

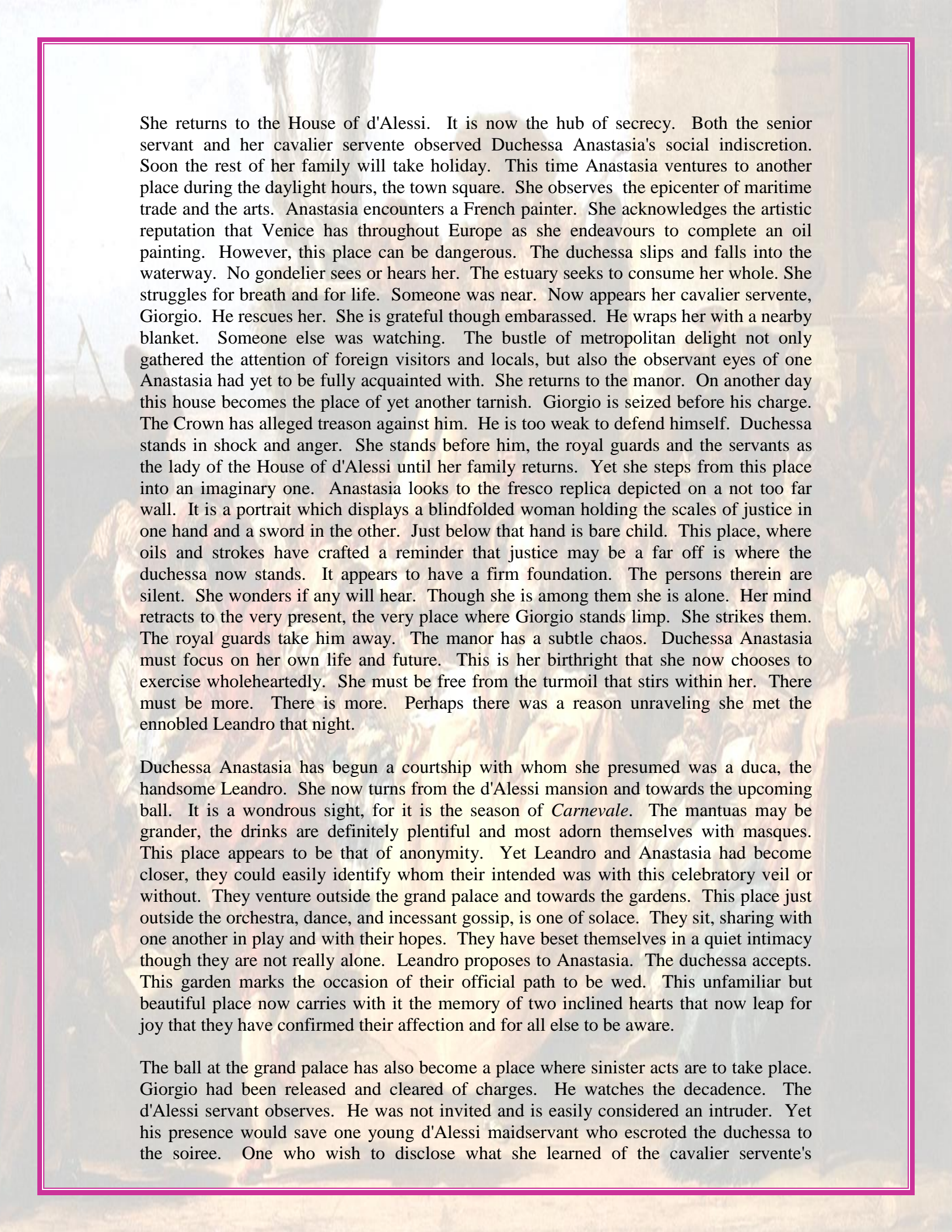
Patricia M. Muhammad
presents

Ardor & Prestige

Places

Venice (*Venezia*) has fascinated many for centuries due to its rich culture, traditions and history. Yet the Venice of today is unlike the Venice of long ago, though much of it is preserved through architecture and its waterways which are still used today. Venice of yore was a city-state during the 18th century. There was no such nation state in existence called by the name of Italy. It had its wealthy. It possessed many of the impoverished. Venice also attracted the attention of its fellow Europeans. This city lies on the outer perimeter of the northeastern seaboard as an inlet of what would become Italy. Yet 18th century Venice was the home of several aristocrats, many of whom belonged to the king's court. If Venice could speak, it would tell of the decadence that many of the ennobled partook during the season of *Carnevale*. If its gondolas were its arms, it would warn the unsuspecting that the unscrupulous existed among the impecunious as well as the wealthy. Had its oil paintings stole away from the mundane hanging against the wall, they would harken others to take a glimpse at what inspired it to become into existence. 18th century Venice was the expression of many things, it was also the place where one young maiden, Duchessa Anastasia sought for something she knew not.

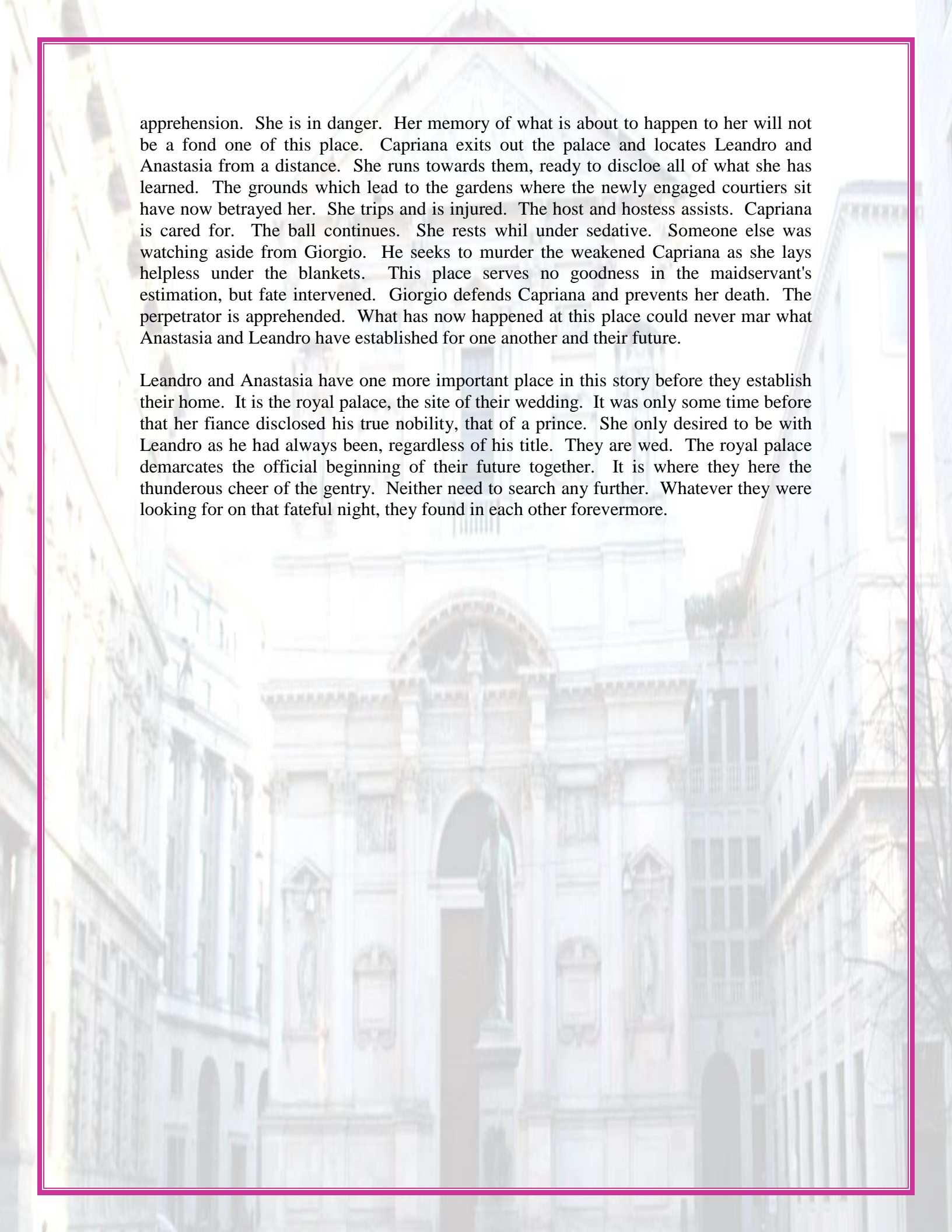
Duchessa Anastasia hails from the House of d'Alessi. She is beautiful, intelligent, but she is also hasty. The maiden perceives the d'Alessi mansion as a chokehold to her budding interest as to what lies beyond the gates of the estate. The patrician wants for nothing. Her needs are constantly met. Yet this did not fulfill whatever void that lingered within her. Anastasia did appreciate her home and her servants, but she had now become of age. The House of d'Alessi had served its purpose in one manner or another. This place was not befitting for her—so she ventured to another. On one clear night Anastasia left her bedchambers by climbing through her window. This was no easy feat. The side of the mansion was her temporal anchor as she descended down its façade, ready to embrace what lied in the open night air. As she found her way along the thoroughfare, she stood in an open square. This place was silent, just as it had been in her bedchambers. Yet it was here that she felt solace. There was silence—until another courter happened upon her. For only a few moments this place had become the agent of a potential threat. It possibly betrayed her. The night had closed its eyes, not seeing her silent wave to garner its attention that mischief may be afoot, and likely aimed at her. Yet this place was still. Duchessa Anastasia heard a voice. It did not seem threatening. As she looked upon the carrier, her eyes befell a strong and handsome gentleman. She still questioned. Her relief had yet to be fully realized. He questioned her. Neither fully disclosed their details.



She returns to the House of d'Alessi. It is now the hub of secrecy. Both the senior servant and her cavalier servente observed Duchessa Anastasia's social indiscretion. Soon the rest of her family will take holiday. This time Anastasia ventures to another place during the daylight hours, the town square. She observes the epicenter of maritime trade and the arts. Anastasia encounters a French painter. She acknowledges the artistic reputation that Venice has throughout Europe as she endeavours to complete an oil painting. However, this place can be dangerous. The duchessa slips and falls into the waterway. No gondelier sees or hears her. The estuary seeks to consume her whole. She struggles for breath and for life. Someone was near. Now appears her cavalier servente, Giorgio. He rescues her. She is grateful though embarrassed. He wraps her with a nearby blanket. Someone else was watching. The bustle of metropolitan delight not only gathered the attention of foreign visitors and locals, but also the observant eyes of one Anastasia had yet to be fully acquainted with. She returns to the manor. On another day this house becomes the place of yet another tarnish. Giorgio is seized before his charge. The Crown has alleged treason against him. He is too weak to defend himself. Duchessa stands in shock and anger. She stands before him, the royal guards and the servants as the lady of the House of d'Alessi until her family returns. Yet she steps from this place into an imaginary one. Anastasia looks to the fresco replica depicted on a not too far wall. It is a portrait which displays a blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice in one hand and a sword in the other. Just below that hand is bare child. This place, where oils and strokes have crafted a reminder that justice may be a far off is where the duchessa now stands. It appears to have a firm foundation. The persons therein are silent. She wonders if any will hear. Though she is among them she is alone. Her mind retracts to the very present, the very place where Giorgio stands limp. She strikes them. The royal guards take him away. The manor has a subtle chaos. Duchessa Anastasia must focus on her own life and future. This is her birthright that she now chooses to exercise wholeheartedly. She must be free from the turmoil that stirs within her. There must be more. There is more. Perhaps there was a reason unraveling she met the ennobled Leandro that night.

Duchessa Anastasia has begun a courtship with whom she presumed was a duca, the handsome Leandro. She now turns from the d'Alessi mansion and towards the upcoming ball. It is a wondrous sight, for it is the season of *Carnevale*. The mantuas may be grander, the drinks are definitely plentiful and most adorn themselves with masques. This place appears to be that of anonymity. Yet Leandro and Anastasia had become closer, they could easily identify whom their intended was with this celebratory veil or without. They venture outside the grand palace and towards the gardens. This place just outside the orchestra, dance, and incessant gossip, is one of solace. They sit, sharing with one another in play and with their hopes. They have beset themselves in a quiet intimacy though they are not really alone. Leandro proposes to Anastasia. The duchessa accepts. This garden marks the occasion of their official path to be wed. This unfamiliar but beautiful place now carries with it the memory of two inclined hearts that now leap for joy that they have confirmed their affection and for all else to be aware.

The ball at the grand palace has also become a place where sinister acts are to take place. Giorgio had been released and cleared of charges. He watches the decadence. The d'Alessi servant observes. He was not invited and is easily considered an intruder. Yet his presence would save one young d'Alessi maidservant who escorted the duchessa to the soiree. One who wish to disclose what she learned of the cavalier servente's



apprehension. She is in danger. Her memory of what is about to happen to her will not be a fond one of this place. Capriana exits out the palace and locates Leandro and Anastasia from a distance. She runs towards them, ready to disclose all of what she has learned. The grounds which lead to the gardens where the newly engaged courtiers sit have now betrayed her. She trips and is injured. The host and hostess assists. Capriana is cared for. The ball continues. She rests while under sedative. Someone else was watching aside from Giorgio. He seeks to murder the weakened Capriana as she lays helpless under the blankets. This place serves no goodness in the maidservant's estimation, but fate intervened. Giorgio defends Capriana and prevents her death. The perpetrator is apprehended. What has now happened at this place could never mar what Anastasia and Leandro have established for one another and their future.

Leandro and Anastasia have one more important place in this story before they establish their home. It is the royal palace, the site of their wedding. It was only some time before that her fiance disclosed his true nobility, that of a prince. She only desired to be with Leandro as he had always been, regardless of his title. They are wed. The royal palace demarcates the official beginning of their future together. It is where they here the thunderous cheer of the gentry. Neither need to search any further. Whatever they were looking for on that fateful night, they found in each other forevermore.