the stars blink out one by one.

There's a black satin dressing gown draped over a chair, and she drapes it over Calpurnia's shoulders.

Calpurnia wraps herself in it and slips into blood-and-glitter dreams.

* * *

When she wakes up, it's Alice and Wonderland all over again.

Calpurnia Constantine is huddled in her midnight cell with her kohl-lined eyes and the dress and slip she's worn for six years.

And she's wrapped in her long, shiny black hair like a cloak.

"Calpurnia Constantine," says a voice, and it's Stella, but it's not, because Stella's right here next to her and the voice isn't.

She raises her dark empty eyes.

The barred door swings open and something very far away tells her she should laugh or cry or run, but she stays very still.

It's always a trick, a rabbit from a hat, and besides, freedom won't taste the same as it did when she was young.

"Get up," the voice commands and when she doesn't, someone pulls her roughly to her feet.

"Hurry," it hisses in her ear. "You can't be late for your execution."

The words are awfully far away, and she's thinking of a girl whose every movement was poetry.

That girl had a familiar face, but she's gone whirling through the stars before Calpurnia could place her.

The light blinds her. She wants to go back to her midnight cell, wishing for a dream she had a long, long time ago.

And suddenly there are so many people, and the wind blows her skirt up and she's being led up stairs that creak under her weight.

She looks around her with squinting eyes and all unspoken question on her lips.

Stella smiles at her.

Calpurnia looks into her eyes with a lonely empty gaze.

The crowd is screaming for blood.

The men force Calpurnia to her knees.

Someone talks over the crowd with words she doesn't understand.

Stella tips her teardrop top hat and disappears.