

The Next Duchess

“Good morning, my lady.”

A sudden waterfall of sunlight cascaded into her dark chambers, awakening the young Countess from her slumber. Willing herself awake, a row of familiar faces appeared before her, awaiting her command. Removing the covers, a flurry of hands rushed to her aid.

“My lady, the Count has requested your presence in the dining hall.”

The Countess idly blew a lock of unruly hair off her translucent face, before having her hair powdered and curled by the hands of maidservants.

“Thank you, Annise,” sighed the Countess, her mind clearly somewhere else.

Lifting her arms, as the maids fitted the Countess with a chemise and corset, there was a whisper from among the frills and ruffles of the countess’s shirts.

“Earl Angelo has accompanied the Count, my Lady.”

The Countess turned her head, hiding her rosy flush from the knowing eyes of the maids. Beneath the layers of her embroidered bodice, the Countess’s heart raced. Taking the arm of a maidservant, she made her timely way to the dining hall’s gaping mouth. Standing beneath the Count’s scrutinizing gaze, the Countess bowed her head respectfully, before acknowledging the charming man sitting comfortably by the Count’s side.

“Good morning”, the Countess breathed, averting her eyes from the hypnotic gaze of the Earl. After taking a seat, the young Countess prepared herself for the Count’s announcement. The Count cleared his throat with a deep grunt, causing a nearby maid, with a baby face, to refill his half-filled silver goblet. Flittering over to the Earl’s side, afterwards, the naive maid made the mistake of staying in the Earl’s presence too long.

“Dismissed,” purred the Earl quietly.

The Countess looked on feeling a stab of jealousy in her tightly bound chest, as the young maid retreated to a corner, trying to hide her brazenly blushed face.

“Countess Inamorta, it has been decided that tomorrow, you shall become the wife of Duke Ferrara.”

The young Countess was caught off guard, but quickly regained her composure. Her marriage came as little news, as the Countess had seen many noblewomen her age be married off one by one. It was expected.

“Congratulations. The Duke is a very wealthy man,” smirked Earl Angelo.

The Countess felt her face flush again and the familiar pang of jealousy lace her chest once more. Deep down, she had imagined that she might have had the chance to be married off, to the strapping Earl. Her mind flashed back to her first encounter with Earl Angelo. The Countess had been

introduced to the Earl by her father at a banquet. The thick mid-summer's air and the corset constricting her waist, like a python, was not the only reason as to why the Countess found herself short of breath as she danced and conversed with the Earl, accompanied by her maidservant. After the banquet, the charismatic man would visit the Count, the Countess often catching glimpses of him, and occasionally speaking to him briefly. Soon after, the Countess would hear echoes of rumours among the ranks of the maidservants, of Earl's roaming hands and heavy breathing. The Countess dismissed such gossip and looked forward to her next encounter with the handsome Earl.

"I'm afraid I must depart now and return to my duties."

The Earl's voice snapped to the Countess out of her thoughts. Maids flocked to the Earl's side, handing him his coat and hat.

The Countess stared after him as the Earl made his way through the labyrinth of halls. "You are to fulfil all of your duties to the Duke as his wife, do you understand?" the Count bellowed.

The Countess bowed her head deeply.

"Yes, my Lord."

The Count dismissed his daughter with a wave of his meaty hand. Her maidservant offered the Countess her arm, as the Countess was led back to her room.

Candle light flickered, making shadows dance with the woven tapestries adorning the stone walls. Turning a cold corner, the Countess stopped suddenly, as the Earl cornered the young maid, who had served him earlier, peeling back her many hot layers. The Countess simply smiled.

Written by Milynda Kelc