

**Patricia M. Muhammad
presents**

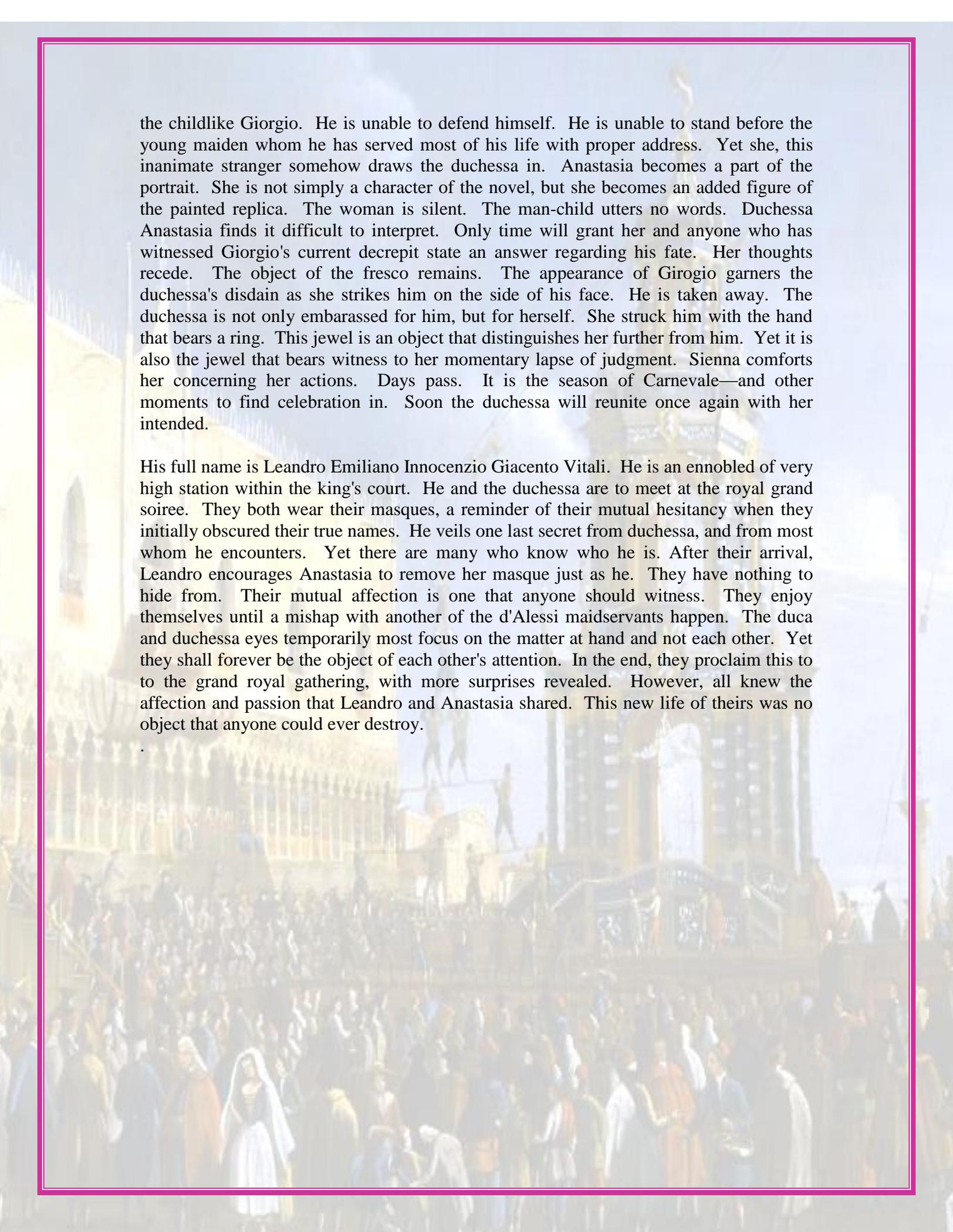
Ardor & Prestige

Special Objects

Anastasia Francesca Milana Fiorentina is a young duchessa who hails from the House of d'Alessi and has recently become of age. She is the eldest of three children. Anastasia has dark black hair which she often keeps pinned in the most traditional styles. One night the duchessa steals away from the manor. The manor is the object which appears to be the manifestation of her imprisonment. She feels confined though she is well looked after. The duchessa seeks the next stage in her life—and she knows it will not be in the House of d'Alessi for much longer. While she explores the open area, Duchessa Anastasia encounters another aristocrat. He is handsome, well-groomed and now curious of the beauty that suddenly appears before him. Neither fully discloses their names. They speak for a short while. The duchessa feels the chill of the night air. The duca can oblige the maiden in distress and wraps his jacket around her. The night wears on. The courtier seeks to return Anastasia home. His jacket will be the reminder of this one fateful night that would set the pace for their eternal future together. Duchessa Anastasia is oblivious of this. She politely attempts to return it to him. He refuses and grants it to her as a gift. Anastasia offers her jeweled comb embedded in her elaborately styled dark hair. She does not know if this first encounter will be her last. The duca endeavours for it not to—and he is granted his wish.

When she returns, Sienna, the senior maidservant is their to greet—and admonish her for her obstinance. Despite her disappointment she vows to keep Anastasia's indiscretion secret from her charge's mother, Giorgina as well as from her father, Pasquale. Anastasia keeps the folded jacket of her soon-to-be suitor in a safe embedded in the wall of her bedchambers. It holds jewelry given to her by her father, beautiful and rare, just as her unexpected meeting with the handsome stranger. The duchessa keeps the secret of her heart's hope interwoven in the very fabric of the courtier's overjacket. She knows her meeting was not fully secret. Sienna knows. Giorgio, her cavalier servente, is aware as well. Yet, just as the safe cradles what she hopes to keep from the ears and sight of others, these two servants will protect her charge as well.

Leandro and Anastasia begin a courtship. As their lives begin together, another—or two is now in danger. Giorgio is seized at the House of d'Alessi before her. The Crown has accused her cavalier servente of treason. He is inebriated, worn from the reality that the duchessa shall never be his, but is he innocent. As Giorgio stands before the duchessa nearly unrecognizable in his current state, she looks to an object at a distance. The object is a fresco, a replica of a famous painting embedded within. In this moment, it is not simply a piece of art. Duchessa Anastasia's thoughts anthropomorphizes the characters within. Her silent words pleads for the woman who holds the scales of justice to protect



the childlike Giorgio. He is unable to defend himself. He is unable to stand before the young maiden whom he has served most of his life with proper address. Yet she, this inanimate stranger somehow draws the duchessa in. Anastasia becomes a part of the portrait. She is not simply a character of the novel, but she becomes an added figure of the painted replica. The woman is silent. The man-child utters no words. Duchessa Anastasia finds it difficult to interpret. Only time will grant her and anyone who has witnessed Giorgio's current decrepit state an answer regarding his fate. Her thoughts recede. The object of the fresco remains. The appearance of Girogio garners the duchessa's disdain as she strikes him on the side of his face. He is taken away. The duchessa is not only embarrassed for him, but for herself. She struck him with the hand that bears a ring. This jewel is an object that distinguishes her further from him. Yet it is also the jewel that bears witness to her momentary lapse of judgment. Sienna comforts her concerning her actions. Days pass. It is the season of Carnevale—and other moments to find celebration in. Soon the duchessa will reunite once again with her intended.

His full name is Leandro Emiliano Innocenzio Giacento Vitali. He is an ennobled of very high station within the king's court. He and the duchessa are to meet at the royal grand soiree. They both wear their masques, a reminder of their mutual hesitancy when they initially obscured their true names. He veils one last secret from duchessa, and from most whom he encounters. Yet there are many who know who he is. After their arrival, Leandro encourages Anastasia to remove her masque just as he. They have nothing to hide from. Their mutual affection is one that anyone should witness. They enjoy themselves until a mishap with another of the d'Alessi maidservants happen. The duca and duchessa eyes temporarily most focus on the matter at hand and not each other. Yet they shall forever be the object of each other's attention. In the end, they proclaim this to to the grand royal gathering, with more surprises revealed. However, all knew the affection and passion that Leandro and Anastasia shared. This new life of theirs was no object that anyone could ever destroy.