

The Matchmaker

Holly Inglis

I am sitting in the chair across from you. You are pouring tea and when you lift the cup to your lips, you burn your tongue. It hurts, but you don't flinch. The teacup clinks against the saucer and you lean forwards to look at me.

A lady should cross her legs.

You know fully well I am no lady.

You are the matchmaker, and your foul hand is wrapped around my throat. You take a woman and between tongs, you fire, and beat, and buff her until she shines like gold and sits, ornamental. Your buffing breaks my skin but I am not what you are looking for. I am skin over iron. Oh, what a poor thing you are, to think I am a lady.

I have sat in this chair eight times now. Matchmaker, you take a weak-willed young girl and a man who will weaken her further, and you force a love between them that will please their parents and doom them to sadness. Every love you have pushed from me has failed and I have been forced back into this room across from you. A lady is a decoration, an asset. It is useful until its costs outweigh its benefits, until it no longer serves its purpose. No, I am not a lady.

I am wild. I have paced on the fringes of liberty, a starving coyote waiting for the wolf to finish tearing at a carcass. No lady can claim her dignity, bent over rotting flesh and baring teeth at the smell of decay. I am a woman, whether you like it or not. A woman is a wild thing, and a sight to behold. A woman is strong and rough and wears her scars for all to see. Undeterred by her body and status. Unwilling to accept she is less than a man because she is not one.

I am staring past your head and into the yellowing wallpaper behind you. You are saying something and I am not listening. You are delivering your verdict. King Minos is sipping your

tea, a judge of souls at the gates to Tartarus. Anubis is weighing my soul against a feather to decide if a beast will eat my heart. I am Sisyphus, the death cheater. I am Tantalus, killer of children. You are saying something about madness.

Oh, yes I am mad. Matchmaker, you are my curse and my punisher. You know who I am and yet you deny me the right to my own mind. The bridle does not sit against my skin and I buck so you cannot saddle me. In response, you lash your crop deep into my skin and the wounds do not heal. Yes, your whipping and branding makes me mad.

You stand up, and pace to a window. Framed against the sun, you turn away from me.

What am I going to do with you?

You already know what I will say.

I want no life in a house bearing children and cooking meals. I want no life you would have me live. We are both proud, and we both will not bend. Give me to as many men as you wish and I will not be subdued. In fact, matchmaker, I dare you. If I can teach you the strength and power of a woman, maybe you will have pity on those who come after me.

You breathe a heavy sigh and return to your seat. You sip your tea again, now cool enough to stomach. I look at you. You look at me. It's a resigned stare, a dance of emotions that twirl and taint your illusion of composure. You are longing, too. Maybe I need not teach you the power of a woman, maybe you already know. A youth spent drunk on possibility leaves want for freedom, does it not?

It is thrilling to meet a woman in a world of proper ladies and girls playing at enlightenment. I wonder, Matchmaker. If I were to run, leave this choking town and see mountains and oceans and cities where I can finally breathe; If I were to learn what a woman truly is, by living the life of one, would you stop me? Or deep down, would you wish you could come too?

Matchmaker, you ought to let me go.

If the cost of freeing a woman is your own pride, what a selfish and wicked being you must be to keep me here.