

The Chimera Jewel

Amid the pageantry of the duke's court in sixteenth-century Italy, a young girl's heart is about to be broken...

By Elizabeth Loupas

Ferrara, Italy, February 6, 1567

I am to marry him tomorrow," Lucia Venturini said. "And I hate him, Serenissima. I cannot bear for him to touch me."

I looked at her in the mirror as she struggled to fix a diamond circlet into my hair. She had been in my household for some months now, a courtier's daughter of fifteen or sixteen, with huge dark eyes in a narrow gamine's face and a rare smile that could light a room. She always seemed overpowered by the rich gowns and headdresses she wore.

"This is sudden," I said. "I did not know you were betrothed."

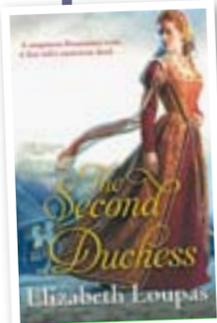
"I did not know either. My father made a secret arrangement with Messer Bartolo's father, and now the marriage must take place before Lent begins."

"Have you told your father of your objections?"

"I have, Serenissima, but he will not listen to me."

I rescued the circlet and settled it on my own head. My wardrobe mistress stepped forward to secure it.

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I said, "I do not know how I can help you, Lucia."

She cast herself to her knees, burying her face in my white-and-silver skirts.

"Speak to the duke for me, Serenissima," she cried. "I beg it as my Berlingaccio favour. I love Alessandro with all my heart and I cannot marry Bartolo Lanzi, I cannot –"

"Stop crying at once." I made my voice sharp because she needed to be shocked back to a proper dignity. "You will spoil my costume."

She went still, as if I had struck her. Slowly she rose, put her shoulders back and lifted her chin. There was pride in her then, and courage, despite her misery.

"I beg your pardon, Serenissima," she

Berlingaccio would be granted.

As a rule, the favours were trifles, gilded sweetmeats and paste jewels and bits of ribbon. A renounced betrothal was rather more than one was allowed to ask, but the year before I myself had asked an unusual favour of my husband the duke, and it had been granted.

Perhaps this was my opportunity to repay fate for my own good fortune.

Before the revels began there was supper and dancing, and that was my opportunity to observe the young men.

Messer Bartolo Lanzi was easy to single out – he danced only with Lucia herself. He was young, tall and bony, with a nose like a beak; he hovered over the girl like a gangling bird of prey,

He squeezed her wrist until she paled, refusing to allow her to go

said, in a husky voice. "I will not trouble you further."

I smoothed my skirts, and hoped the tear-spots would dry before the revels.

"Are both gentlemen here tonight? Your Alessandro and Messer Bartolo?"

She coloured up, then turned pale.

"Yes, Serenissima."

"What is Alessandro's surname?"

"He is Alessandro da Riva."

"Very well," I said, more gently. "I will observe them in the course of the dancing and judge for myself. Then perhaps I will speak to the duke."

In Ferrara Shrove Thursday, the beginning of the final riotous week of Carnival, was called the Berlingaccio. It was celebrated with double night-time revels called the Notte del Duca and the Notte della Duchessa.

The gentlemen and the ladies were separated, and it was a long-standing tradition that any favour asked of the duke or duchess on the night of the

bedecked in mulberry-coloured velvet and far too many gold chains and jewels for good taste or fashion.

One of my ladies whispered that he was a merchant's son, enormously rich, and that Lucia Venturini's father, aristocratic though he might be, had large debts coming due.

So, the sudden marriage was explained. Wealth and merchant blood in themselves were not character flaws, but as I watched, I saw Lucia attempt to withdraw after a galliard. Messer Bartolo squeezed her wrist until her face went pale, and refused to allow her to go. This did not endear him to me.

Alessandro da Riva, pointed out by one of my husband's attendants, could not have been more different from Bartolo Lanzi. He was of medium height, with a stocky, athletic physique, a square face, and unexpected deep dimples in his cheeks. He wore one plain gold chain and no jewels, and politely partnered a different lady in each dance.



"I beg your pardon, Serenissima. I will not trouble you further"

ILLUSTRATIONS: GETTY IMAGES, THINKSTOCK, MANDY DIXON

A baron's son, the courtier murmured, intelligent and ambitious but with not so much as a copper sesino in his pocket.

"You appear interested in the dancers," the duke remarked.

We were seated at a supper-table on a dais, above the room, in our white-and-silver Berlingaccio costumes. My husband, with his dark eyes, swarthy skin and close-cut black hair and beard, was one of the few men I had met who could wear such opulent fripperies without losing a breath of his power and ruthlessness.

Only in private did I call him by his

Christian name, Alfonso. He had called me by my Christian name, Barbara, only once in the year and two months since we had married.

"I am concerned for one of my ladies." I indicated Lucia, still dancing with Bartolo Lanzi. "She has become entangled in an arranged marriage –"

"You yourself were entangled in an arranged marriage, Madonna, and you seem none the worse for it."

I felt colour rise in my face.

"I was considerably older," I said. "I was willing, she is not. She loves another."

One corner of his mouth turned

down in a sardonic half-smile.

"Ah, love," he said. "That reminds me. I have a Berlingaccio gift for you."

He held out his hand and a gentleman gave him a velvet-covered box. He presented it to me with a flourish.

"The exception," he said.

In the box was a jewel, encircled with diamonds and sapphires, depicting a graceful but clearly mythological beast fashioned in gold and embellished with more precious stones. It had the forequarters of a lioness, the head of a

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horned goat rearing from its back, and a snake for a tail.

"A chimera," I said. A mythological beast, but also a symbol of something that could exist only in the imagination.

Love, the duke had said to me once, *is a chimera of poets and adulteresses.*

Later, after many things had happened, he had said, *Perhaps there are exceptions.*

He had not forgotten. I wanted to touch him, however slightly – my hand over his, perhaps – but that was out of the question, in public, between the Duke and the Duchess of Ferrara.

"Lucia Venturini is sincere," I said instead. "And I do not like young Messer Bartolo. He –"

"Do not meddle in this matter, Madonna," he said with finality. "I have reason to wish it to remain just as it is."

Perhaps he had some plan to exact recompense from Lucia's father, or Bartolo Lanzi's father, or both. I bowed my head in apparent acquiescence and turned my attention to fastening the magnificent chimera jewel at my shoulder. I had learned not to oppose my husband openly, any more than I would caress him openly.

However, there were other ways.

The Notte della Duchessa revels were held later that night in the courtyard at the foot of the Saint Catherine tower, one of the four towers of the great walled Castello in the heart of Ferrara.

I sat on a silver Carnival throne with baskets of glittering Berlingaccio favours on either side. I was not masked – the duke and the duchess were the only ones unmasked for the revels – but the others' masks were trifles; it was easy to recognise the ladies of my household.

Lucia Venturini, for one. She approached me in the proper order of precedence, her shoulders slumped and her head down. She had given up, then.

I had watched her dance with Bartolo Lanzi, I had watched him hurt her, and I had done nothing.

"I beg a favour of the duchess," she said without expression, "on the night of the Berlingaccio."

It was the prescribed form. I answered her just as formally. "Whatever you desire will be granted, by Saint George and the House of Este."

She raised her eyes to mine. There was another form for what she should have said next, but she had no words. Her anguish made my heart stop for a moment, and stiffened my own resolve.

I leaned forward so the fold of my sleeve disguised the movement, and detached the chimera jewel from my shoulder. Quite casually I pretended to take it from the profusion of cheap paste jewels heaped in my baskets.

A fortune in genuine gems. Enough to flee Ferrara with her Alessandro, and

The duke then commanded my presence. His expression was dark, and I remembered other times he had been angry with me.

Without greeting me he said, "You are not wearing the chimera jewel."

"No, my lord," I said.

"You gave it to her."

I said nothing. I held my breath, my hands clasped tightly.

"I told you not to meddle. You have given away your jewel for nothing."

"I do not understand."

A spark of wry amusement slowly lightened the darkness in his eyes.

"Alessandro da Riva is on his way to Rome on business of my own, so secret that he required a device to hide his true purpose. I am perfectly capable of arranging such devices myself, Madonna."

I fear my mouth dropped open in an unseemly manner.

**Without greeting me he said,
"You are not wearing the jewel"**

live in comfort wherever they chose.

On the other hand, an expression of something my husband would never say in ordinary words. Precious to me as well. I held it tightly and looked at the circles her dried tears had left on my skirt.

I beg it as my Berlingaccio favour. I love Alessandro with all my heart.

I offered the jewel to her.

"What you ask is yours," I said.

She looked at it. I saw the colour begin to come back to her face. She looked up, her eyes alive once more.

"I thank you on this Berlingaccio," she whispered, "and forever swear my loyalty to the House of Este."

She took the jewel, curtsied deeply, and slipped away.

"You gave Alessandro da Riva the means to run away with Lucia Venturini? So no-one would know he was on a secret mission for you?"

"Exactly."

"You could have told me."

"In a public place? I think not. And later we were separated by the revels."

I wanted to laugh and I wanted to cry.

"I am so sorry, my lord," I said. "I would never have given up the jewel if I had thought there were any other way."

"Perhaps for young da Riva and your Lucia, love will not be a chimera."

"It will not, my lord," I said. "I think they will be an exception."

We were alone in the audience chamber. He rose, took my hand and kissed my knuckles very lightly.

"As are we," he said.

The next morning, Bartolo Lanzi waited at the church door in his bridegroom's finery for a bride who never arrived. He and his father were outraged. They demanded an audience with the duke, demanded that Alessandro da Riva and Lucia Venturini be tracked down and dragged back to Ferrara in chains.

When they left his audience chamber, they looked unsatisfied.

**THE
AUTHOR
SAYS...**

"In sixteenth-century Ferrara, a magnificent jewel empowers two women – an ardent young girl and a dignified duchess whose love is no less passionate for being carefully restrained..."

