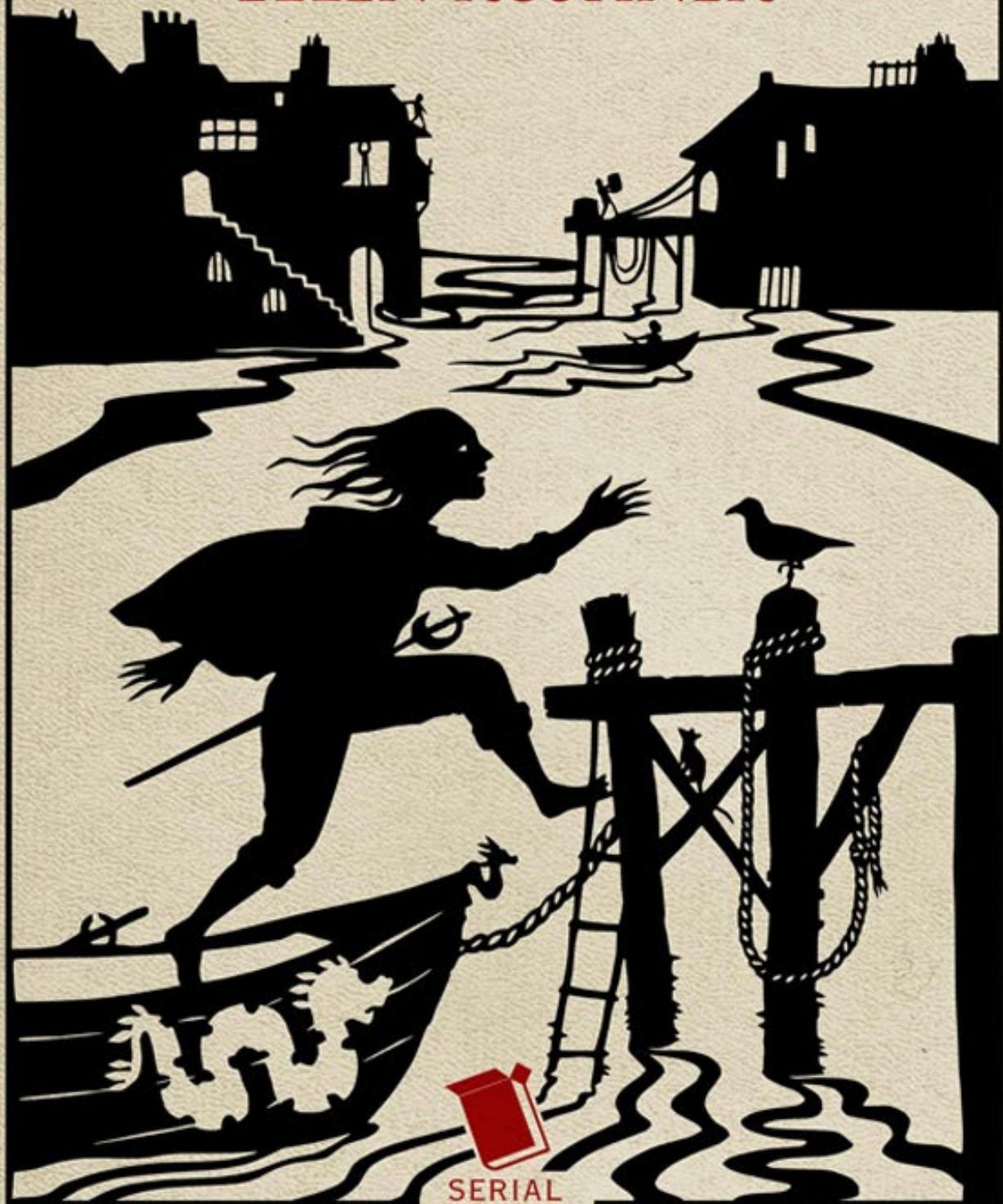


# TREMONTAINE

SEASON ONE • EPISODE 1

ARRIVALS  
ELLEN KUSHNER



SERIAL  
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# TREMONTAINE

— SEASON ONE ♦ EPISODE 1 —

## ARRIVALS

BY  
ELLEN KUSHNER



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Written by:

Cover Illustration by: Kathleen Jennings

Art Director: Charles Orr

Lead Writer: Ellen Kushner

Editor: Delia Sherman

Producers: Racheline Maltese and Julian Yap

Tremontaine original concept by Ellen Kushner



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# TREMONTAINE

## Episode 1

### Arrivals

by Ellen Kushner

In the highest room of their splendid family townhouse on the highest part of the Hill, Diane, Duchess Tremontaine, sat in a window seat and surveyed her city.

Below the sweeping lawns of Tremontaine House the river roiled under the dull grey skies of a windy, rainy day. Across the river, prosperous houses sent up trails of smoke from their many chimneys. But beyond them, in the older part of the city, only some of the ancient buildings of the University bore these flags of prosperity. Many students went cold for their learning. But for a clever man not born to land or riches, what else was there?

Diane smiled. Her husband the duke loved the University. He believed in clever men, and he had some pretensions to learning, as his extensive library testified. He served on the University's Board of Governors, and was happier there than in the halls of the Council of Lords. She didn't object. It gave him something to occupy his mind, while she occupied hers with weightier matters.

She clutched the sheaf of papers in her hand and craned her slender neck, looking down the river past the Council buildings to the docks, where every day she hoped for her salvation.

The docks were impossible to see from the Hill, of course. The river bent through the city like a bow, crossed by bridges connecting the older side of the city to the new. And the *Everfair* was lost; the papers told her that, leaving no room for hope any more. But there was a Kinwiinik Trader ship due in soon. There always was, this time of year, daring the first of the spring storms, bringing things exotic and delightful to the city's inhabitants: bright feathers, exotic spices, colorful cloth . . . and chocolate. These things were always welcome. But this time, the duchess had a particularly urgent use for them.

There were footsteps on the stairs. She shoved the papers under the generous folds of her skirts.

"Diane?"

Her husband knew she loved it up here. The servants had instructions not to trouble her when she was in her retreat—her "bower," William romantically called it; or, sometimes, her "gentle falcon's nest." But he could visit when he liked.

The little door opened. She did not turn her head. Let him find her lost in thought, gazing dreamily out the window.

William Alexander Tielman, Duke Tremontaine, bent his long body to her. When his lips touched her neck, she arched it and smiled lazily, leaned into the warmth of his chest, then turned her lips up to his.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said. For a moment, they looked out over the city together. William rubbed her satin-clad arm. "It's gotten cold," he said gently. "Your fire is low, and you haven't even noticed."

“No,” the duchess said; “I hadn’t. What a good thing you came.” She snuggled into his coat again. “So why are you here? Surely you can’t be missing me already!” They had spent the better part of the morning sporting in bed for so long that their morning chocolate had grown cold, and they had to ring for new.

“Why should I not?” he said gallantly. “But I wouldn’t disturb you for that. I just wanted you to look over my speech for tomorrow’s Council. My man Tolliver’s drafted it according to your notes, and I’ve tweaked it here and there . . . but I’m not quite certain yet. Will you . . . ?”

“With pleasure.” She sat up briskly, folding her hands on her lap. “Read it to me, why don’t you?”

But he made no move to produce notes from his pockets. “And there’s something else,” he said.

“Really?” She had to struggle to make it sound like a question. She’d known he wanted something else from the moment he’d entered.

“It’s Honora.” The duchess waited, expressing just the right mix of politeness and disinterest. “She’s had another child.”

“Already? It must be the country air.”

On the subject of their married daughter, the duchess was intractable. But the duke pressed on: “It’s a boy, this time. They’ve named him David—for the old duke, of course, the King Killer. The family hero.” He risked a smile, inviting her to join him. “He’s David Alexander Tielman.”

“. . . *Campion*,” the duchess finished sharply. “Don’t forget the *Campion*.”

Duke William sighed. “You haven’t forgiven her, have you.”

The duchess bit her lip, and turned to look out the window. “No,” she said, “I haven’t.”

“But Diane . . .” He stroked her shoulder. “Honora does seem happy in her new life. If you could find your way to—”

“I am very glad that she is happy, William. Truly.” She did not try very hard to keep the rancor out of her voice. “In time, I am sure I will get over what she did to us.”

“I’m sure you will,” he said softly. His charm was in seeing the best in her, even when it wasn’t there.

“Oh, William!” She threw her arms around him, allowing herself the luxury of tears. “I had such hopes! The years I spent, preparing to bring her out to make a good—a fine, an excellent—marriage! The alliances, the parties, the dresses we could ill afford—”

He stroked her carefully arranged curls, and she let him.

“And then, to fling it all in my face! To ruin every plan I had for repairing our fortunes! To run off with that ridiculous country nobleman, not even halfway through her first season!”

“Raymond *Campion* seems a decent man. His estates, though small, are in order.”

“I’m sure they are, my dear. As far as they go.” She lifted her head, wiped her nose, and patted her hair back into place. “It could have been worse, I suppose; she could be begging us to support her and some impecunious nobody.” She looked at her husband with sudden suspicion. “She hasn’t been asking you for money, has she?”

“What? Oh, no, no. Not money.”

“What, then?” the duchess asked, more sharply than she had intended.

He sat by her side and took her hand. “Don’t you think . . . a little visit . . . just to see the children . . .”

She did not pull away, but every part of her stiffened. “No. Absolutely not. Honora made her choice, and she must stand by it. She knew her marriage was critical to the future of Tremontaine.”

“But surely—”

“She did not consider us; why should we consider her? I’ve no wish to see her, or to see what Raymond Campion begot on her.”

That was not entirely true. If he lived, this baby boy would most likely be Duke William’s heir, given Diane’s and her husband’s unsuccessful attempts to produce a male themselves. But Honora’s and that Campion fellow’s boy was bound to be a disaster. She might have to take him in hand someday.

Diane stroked her husband’s brocade sleeve. “I’m sorry, William. Of course they must be acknowledged. People have had a glorious time gossiping about the runaway Tremontaine daughter; it wouldn’t do to have them talking about the babies, now, poor mites. Go ahead and send them something; silver, perhaps, with our swan on it. Something from the cabinets; we can’t afford new, and anyway, it will seem more important if it’s family silver, crested.”

“Goblets?” He smiled. “Or rattles?”

“Whatever you like,” she said warmly. “I trust to your selection.”

Her husband squeezed her arm. “We’ll come through, my love. It wasn’t all on our daughter’s shoulders.” The duchess wisely held her tongue. He did not know about the wreck of the *Everfair*. Nor did he know what she had mortgaged to fund that expedition.

“Tremontaine’s been leaking cash for years,” the duke went on blithely. “But no tradesman in this city will refuse credit to us, or to any other noble for that matter. Why, some of our friends—”

The duchess shuddered. “You know how I feel about credit, William. I do not like to owe anyone anything. And it does not become the House.”

“Another loan, then . . . ?”

“And I know how *you* feel about loans!” She put her fine hand over his big one, gave it a squeeze. “When we put the Catullan vineyards up for security against that loan for the improvements at Highcombe, you didn’t sleep a wink until they were completed, repaid, and the vineyards out of danger.”

He looked down at both their hands. “Not a bit!” he said softly. “I knew we’d made the right decision. Couldn’t let my father’s house go to ruin. I spent some happy years there . . .” He smiled at something she couldn’t see. “And then we got that phenomenal Catullan harvest, as you predicted—and what a laugh, to pay them back with profits from the very vineyards they were hoping to get their paws on if we failed!” He grinned at her, a boy’s grin. “I’m only sorry I couldn’t share the joke with everyone I know.”

The duchess squeezed his hand harder. “But you know you mustn’t, don’t you? Not ever. For anyone to know we were taking out loans, much less putting up Tremontaine land

for them . . .” He nodded. But she pressed on. “We can enjoy the joke together, the two of us, my darling—but that’s as far as it goes.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it. “You keep a most careful house.”

“Because I must, William!” The duchess smiled ruefully. “The cook and the staff all hate me, because I make them do so very much with so very little. To their credit, they always come through. But the ball for Honora’s presentation was a triumph of ingenuity over penury. And how I’m going to manage our Tremontaine Ball this year, I do not know. I’ve got the musicians all hired at reasonable rates, but there’s the invitations all to be handwritten and . . .”

“Why not have them printed? There are some fine engravers.”

“William.” She looked at him with her clear grey eyes, a tiny frown between them. “Tremontaine does not print invitations. To anything.”

Her husband smiled. “Sometimes I think that you are more Tremontaine than I am.”

His duchess chuckled. “You were born to it. You didn’t care.”

“I cared. But my father was such a dreamer. He wasn’t at all practical. I think he spent his time longing for the old kings, and the lost glories of Tremontaine.”

His hand wandered up from her shoulder to stroke the exposed white stem of her neck. “But that was in my favor, in the end. If the old duke hadn’t been so set on the family’s glorious past, he would never have insisted that I marry the only remaining daughter of a dying branch: a very young girl, with very little fortune beyond her wit”—he kissed her ear—“her grace”—kissed her brow—“and her beauty.”

Duke William tweaked one curl of his wife’s perfectly coiffed head, careful not to disarrange anything. “I’m sure my mother objected to that match every bit as much as you do to Honora’s. So you see? It’s a fine old family tradition.”

“Thank you, William.” His duchess rested her head against his brocade-clad chest, despite what it did to her curls. “I am sure I do not deserve you.”

Her husband kissed her nose. “And I am sure you deserve far more.”

“Now,” the duchess said briskly, “let us go downstairs. I shall get my maid to tidy me up, while you read me your lovely speech.”

It was not difficult to slip the papers in her petticoat pocket, nor—when she got to her rooms—to close them in a cabinet drawer before her maid could find them.

• • •

Ixkaab Balam, first daughter of a first daughter of the House of Balam of the Traders of the Kinwiinik, stood on the dock enjoying the feel of the land still moving under her like a ship on the waves. She knew it was an illusion. A Trader and a daughter of Traders, she was used to ships. She could sail one herself, if she had to; she and her cousins had grown up coaxing the nimble river ships around the Ulua’s turgid bends to their family’s home in the mountains when the elders were occupied at sea, or at war.

She’d been at sea before, herself, though never for as long or as far as these ninety days past on the merchant ship *Wasp*, leaving the warm waters of Binkinha behind for the cold north. She knew the sensation of rolling ground would pass, and figured she might as

well take pleasure in the contradiction while it lasted. Ixkaab hated to be bored.

She had tried not to be bored on the ship. She'd badly needed to be distracted on this voyage, while making sure that her particular skills did not rust. But there was very little of interest to glean on the *Wasp* about twenty-one gut-led Kinwiinik sailors, two Tullan outlaw runaways, a crippled old Xanamwiinik sailmaker, and a deaf-mute cook, on a cargo ship full of feathers and parrots, spices and maize flour, and a king's daughter's ransom in processed cacao beans—along with five Traders, each of whom she was somehow related to. Besides the obvious facts that Uncle Koxol's sister's son's wife was pregnant, Mother's Cousin Mukuy was already dyeing his hair, Father's Cousin Chokan was sneaking twice his ration of tamales from the galley, and the captain wrote poetry to the cabin boy, what was there to learn?

And so Kaab had wisely applied herself to studying everything she could about these North Sea people, these Xanamwiinik, amongst whom she was bound to dwell for a while, at least until her part in the disastrous affair of the Tullan Empire mission had blown over.

It was a dismal prospect. This grey and smoky little backwater with its piddling river was hardly the broad, sunswept avenues of the Tullan capital, or even the flower-laced lanes of her sweet Binkinha. Ixkaab set her jaw. All-knowing Chaacmul knew she'd seen uglier places—though not, so far, colder ones. As the *Wasp* had drawn nearer this side of the world, she had finally understood why everyone insisted she bring all her quilted clothing. “A damp cold,” Aunt Saabim used to write her mother, and now Kaab knew what she meant. Of course, there would be Local clothing to put on, better suited to the climate—she eyed the ship's agent's heavy wool jacket, which he wore unbuttoned in defiance of the chill. It looked scratchy. What kind of animal made wool like that? Would she be forced to wear it? Why hadn't her people tried importing decent fabric to this place—something with some color in it . . . *Spoken like a Trader, little bee*, her mother's voice said in her head. *Now, think like an agent.*

*An agent whose wrists are bound by one mistake*, Kaab argued with her mother in her head. *What else is there to find out here?* Two generations of Kinwiinik Traders had surely learned everything there was to know.

She feared that there was nothing for her to *do* here.

“. . . And that, milady, up there on the right, is our Hall of Justice.”

She carried the map of this new city already in her head. But she let the kindly ship's agent explain it all to her anyway: “It was built in the days of the old kings, but is now the seat of our noble Council of Lords.”

It was hard to understand his accent. Had he really said all the kings were old? She shook her head. Of course not. These people had no kings. He meant “old” as in “previously had been there but now were not.”

Ixkaab badly needed to immerse herself in the daily speech of Xanaamdaam. She had tried on the voyage, but her relatives spoke only basic merchant Xanam, preferring to remain amongst their own kind in the strange city that so loved cacao. Her many shipboard conversations with the toothless old Xanamwiinik sailmaker had given her seven fistfuls of curse words, a profound knowledge of what a Riverside prostitute would and would not do for money, and many ways to defend herself with a canvas sail needle (including where to

slip it in to kill and leave no trace, which Kaab was too polite to say she knew already). She had also spent hours in her cabin reacquainting herself with their clever system of alphabet letters to make words; and she and Cousin Chokan had practiced some dance steps that the sailmaker swore were just what decent Xanamwiinik ladies did in public—even though this involved holding hands with men who were not their relatives.

It would come to her, she was sure. She just needed to talk with more locals. Kaab was good at languages. As a child she had learned this one from a family servant who'd worked for Aunt Saabim here. Her mother had wanted her daughter's tongue to be as swift as one of the little chameleons that flitted across the sunny courtyard—her mother, who, Ixkaab realized now, had also been one of the great movers of the chocolate trade across the North Sea passage to this land. But her mother was gone to the houses beneath the earth. Instead, it was Ixmoe's younger sister Ixsaabim who dwelt here with her new husband, keeping the Balam family at the forefront of the Northern chocolate trade. And here Kaab would stay, in the Balam family compound, until her father called her home.

"The old kings were terribly corrupt," the agent was saying.

"So now you are ruled by the Lords of Council."

"The Council of Lords!" The agent laughed with the patronizing amusement of one not used to hearing his language imperfectly understood. What a hick! "But here I keep you chatting, when I'm sure you are tired and would like to go home to your family."

"I am not in the least tired," Kaab said. "Pray, continue your most delicious explaining."

Because, in fact, Ixkaab Balam was not at all eager to arrive at Aunt Saabim and Uncle Chuleb's before they had had time to read her father's hastily written letter, the letter that had accompanied her on the *Wasp*, the letter explaining just what she was doing there, and why she had had to leave home in such a hurry.

• • •

"Your hair was perfect already," the Duke Tremontaine said, standing awkwardly against the passementerie on his lady's boudoir wall. It was one of the things she loved about him; the way he always seemed to feel out of place, no matter where he stood, everywhere except in his leather-filled library. When Diane had traveled here almost twenty years ago, a callow girl about to be married to the young heir to Tremontaine, she had been so afraid that he would turn out to be cold, or arrogant, or even dull. Duke William was none of those things. "I don't know why you must spend so much time on it."

The duchess's maid knew better than to smile. It was her lady's place to contradict her husband, when she chose.

Lucinda had had cosier employers: rich, titled ladies who wanted sympathy, gossip, or even mothering from the woman who tended to their looks, their clothes, and their personal comfort. But the lady's maid preferred to work in silence, paying perfect attention to each curl, each ribbon, each fall of lace; to the placement of each jewel on the shining bodice or tight-laced sleeve. And the duchess repaid her efforts: Diane de Tremontaine was the shining star of every social gathering. She had a certain something no one could safely

imitate: a simultaneous air of fragility and confidence, of grace and poise and hesitance, the desire to please and the fullness of being pleased . . .

The Duchess Tremontaine suited Lucinda very well. She made no demands other than to be turned out perfectly every time.

“Now, madam,” the duke said, “since you are sitting quite still for the foreseeable future, would you be so good as to listen to the notes for my speech at this afternoon’s Council meeting? You know I dread these things like a visit to the tooth surgeon’s.”

“I know you do.” Diane nodded her approval of the second set of enameled hairpins Lucinda set before her. “But you always perform splendidly. I wish I could come and see you in the Council of Lords. I could watch from the gallery. But I must get dressed up and attend that dreadful chocolate party at dear Lady Galing’s.” Diane frowned down at her lap. “I don’t know what I will wear; everyone’s seen all my afternoon gowns so many times already!”

“They won’t notice the gown; they’ll be looking at you.”

“You’re a darling. Clara Galing will notice. She has an eye for such things.” Diane turned a ruby ring on her finger, contemplative. “She isn’t well, you know. Who can say how many more times we will be called upon to listen to harp music in that blue salon, while balancing those tiny saucers on our knees?” She snapped her fingers in annoyance. “If only Honora had held out, she might very well have been contracted to Galing, and have been lady to the Crescent Chancellor before she was twenty!”

“With a husband twice her age?” The duke, less than ten years his wife’s senior, shook his head. “And anyway, Galing’s besotted with Asper Lindley, now.”

“Oh is he? With Lindley? I would have thought Asper a bit long in the tooth to attract Galing.”

“Well, that’s just it.” William leaned back against the armoire, comfortably sure of his facts. “When we were boys, new come to town—thinking ourselves fine young men, of course—Galing took quite a fancy to Asper. But Asper wasn’t having any ‘dry old politician’—his very words, as I recall—he was too busy chasing other men’s wives. Someone had told him they were easy, and he was . . . eager for experience.”

Unable to nod under Lucinda’s ministering hand, the duchess pressed her lips together in amusement. “And with that shock of gold hair, and that delicate mouth, I’m sure they were only too happy to oblige him. Land!” She laughed aloud. “What a pair you must have made! The scarecrow and the ivory god.”

In the mirror, she saw her husband blush. Interesting. He’d been awkward on their wedding night, but not entirely ignorant. She’d made a point never to ask him how he’d learned, nor yet with whom. She covered her sigh with a yawn. Asper Lindley! Fancy that. Well, Lindley had her coloring, after all. No wonder William had been so enthusiastic when he met her. “What changed his mind now, I wonder?”

“His ‘dry old politician’ is not as old as he appeared to us then. And Galing is now the Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords. So Asper, having satisfied his taste for pretty girls (while still refusing to wed any, much to his mother’s despair), well, Asper has moved on to men of influence, while he still has power to attract them.”

It all lined up, even her husband’s slightly sarcastic tone: he wouldn’t understand

why a pretty boy would play with him and then move on. William loved deep, and William loved true.

“You should see the two of them in Council,” he went on. “Sometimes I think the Crescent isn’t paying attention to anything anyone’s saying, he’s so busy staring across the room at Asper Lindley’s golden hair. I doubt he’d have looked twice at our Honora.”

“Oh, darling. Galing looks twice at *everything*. I’m sure we could have arranged it.” The languid duchess grew suddenly brisk. “Now, then, let’s get your notes, shall we? If you can convince the Council to lower the tax on barley water, it will be very good for us. Our barley crop has done extremely well this year.”

• • •

In the River Street Marketplace, a girl named Micah kept her eyes firmly on her turnip stall. It was a grey and muddy day, “the arse end of winter dragging its dirty tail behind it,” as Uncle Amos liked to say. Winter’s end was mucky and messy enough at home on the farm; in the city it was worse. Not *ten* times worse—though that was what Aunt Judith always said. As if the multiple of “bad” was always ten! Micah liked people to be more precise. So, with the part of her that was not watching the stall, she calculated how much worse the city was, exactly.

On the farm, you pretty much knew what you were getting into, or how to avoid it—as long as you wore your clogs in the farmyard. You knew what season to plant things, and when to put the chickens to bed. The way to the pasture didn’t change, and the cows had worn a deep, clear rut over the years between it and the barnyard where they came to be milked.

The city, though, had streets tumbled about in no particular order. If cows had laid out the streets that wandered and crossed each other, Micah hoped never to meet them. And then there were the buildings, with their different shapes and sizes and ornaments: One was a house where people lived and one was a shop where people sold things and another was a place to get beer and another to get grilled meat, but because the shop had once been a tavern it still had those little windows taverns have, and somehow you were supposed to know what was what by the pictures hanging on boards over the doorway, though why a place with a horseman on the sign sold wine, while a sailing ship sold cloth . . .

Micah did make a map of the streets in her head. She added new ones to it every time she went anywhere in the city. But she couldn’t do anything about the houses.

In the city you couldn’t always see the sky, and there were no trees at all. And underfoot lay all kinds of garbage that people tossed, not just dog- or cow-poop, and nobody saved it to put on the fields. Because there weren’t any fields. Just a big open square where Micah and Cousin Reuben came every week to sell what the family grew, alongside lots of other farm folk from miles around, people who lived close enough to the city to make it there and back between sunrise and sunset. Micah’s family was a little farther out, so they brought blankets to sleep in the cart overnight and leave for home the next day.

Weather-wise, Micah put the city at about four times worse than the country. In

terms of the number of people, though, shouting and crowding, it was easily one hundred and ten times worse. So Micah kept her eyes on the stall, where all the bunches of sweet little turnips were arranged in the most beautiful patterns. By her. By Micah. Five on the bottom, then three, then two, then one. Eight rows like that.

And every time anyone bought some, she had to rearrange the whole thing. It kept her busy.

• • •

Kaab had convinced the agent to run her a little up the river in a skiff under the bridges, just to get oriented. Maps were all very well, but they didn't really show the details of a place: the height of a wall, the width of an alley. As it gave him a chance to show off his city and his knowledge to the exotic foreigner, the agent was happy to do it. A boatman did the rowing, of course, moving them northwest against the slow current.

Kaab pointed to the river's west side, on the opposite bank. "What are those funny—those pretty little roofs? With all the little chimneys?"

"Oh, that?" He looked away. "That's nothing."

"Nothing? But people live there . . . ?"

"Pay it no mind. It's called Riverside. A lawless place."

"Do you say so?" But Kaab knew all about Riverside. Her friend the sailmaker had many stories of the little island in the middle of the river, old in stone and old in mischief, the haunt of—

". . . thieves and pickpockets," the agent was saying, "fences and forgers, card sharps and keen beggars, and, ah, very bad women."

Kaab shook her head sadly. It amused her no end to play the innocent stranger with him. "And swordsmen?" she asked doucely. "Are these famous fighters of yours there, too?"

"The worst of them are," he said darkly. "These Riverside swordsmen are desperate men. Some do use their talents to move up to a better life, working as guards or duellists for the nobles. But the worst of them . . . well, they kill each other on the street just to try their blades."

"I did not know this city was so perilous."

"Oh, only in Riverside, lady," he hastened to assure her. "Don't you think of setting foot there! Why, the City Watch doesn't even go there. But anywhere else, you're safe as houses."

She let the funny phrase pass; his tone and his earnest face made the meaning clear. Like everywhere else she'd ever been, it was a *nice* city, they said, a *good* city, run by decent people. You'd only get in trouble if you did something stupid. Or failed to follow the seven hundred and thirty-three unspoken rules of conduct that of course anyone should simply know. Fortunately, Ixkaab Balam was a quick study.

"But must we all cross this terrible Riverside to get to the Middle City on the other bank?" she asked. "The very fine shops are there, no? And then one may climb to the Hill, with its stunning houses of the great nobles of the land."

He chuckled. "Never you fear, milady! You need never set foot in Riverside. There

is a modern bridge upstream, just past the University, that will take you to the new side of the river, where the shops and the people are very fine, indeed. It is a bridge so wide, mark you, that two carriages may pass each other on it!”

“Stunning,” Kaab murmured. It seemed to be the right answer to everything. She wondered how quickly she could shake this fool and get to Riverside.

• • •

“Micah!” Cousin Reuben wanted her. “C’mere, boy!” She had to let him call her *boy* when they were in the city, because that way people wouldn’t bother her. She even wore boys’ clothes, and had her hair cut short. Aunt Judith had put a big bowl over her head, and cropped around it. Once she got used to the feel of nothing covering her neck, though, Micah liked it; long hair was a big nuisance to take care of, and sometimes tickled you when you didn’t want it to.

A woman with a basket was buying turnips, and Cousin Reuben was trying to count change. He wasn’t very good at it.

“It’s clear as the nose on your face!” the woman with the basket was saying. “I give you a quarter-silver for these, and you give me seventeen brass minnows back.”

“Eighteen,” Micah said.

Reuben didn’t seem happy. “You don’t even know what she bought!”

“Yes, I do. A bunch of the little ones. Right there. I’ve got them in order, so I know. It would be seventeen minnows,” she told the woman, “but you took the littlest ones, so we owe you eighteen instead. Did you want bigger? It would be seventeen, then.”

The woman smiled. “You’re an honest lad. Not like some of them kids. Yes, give me the bigger ones.”

Carefully, Micah rearranged the stall to get the right bunch and put the wrong ones back. The woman stamped and blew on her fingers. “Hurry up,” said Reuben, but the woman said, “No, take your time, honey. I know you’ll pick a good bunch out for me.”

“They’re all good,” said Micah, “but these ones cost more.” The woman didn’t say anything else. But Cousin Reuben gave her the right change.

“Well, she was a prize,” Reuben grumbled. He looked at the sky. “Sun setting in a bit. Get ready for the ‘Oh-no-I-forgot-dinner’ rush.”

“If we sell everything,” Micah asked, “can we go home tonight?”

“Naw, sugar. Too dark to see, this time of year. You don’t want old Rhubarb breaking her leg, do you?” He patted the head of the roan plough horse, who doubled as wagon-puller. “That would make you sad.”

“Yes, it would. I love Rhubarb. The horse, that is, not the plant. I like rhubarb pie, but that’s about it. Sally likes fresh rhubarb dipped in honey, but—”

“Dear God! Turnips!” A voice like a trumpet sounded in their ears. “You don’t know what this means to me! You saved my job—possibly my life. Yes, my life for sure.” The speaker was a big man with a beard tucked into his belt, who hardly paused for breath. “How much? See, I’m not even bargaining. I’ll take everything you’ve got.”

Micah looked at her piles. “Six and a half silver and thirty-two brass minnows.”

“Why don’t we make it a straight six?”

“Because that’s not what they cost. If we sold every single bunch, we would get six and a half silver and thirty-two brass min—”

“My boy’s real good at numbers,” Reuben said, ruffling her hair. “It’s all right, master. You can have the lot for six. And then we can go home, eh, Micah?”

“Not if Rhubarb breaks her leg! We can’t go home in the dark, Reuben, you said—”

“Now, now, no one’s going home in the dark.”

The big man looked at all the turnips. “I shall have to make two trips. Unless . . . ?”

Reuben looked at Micah. Micah nodded.

“No trouble, mister; my boy will be glad to help you.” He winked at Micah, which meant “be sure to ask for a tip.” And to her he said: “You just help the nice man carry them all home, and I’ll stay right here and take care of Rhubarb, make sure she gets fed and rubbed down, and make us a nice, cosy bed in the cart for the night. And then we’ll head out at first light, and be home by noontide.”

“Well.” The man drummed his fingers. “That’s very kind of you. Offering help, I mean. It’s not far—just down River Street and into the University.” Reuben started putting their stock in sacks, while the man explained, “I’m Harcourt Onophrion, cook to the Horn Chair of History. A great man, Doctor Fleming, and he’s throwing a little feast for some other University masters tonight. Something about some dead poet, and they all get drunk and sing and recite. I had a splendid meal all planned for them—not that they notice what they’re eating once the Ruthven red starts flowing—but a very good meal. I was just going over the menu with Doctor Fleming—and he nearly burst a blood vessel when he saw I didn’t have mashed turnips on it. Who knew? Turns out you can’t properly celebrate Dead Poet without Mashed Turnips. Won’t be made a fool of in front of his colleagues. Swears he explained all this to me, but I am here to tell you, he may remember ancient history, but he’s clueless about two days ago. Thank you . . . Yes, yes, that’s very good. I’ll use some greens for salad tomorrow, and pickle the rest of them.”

Reuben filled one sack and started on another. “I had to come myself,” Master Onophrion explained. “My boy is down with the quinsy, and I wouldn’t trust Fleming’s manservant to find a black cat in a snowstorm, much less the right kind of turnip. I really am very grateful.”

“That’s all right. Micah, you take these—not too heavy for you, are they?—and just follow the gentleman. You’ll find your way back, right?”

“Right,” said Micah. “I’ve been to university. Last time was fifty-nine days ago, when we made that carrot and potato delivery to Nan’s Cookshop. I remember that way. And if this one is different, I’ll put it on my map.”

“Good boy.”

“Come, then,” said the cook, “Dead Poet won’t wait forever!”

• • •

Back on the dock, Ixkaab thanked the agent profusely, pleased that she would never see him again.

*Oh, don't thank me, always happy to help such a distinguished visitor, so pleased the first ship is in after a hard winter, please give your uncle my best regards and tell him it's a privilege to serve the Kin-Winny trading fleet . . .*

His words ran together in his enthusiasm, but she got the gist of it. Xamanek's light, was he never going to finish? He was like one of the beggars lining the flower-strewn road to Ixchel's temple . . . Kaab smiled to herself as she figured it out. Of course he was.

"I will certainly tell my uncle when I see him." (And not my aunt? She'd heard these people undervalued women. Well, so much the better for her.) "But, sir, please allow the immediate expression of my gratitude for your kindness."

Kaab and the agent did the dance of protesting, insisting, protesting, insisting—she made note that, as with the Bakhim, it was the usual three times before he conceded. Kaab dug in her sash for her pouch of cacao, and pressed a reasonable-sized chunk on him.

He acted as if it were Nopalco gold, and not just a common-variety bean, barely worth a hot bath back home. So she'd given him too much. But what of it? She raised her chin. The *Wasp* was full of cacao; and she was a first daughter of the House of Balam.

She let him bow to her one more time, waited until the agent's attention was once again turned to the unloading of cargo (as it should have been all along), and went to where her personal luggage sat awaiting transport.

Ixkaab was still wearing her shipboard travel dress: loose trousers and blouse under feathered vest under quilted jacket. Her thick, dark hair was decently wrapped atop her head, and she was grateful for the scarf that covered it all. Ever piece of cloth kept you warmer here.

Traders, of course, were supposed to adopt the Local garb, to blend in. There would be plenty of time for that when she had presented herself at her family's compound. For now, let the Locals think of her what they would! She was not planning to go amongst decent people anyway. Before she settled into being the dutiful daughter of a house of prosperous foreign merchants here, convincing all her kinsfolk that she would never get into trouble again, she needed to test out her newest skill, acquired on the ship from the old crippled sailmaker who had once been a swordsman.

• • •

"There!"

The Duchess Tremontaine finished tearing the long, fine seam of her pale green silk skirt. Her maid was working on the other seam, but the duchess was not above putting her hand to fabric, if it would get the job done faster. And besides, the action of pulling the material apart, the sound of the careful stitches snapping under her hands, gave her satisfaction.

"Yes, good," she said. "All that green was getting vulgar. I'm going to wear dove colors this spring. They will look dreadful on poor Sarah Perry, but she won't dare try not to follow, not if Lady Davenant takes it up, and you know she will. Lady Sarah is about to marry her homely daughter to Rupert Vernay, who stands to inherit Lord Filis and's not inconsiderable estates someday. What a pity she'll have the choice of looking either stylish

or corpsy at their wedding this spring. Now fetch me the grey satin underskirt.”

“I fear I have not yet gotten the chocolate stains out of it, madam.”

“Have you not?” The duchess rested her hands for a moment. But her tone was contemplative, not angry. “Have you not, indeed? Lucinda,” she said with sudden briskness, “you will have to finish the task yourself. Run the seams up the green, so . . .” She bunched the fabric in her hands. “Yes, so it ruches naturally. You need not be precise. Just make sure it falls so that no one can see the chocolate stain on the grey.” Her maid nodded, taking the green silk from her. “I will be writing letters in my closet. I am not to be disturbed.”

“Yes, madam.”

The duchess paused at the door. “Just remember—I want a sense of deliberate carelessness. The way you did my hair for the Lassiters’ ball. A tumble of silk.”

“Deliberate carelessness.” Lucinda nodded, and a slow smile spread across her face. “Madam, no one will be able to copy you.”

“Well, they can try,” Diane said, with the most piquant of little smiles, the one she had when something genuinely amused her. “They can certainly try.”

• • •

The big man huffed and puffed as he walked with his sacks of turnips. He didn’t want to talk. Which was good, because it meant Micah could really concentrate on remembering their route for her map because of the way the old cows had laid out the streets. It took some thought, but she could do it.

“Carry those for you, mister?” An enterprising boy tried to stop Master Onophrion, but: “No need,” the big man huffed. “We’re nearly there. You all right, then, little one?”

“Yes, I am,” said Micah, without the breath to explain that she wasn’t that little: She had strong shoulders and a broad waist. “Cobby,” Aunt Judith called her. Like a good plough horse. But compared to the cook, Micah was pretty little, so she guessed he could call her that if he wanted.

“Here we are.” He fumbled with keys at the door of an old, old house, and opened it. “Just drop them in here. Sa-a-a-am!” he roared. “Come help me with these!” He turned back to Micah. “I’d offer you a hot drink, but I must get to work for the Turnip Poet. Here. Get yourself one at the Ink Pot; it’s close by.”

He handed her a handful of brass. And then the door was shut, and she was alone, stamping her feet on the cold stones of the streets of the University.

It felt like a lot of brass. But her fingers were too cold to count it. She shoved the money deep in her pocket. A hot drink sounded like a really good idea. Micah started looking for the Ink Pot.

The sun was still up, but the twisting streets were narrow, and the old houses hid most of the sky. Not too many people were about, and those that were, were hurrying through the cold, their black scholars’ robes clutched tight around them, their long scholars’ hair flying behind.

“*Ho-o-o-t taters!*”

A boy stood by a big tin that held bright embers with baking potatoes nested in them.

They looked good to Micah, and so did the warm tin.

“Get ‘em while they’re hot!”

She approached the fire, and rubbed her hands at it.

“How many for you, friend?”

A potato would warm her hands; but if she was going to spend the money, it would be better to be indoors. And besides, the cook had told her to get a hot drink. People sometimes got mad if she didn’t do exactly what they said. “Zero,” Micah told the boy.

“Zero? ‘Zat your name?”

“No. It is a number that is less than one. Less than one half, even,” she hastened to assure him, in case he got the wrong idea. She didn’t like it when people tried to buy half a turnip, either.

“‘Less than one’ equals fuck off, kid.”

“Can I just warm my hands a little?”

“No. Not if you’re not paying any.”

“Fair enough. Can you tell me how to get to a place called the Ink Pot?”

“The Ink Pot . . . hmm . . .” The boy stroked his chin, as if he had a beard. “‘Zat where the poets hang out?” Micah didn’t know, so she didn’t say anything. “Let’s see . . .”

The directions he gave were not very clear. He kept using street names—which wasn’t useful because there weren’t any signs—or else landmarks like “right by the bookseller’s with the picture of the dog in the window,” which were not that helpful either. But while he talked, Micah made all the turns a good pattern in her head, so when he finally finished she thanked him politely and set off.

It was not as close as the cook man had said. Or else the potato boy was confused. When she got to where he had directed her, all she saw was a plain door; a door set in a wooden wall with a low shingle roof. Was this the Ink Pot? It looked a lot like an old stable. But she could hear voices inside. Maybe it was a secret tavern. But where was the tavern sign? What if it was somebody’s house? Micah was standing frozen when a young man in a black robe hurried up to the door. He stopped when he saw her.

“Don’t be afraid, young ‘un. Doctor Padstow won’t bite.” He opened the door, motioning her in with him to a place full of voices and warmth. If they didn’t have hot drinks, at least they had heat. Micah went in.

The little room was full of benches occupied by black-robed scholars with slates, all grouped around a hot brazier. In the middle, a man with black-banded yellow sleeves was drawing with a burnt stick on the plaster wall.

Micah stared. It was an eight-sided shape, perfectly divided into eight triangles. Around the outside, each line was marked with a letter *a*. The sides that made up triangles in the center were marked *b*. It made a fine pattern. But between each of these, a dotted line without a letter cut each triangle into two parts. Now, that was interesting.

“The question, gentlemen, is this,” said the man with the burnt stick: “What is the total length of the lines bisecting the triangles—*Bisecting*, as you will remember, Master Smith,” he said pointedly to the student who had come in late with Micah, and was clearly wrong about Doctor Padstow not being one to bite, “being the act of dividing in half . . .”

*Bisecting*, Micah murmured to herself. What a wonderful word for it!

“. . . then: What is their total length, expressed in terms of  $a$  and  $b$ ?”

The young men all scribbled furiously on their slates. “Doctor Padstow?” One raised his hand. “If we were to connect the eight *outside* points to create a circle . . .”

“It would create a very pretty picture, Master Elphinstone; but unfortunately, would not get you any nearer the answer.” A bell started tolling, a huge, heavy sound on the air outside. “And so I’m afraid I will have to leave you to ponder the question until our next lesson.”

Micah felt jumpy, as if she had to pee. She couldn’t stop wriggling inside. She had to tell them, if they couldn’t see. “Squares,” she said loudly.

Doctor Padstow looked up sharply. “Who said that?”

“I think it was the kid.”

“Because you’ve made the inside ones squares, and they’re all the same, so to find out, you just add them all up!”

Everyone was staring at her. She really hated being stared at.

“Are you a geometer, boy?”

“No,” Micah said. “I have to go!”

She turned and ran.

Now the streets were full of people; men of all ages in black robes, scurrying about as though they were rats set free from a trap. The big bell must have released them. They didn’t see anything wrong with pushing to get where they were going, either. Micah really, really hated being pushed, or even being brushed, by strangers.

She tried going back the way she’d come, but the black-clad rats wouldn’t let her. She was scared, now. She counted backwards from two hundred and fifteen by numbers divisible by three. That usually helped. But people kept bumping into her. She couldn’t see where the street ended so she couldn’t tell where to turn. She was losing her numbers. She was losing her maps—

• • •

“You all right, kid?”

Micah looked up from where she was crouched in a doorway, her hands over her head. She didn’t remember getting there.

“Don’t touch me!” she said hoarsely.

It was a young scholar, almost as young as she was, maybe. “I won’t.” He drew back his hand. “Did somebody hurt you? Did your master beat you?”

“No.” Micah felt in her pocket for the turnip cook’s coins. They were all still there. “Nobody beat me. I just got lost.”

The young scholar smiled. “I did, too, my first month here. You’re from the country, aren’t you? I am, too. Can I help you find your way?”

“The Ink Pot?” Micah said without hope.

“I know it. Come on.”

This boy did want to talk. But mostly he was telling her about himself. It didn’t matter, anyway. The streets were a giant tangle of yarn, like when the cat got into Aunt

Judith's basket. It would take her all night to untangle them. Eventually, Micah told herself, she'd find a street she knew, and she could start again. But she'd probably have to wait 'til dawn to find her way, unless she spent money to hire a torch to walk her through the night streets, and Cousin Reuben would be mad. She definitely had to have a hot drink, first.

• • •

Riverside felt dangerous to an experienced hand like Ixkaab Balam. There were a million hiding places amidst the close-together, leaning old houses of stone, where anyone could be lurking.

But before she'd left her father's house, Kaab had taken a little memento from the wall of his accounting room. It was one of the curiosities her kinsfolk had sent back from foreign parts. Since his duties left him no chance to travel overseas, her father liked to line his workroom with exotica.

Her father might be annoyed to find the Xanamwiinik dueling sword gone, but surely he'd understand why she had carried it with her across the sea.

The blade was long and heavy and bright. The *Wasp's* sailmaker had shown her how to keep it from rusting during those months at sea.

And he'd shown her how to use it, as well. His legs being as they were, he could no longer enact the moves, but by Ahkin, he could make Ixkaab dance! Up and down the deck, 'til the strange grip felt normal in her hand and the weight of the sword on her arm. And then its silver tip up and down the mast-that-was-her-enemy, until Kaab was sure her enemy stood no chance. But when the sailmaker lifted a marlinespike, and showed her what a clever blade could do to dance around her like a dragonfly in heat—Kaab smiled at the memory. It wasn't a toy, after all.

She was glad the Local sword hung at her hip now. There were very few people on the street, although it was nearly midday. But they had to be somewhere. Indoors, maybe? Few of the cunning, twisted chimneys gave forth smoke.

The Riverside stone still exuded coldness from the night; and judging by how the houses nearly met across the narrow, filthy streets, the sun probably never reached between them long enough to warm them. On one street Kaab went down, most of the houses looked abandoned: wooden doors rotted, shutters and glass gone from the windows. Ancient staircases up to nowhere.

Kaab headed for a street where she could see wash lines hung across the road between houses. The sheets on them were yellowed, the underwear torn—but between them were bursts of color, like parrots roosting in a tree: a bright scarf, a frilled skirt, a stripy stocking . . . Poor people. But ones who liked some flash and dazzle.

Ixkaab counted dozens of mangy cats on the streets, the roofs, the doorways, cats of all sizes and colors—some new to her—all of them scrawny, many of them patchy and bitten; but she didn't see a lot of rats. Good for you, kitties! she thought.

*I know my love by his way of walking*

*And I know my love by his way of talking  
And I know my love by his steel so true  
And if one love leaves me, I'll seek a new!*

A woman was singing vigorously to herself, loud enough to be heard around the corner. Kaab slowed and took the side of a house, to see before she was seen.

The woman was leaning against a wall, catching a bit of sun on her pale, pale face. But her hair was aglow already. Kaab blinked. It was no trick of the light: the woman's hair was the color of clouds at sunset, of a good ripe mango, of a hunter's fire. If not for her face, she would be a creature of fire—but no: The woman heaved a long sigh, and her bosom rose like Ixel's pale twin moons from the top of her gown.

Kaab let her breath out slowly. Was this a Riverside prostitute, waiting for customers? Was her song some kind of signal to let people know? If so, where were they all? Why weren't the streets lined up five deep to taste the nectar of this woman's lips, bright and pink as the blush on her pale cheeks . . . to unbind those twin moons and let them sail the skies of pleasure . . .

"I'm going to kill you, Ben!" the street goddess yelled up at a window above her.

A bright head popped out of it. "Not if I kill you first!" A young man's face, pretty and delicate as Chamwiinik porcelain, capped with tousled golden hair that just had to be fake. "You've hidden my best striped jacket!"

"I've pawned your ugly jacket!" Her hands on her hips, her head tilted up to the window, the sun-haired, moon-bosomed woman turned her back to Kaab. Her buttocks . . . well, there might be some padding under that skirt. Against the cold, maybe. But then, there might not.

"It wasn't funny the first time, Tess, and it isn't funny now! Come up and get me my goddamned jacket! Or I swear I'll—"

"Get it yourself," she sang. "It's under the bed, where you flung it last night sometime between when you got that message from your father, and when you finally stopped drinking."

"Very funny." But his head ducked back inside. The words wafted faintly out: "I looked under the— Oh."

"Oh." The woman Tess smiled to herself with those ripe guava lips. She leaned back against the wall, picked up a skein of her glorious hair, and started braiding it into tiny braids.

Kaab murmured a Tullan verse to herself: "*If I were your sweet sister, I would braid your night hair into as many strands as there are stars in the sky . . . and if it took all night, and the next night after that, then who could fault or interrupt us?*"

The door sprang open, revealing the gold-haired Ben in a fine, bold jacket of green and red stripes, buckling on a sword. *At last!* Kaab thought. *Some clothes with color!* But any approval she had for this Ben vanished when he seized Tess roughly by the arm.

"Let go of me, you sot!" she said.

Of course! He must be the man who sold her love, to pay for his vainglorious jackets. *Pimp*, that was the word. Local custom or not, Kaab couldn't stand it. And hadn't he also

just threatened to kill this glorious woman? She had come to Riverside to try her sword, and this was her perfect chance.

She stepped forth from the shadows.

“The brightest of mornings to the one of you, and a heap of trouble to the other.” Kaab didn’t know how these people issued a challenge, but he could hardly mistake her meaning.

The pimp stared at her. And then he laughed. “Nice outfit, sister,” he said, “but the Riverboaters’ Masquerade was last month.”

Masquerade? Oh, he meant her clothes. Kaab tightened her woven sash ostentatiously, and showed him the scabbard at her side. “I do not joke.”

“I do not care,” he mocked.

“Shhh!” Tess pulled at his sleeve. “Ben, she’s one of those *chocolate* people!”

He grinned. “Chocolate, huh? And does your rich Trader mama know you’re out here in big bad Riverside, little girl?”

Kaab breathed in slowly through her nose. She had no trouble understanding Ben’s language. His accent was like the sailmaker’s, and he spoke as loud as a village priest.

“I will be clear,” she said distinctly. “You trouble this lady. You insult my people, my mother, and my dress. You have a sword. I have a sword. Is more clearness needed?”

“Is more clearness needed?” He seemed to be mocking her accent. “Well, that depends.” He put his hand on his hilt. At last. “I might need to see what color your blood is.”

“Ben!” The glorious Tess was actually pulling on his arm. “That cart won’t wait forever! Do you want to see your father before he dies, or not?”

“This won’t take long.” He shook his woman off.

Decency required that Kaab just let him go to attend his father’s deathbed—but her liver-spirit was too stirred up to care. If he’d rather fight her, let him. She’d make short work of him and his insults. She drew her blade, all thoughts of formal challenge gone. And Ben drew his.

Like buzzards scenting meat, people were flocking to the space around them, making a rough circle for them to fight in, shouting incomprehensible things. It was crude, it was bizarre, it was outlandish—and Ixkaab Balam felt alive, for the first time in weeks.

Ben lunged at her at once—in a hurry to catch his cart, no doubt—but she knew this one; the sailmaker had taught her. Her wrist moved, and his blade slipped off hers with a grinding noise that made her grin. *Take that, you mangy little pimp!*

“She knows what she’s doing, Ben!” Tess cried. “For godsakes, stop!”

Kaab’s wrist finished the move, twirling her point around his to target his chest. But Ben was not to be had so easily. He stepped back, then came at her again, as if he couldn’t believe it hadn’t worked right the first time. Again she countered him, and this time her point reached closer to his chest.

The people kept yelling, again with no respect for the fighters, as if this duel were a servants’ tavern brawl. Above them she heard Tess’s voice blaring: “First blood! First blood!” What was she talking about? Kaab wasn’t bleeding, and Ben wasn’t either. “I’m the cause of the fight, and I’m calling it just to first blood!”

Circling Kaab, Ben growled, "Shut up. I'm going to kill her."

"No you're not! You haven't got time! Just pink her and go!"

Kaab's body was hot, but the fight was cooling her liver-spirit, and her head-spirit was reasserting itself. Ben was distracted. Maybe his woman was even doing it on purpose, to help Kaab rescue her from her pimp. It was the perfect time to try a special little play her shipboard friend had taught her, a trick he said would never fail: a fake thrust that led the enemy to aim for your shoulder, while you blithely went in straight to his heart.

It failed.

She felt a wasp-sting in her right arm. "*Rose-torn demons of hell!*" Kaab shouted, dropping her blade.

"First blood!" All around her, the people were crying it out, like an incantation. Kaab didn't trust them. Her sword had skidded west. She reached down for it—

A burly old man had his foot on the blade. "You know the rules," he told her. "Or if you don't, you shouldn't be here."

Kaab looked up at him. "Are you of honor?" It came out wrong, but the grey-head nodded.

"This is Riverside, honey. We know no honor but the sword."

He stepped back a pace.

"Now, pick up your blade; and go back to whatever traveling sideshow you came from, girl. And if you ever want to come here again, I advise you to take a few more lessons, first."

She risked a look across the circle. Ben stood there, panting and grinning. The perfidious Tess pulled at his arm. "*Now, Ben!*" She spoke to Kaab directly: "I'm sorry," she said. "He's mean when he's hung over."

"I was provoked!" Ben objected.

"Provoked to fight a girl?" someone jeered. So the sailmaker had been right. Women did not fight here.

"He'll tell you all about it," Tess said pointedly, "when he gets back from *visiting his dying father*." She shooed people away like flies. "Stop gawking. Haven't you got anything better to do?"

But Kaab was a curiosity, now that the fight was over, and they would not depart. "Where you from, lady?" the voices came at her. "Where'd you get them clothes? What'll you take for that stripy head rag? Who taught you to fight?"

It was the kind of situation Kaab always enjoyed, Xamanek help her. A new city, a new role. She could tell them anything, and they'd most likely believe it as not.

She lifted her head, trying to look like the carving of Xkawkaw on a temple gate, and announced: "I came on a great ship from the west, on the Road of the Wind. An old god taught me to fight, and I honor him by shedding my blood on your soil. Lord Ben, you have served me well. I give you leave to depart."

She nodded imperiously at him. Much as he might like to, he would not attack her again; the glorious Tess would see to that. And indeed, she was rushing him off as quick as she could, berating him all the way.

Ixkaab Balam smiled. Her shoulder stung, but she'd had worse. It was a good first day in the new city.

*Such a play-actor!* her mother's voice said fondly.  
And the Riversiders parted to let her pass.

• • •

The Ink Pot was a very nice place. It was pretty clean, and not too crowded. There was a good fire going, and people were laughing and even singing in one corner of the room. Nobody seemed mad, and no one was looking at her. Lots of them were drinking things, mostly from pewter or earthenware mugs.

The boy who had guided her said, "I'll have one with you, if you like."

"All right," said Micah.

"Where's your brass?"

"In my pocket."

"Give it to me, then."

"Why?"

"So I can go get the drinks, you gubbins! What are you having?"

"I like hot cider," Micah said. "But you can't have my money. It's mine."

"They won't give me drinks without money! Don't be stingy. Didn't I bring you here? This place is for poets, and I'm a geographer."

"Don't call names," Micah said. He should at least be polite.

She looked around for someone selling drinks. She'd never actually been in a tavern by herself before, and Cousin Reuben always got the drinks.

"How much are they?" she asked the boy. When he told her, she nodded. She certainly had that much, and a little left over. "All right," Micah said. "I'll give you the money if you get the drinks." It seemed fair—or at least, a price worth paying so she didn't need to wade into the throng and figure it out herself. She counted out exactly the right amount, and watched her helper head towards the bar.

"Come on!"

The voice behind her was loud and startling. Micah whirled; but they weren't shouting at her. Four young men sat at a round table, playing cards by candlelight in the low-roofed tavern, beer mugs at their elbows.

"Rafe, are you in or out?"

"I'm in." The tallest and darkest of them put some silver on the table.

Wow! Micah thought. They were betting with real money. She and her cousins only played with acorns.

Drawn to the game, she edged closer to the table, standing behind the dark-haired one, Rafe. She could see his cards. Not a bad hand, but it was more important to know what the others held. He couldn't bet against them if he didn't know. Each player had one card showing faceup on the table. The others had a Sun, a Comet, and a Two of Beasts. Rafe had a five, so at least they knew that. The betting went round again, and then another set was dealt.

The boy who had guided her handed Micah her drink, but she hardly noticed. She was following the patterns of the cards. She pretty much had them when Rafe laid more

silver on the table and said, "All right. Everyone show."

They started laying their hands out, but she couldn't stand it. "Fold! Fold! What are you, stupid?"

Everyone was looking at her again. But she hardly even cared. How could he be so dumb?

Rafe turned a sharp face to her, and said kindly, "It's all right, young 'un; I've got a pair of Beasts, a pair of Crowns and a Celestial. They can't beat that."

"Yes they can! It's so *obvious!*" She had that needing-to-pee feeling again, only it was needing to talk, to explain. "Look! He's got a Celestial showing, and he's got two cards down and he's betting high. There are only twenty-two cards left undealt, and the chance of one of them being a Celestial is five in a hundred, so that guy clearly has one more in his hand, which means he's got two and you lose!"

There was silence. Then, one by one, each man laid open his hand on the table.

"Holy Mother!"

She was right, of course. She always was. Her cousins wouldn't even play her anymore unless she played blindfolded.

"What's your name, son?" Rafe asked her, and she felt so sorry for him she didn't even bother to tell him she wasn't his son.

"Micah."

"Just come to town, have you?" She wasn't wearing a scholar's robe. And her hair wasn't even very long. But Rafe seemed to think she was one. "Well, Micah, would you like to join us for a hand or two?"

Five games later, Micah had a nice little pile of brass and silver in front of her. After the sixth, the other guys wanted to quit. "It's all right," Rafe told her. "We can go elsewhere. You're not tired, are you, Micah?"

"No," Micah said. This was fun. She'd already made four-sevenths of what she and Reuben had made all day selling turnips at the market.

"There's usually a good game going at the Gilded Cockatrice. Rich boys, too. Do you play Constellations?"

"No. What's that?"

"I'll teach you later. It's a fancy game, you're right; not as much fun as Seven-Card Slap-up. We'll go to the Blackbird's Nest instead. Full of historians who don't know a Celestial from a hole in their bum, and fancy themselves card sharps. Easy pickings. And if there isn't a game going, we'll get one up."

They walked together through the twilight of the streets. Micah liked the way Rafe knew where he was going all the time. People just got out of his way.

In the Blackbird's Nest, she bought them both drinks, because that was what you did when people guided you somewhere, and she had plenty of money, now. Rafe got a rum punch, and she got more hot cider, because it was the only thing she knew the name of that she liked.

Three men were playing Hole in the Corner. Rafe asked one of them, a man called Lawrence or possibly Larry, if he and his friend Micah could get in on the game. The other two were named Thaddeus and Tim. They moved aside on their benches for her and Rafe.

At first she hated betting her money, because once she had silver she wanted to keep

it. But then she started getting some of theirs, and when they switched to Slap-up she got even more.

“I’m out,” said Tim. She didn’t like Tim. He bluffed a lot, and she could never tell when people were bluffing. It didn’t make sense. It was a crazy thing to do.

“What about you, Micah?” asked Rafe. “You getting tired?”

“No,” she said. It was just getting good, really; she’d figured out that Rafe always thought that three of a kind would beat anything, even when it wouldn’t. She felt bad about taking his money, but rules were rules.

Larry leaned forward. “Hey!” he said, but in a friendly way. “I remember you now. We went into Introduction to Geometry together this afternoon.” He didn’t look familiar to her; but all these men with long hair and black robes tended to look the same. “You’re the one who knew about squaring triangles. Doctor Padstow wanted to meet you, but you ran away like the Hundred-Skin Maiden. Guess you realized you were in the wrong lecture, eh? You want a more advanced class.”

“I like numbers,” Micah muttered.

“Whose classes are you taking? Or don’t you know yet?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, we can help you. Thaddeus here did a lot of math before he realized he was a history man.” Thaddeus had bought everyone another round. She’d had something that was like hot cider but with a special taste in it. It was good.

“And Tim can tell you where to get your robe for cheap, if you don’t mind used.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Your warmth is heart-melting,” Rafe told his friend. “But we’re here to play cards, Larry. You in?”

“Nope,” Larry said cheerfully. “I’m the King of Losers in Loser City. If I lose any more, I’ll lose my next term’s fees, and then I’ll be back to digging ditches for Lord Trevelyan like my dad.”

“Me, too.” Thaddeus rose. “But another time, maybe. Your luck can’t last, Micah. I’ll win it all back from you, see if I don’t.”

“Do you want to bet?” Micah asked him. Back on the farm, she wasn’t allowed to bet, but here at University nobody knew that.

Thaddeus leaned across the table. “Bet what?”

“Bet I can beat you eight games out of ten or better?”

“Eight hands, or eight full games? And why eight? Why not seven, or nine?”

“Because eight is—is the right number,” Micah said.

Thaddeus rolled his eyes. “Mathematicians.” He gathered up his books and wrapped a scarf around his neck. “I’ll see you at home, then, Rafe. Don’t stay out too late.” He rapped his friend on the head in passing. “Or if you do, don’t kick over the slop bucket and wake everyone—”

“I only did that once, you loser. And only because you and Joshua got drunk and left it in the middle of the floor.”

“Because *you* were stone sober, of course . . . Where is Joshua, by the way? I thought he was supposed to keep you out of trouble.”

“Off getting into trouble of his own, I hope.”

“You need to find him some.”

They were a lot like her big boy cousins.

After Larry went away, Thaddeus left, too, and Rafe and Timothy started talking about stuff Micah wasn't interested in.

She counted the money in front of her again, and gasped. Now it was more than twice what she and Cousin Reuben had made all day in the market, even including the turnip cook—

Then Micah gasped again. She'd forgotten all about Cousin Reuben.

She tugged on Rafe's black sleeve. “What is it?” he asked lazily. His breath smelled a little funny, like her cousins' at Year's End. She wondered if he'd had too much to drink. Drunk people didn't talk right, and did bad things. Jackson on the farm down the road got drunk and beat his wife, and his children never had shoes. But Rafe was still perfectly clear and understandable, and still nice.

“I have to go back to the market,” she said.

“The market's all closed up, kiddo,” Timothy said. “Shops, too, by now. What do you need?”

“I'll take care of him.” Rafe swept a sleeve around her shoulders, and she let him because he didn't know any better about how she didn't like being touched and she didn't want to hurt his feelings. “Micah's new in town. Come on, son; got all your winnings?”

Micah carefully put them in her pouch, tucked that inside her boys' breeches where Cousin Reuben told her nobody could lift it, and followed Rafe out of the tavern.

It was dark out. Really dark, except for the light from the torches stuck in brackets on the walls in front of all the taverns and cookshops that were still open, even this late.

Rafe leaned down to look into her face. “So what's this about the market?”

“My cousin is there. His name is Reuben. I came with him today. He'll be worried, and then he gets mad.”

He peered at her in the flickering light. “What was he doing there?”

“Selling turnips. Only by now he might be asleep.”

“You're a *farmer*?” Rafe kept looking, and then he slowly smiled. “But you found your way to Padstow's class. You want to study here, is that right?”

“I need to go find Reuben. He'll be mad, and I'll get yelled at.”

Above their heads, the bell tolled. But the streets remained quiet and still, except for the noise from the tavern, spilling out the windows along with the bars of light.

“Look,” Rafe said. “Micah. It's really, really late. You can't go running around the city at this hour. It's dangerous, see? There're bad people out.”

“Oh,” said Micah. “Well, all right. But where can I sleep, then?”

“In my rooms. You'd be welcome. There's three of us there already; one more won't matter, as long as you don't mind sleeping under the table.”

“Well, all right. As long as I can tell Reuben in the morning. He's not stupid. He can see it's dark.”

She trotted to keep up with Rafe. But at a low window along a twisty street, with good smells trickling out of it, he paused. “I haven't eaten. And I bet you haven't, either.”

It wasn't a real bet, because he'd been with her for hours. But Micah realized she was ravenous.

Rafe grinned. "Ever had tomato pie?"

• • •

Micah hadn't realized that cheese could be so good, all melty and drippy on top of tomato goop on top of flat bread baked in an oven. She usually hated goop, but this was so salty and chewy and, well, friendly, you couldn't mind it.

A barmaid brought them both beers. It was thin and nasty; nothing like the warm brown ale that Cousin Seth brewed each fall. Micah gave Rafe hers.

The barmaid came back. She had big titties, and she drooped them in Rafe's face, like a cow, which made Micah giggle.

The barmaid ignored her. "Anything else you need, Rafe? I gave you extra cheese."

"I know you did, Margery, and I'm grateful." Rafe tilted his stool back and looked off into the distance. "*Mannerly Margery, milk and ale. That's a poem.*"

"A poem? For me?"

His stool came down with a *thunk*. "Thing is, Margery, I'm wedded to my studies. And Astronomy is a cruel mistress."

"Cold up there in the sky, is it? Maybe you need a nicer mistress, then."

"Probably. But I've got plans. Big plans. I—"

"Big plans." She snorted. "Big ones. Bigger than everyone else's? Right."

Margery went away. She wasn't interested anymore.

But Micah was. "What plans, Rafe?"

"Oh, Micah." Rafe spread his hands on the table. "Did you recognize the poem?"

"I don't know poems."

"There, see? I want everyone to know poems! Poems, and philosophy, and astronomy and geometry and mathematics and—and poems. Beauty. Complexity."

"How?"

He leaned forward, and his voice got lower. "I'm going to found a school. A school that's dedicated to teaching—to letting everyone learn beautiful, complex things! First in the city, and then, maybe, all over the land."

"If you think farm people are stupid, we're not. We can read, and write, and cipher."

"Yes, and so can my father! He's a merchant, with ships and countinghouses. But he might as well be a farmer, for all he knows or cares about the finer things in life. A farmer of the sea, a farmer of coins and—and money." Rafe finished his beer and started on hers. "And will he support me in my venture? Hells, no. He wants me to study law, and accounting. To join him in his miserable little life of crates and bales."

"Will you?"

"Hells, no!" he said again. "I'm going to have to get a job, as soon as I become a Master. I'll need money, and lots of it, if I want to teach the poor." He was moving his hands around in the air. "Sure, I'll probably have to earn it tutoring some noble's kiddies at first, but I'm no climber. I won't be secretly hoping to be noticed by Lord Papa and raised

to a secretarial position on his political staff, so I can help the nobles keep things the way they are. Not me!”

Micah stared, fascinated. “What, then?”

“I’ll write pamphlets about my theories. Then people will come flocking to me—”

“Like sheep?”

“Yes!—No! Not like sheep. Like . . . like . . . Like true men and scholars! To spread knowledge throughout the land.” She didn’t quite know what he meant, but he made it sound nice. “Micah.” He leaned across the table to her, a little too close. “I want you to promise me something. You have a thirst for learning. I know it. Stay here. Stay here and learn.”

“But I don’t want to know poetry.”

“Not poetry.” He leaned back to wave his hands again, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Mathematics. Start there. But not Padstow. Padstow’s for beginners, and you’re not one. I don’t know who your tutor at home was, but there are doctors here more worthy of your knowledge. Men who can teach you something. Men you can study with. You have to join us here. You have to stay, and study what you love. Will you promise?”

She had never seen anyone whose face lit up as much as his. His eyes were like stars, like the first stars of evening that appeared while the low sky was still blue around the edges. Micah always wished on the first stars.

“Promise me,” he said again. “Not just: *Sure, Rafe, anything you say, if you’ll let me go.* Promise me you’ll give it a chance, to dedicate yourself to learning with me.”

“All right,” she said breathlessly. How could she not? “But just for a week. Just ’til next market day, when Reuben comes back. Then I have to go home.”

“Sure,” Rafe said. “Sure, Micah, that’s fine.” He gave her another starry smile. “And maybe you can teach us, too.”

“How do you mean?”

“Your cards—the way you play, I mean. There’s some kind of method, isn’t there? You’ve figured something out?”

“Well, kind of. It’s all in my head. But maybe I could draw you a chart . . .”

“Could you?” He gripped her hands harder. “Would you? So I could start winning, too? I could pay all my debts—buy all my friends food—stand the fees for my oral examinations . . . Oh, Micah! If you could do that for me! And I will help you. I swear it. You can bunk in our rooms, I’ll help you find good classes, and find your way round . . . You belong here. I promise.”

He rose suddenly, and slapped some coins on the table.

“Shouldn’t I pay, too?” Micah asked.

“Your first tomato pie? It is an honor.”

That was so nice of him. When she had won all that money, even some of his. And he had shown her all around, and found her card games. You should pay people for their help, she knew that. Micah fished for her pouch. She’d give him fifteen—no, seventeen—percent of tonight’s earnings. And in the morning, she’d start writing him up her likelies tables, so he could start winning, too.

• • •

Facing her family was a lot harder than facing the Riverside swordsman.

They knew exactly who Ixkaab Balam was, and what she'd done, and there were no pretty stories to tell them.

Instead, Kaab let herself be scolded by Uncle Chuleb, and examined by Aunt Saabim, and fussed over by various older female relatives whose names she couldn't even remember—if she'd ever known them—but who all exclaimed about how she'd grown, and how long her hair was, and how much she resembled her mother (may she never be extinguished, may she never disappear) and laughed or tutted at the state of her clothes, according to their natures. The family's children wanted presents, the teens wanted to hear about the voyage, the older folk wanted the news from home . . .

Finally, Uncle Chuleb had the sense or the courtesy to deliver the formal welcome: "The Sun shines upon your arrival, Ixkaab Balam, first daughter of my wife's sister."

Aunt Saabim picked up her cue: "In a week's time, we will feast your arrival. (Did your father remember the extra *achiote* I asked him for?) But now, we welcome you to the House of the Balam in Xanaamdaam. It is your home as long as you respect the laws of gods and humans. Our life for your life."

Kaab placed her hand on her heart, and bowed deeply. "And my life for yours."

"What you ask for shall be given, though we must walk the Road of the Sun to get it."

Everyone bowed to her now, even the littlest kids. Kaab looked around at them all, her people, old and young, women and men, some outlandishly dressed in Local clothing, but all with faces with the right expressions, skin the right color, eyes that knew her and welcomed her because she belonged to them.

She had to say something in response. But she was all out of words. She had been nearly ninety days at sea, and every day felt suddenly like a year.

"I would like . . ." Ixkaab Balam said. They nodded encouragingly at her, all smiles and welcome. She ought to ask to drink a welcome cup to toast them, or ask for prosperity on the house, or any number of things that meant nothing at all at the moment.

"I would like the longest, hottest, soapiest, scented bath it is within your power to provide."

The sound of their laughter welcomed her at last.

• • •

All eyes were upon the Duchess Tremontaine as she entered Lady Galing's drawing room. She was dressed in a marvelous confection of sea foam and lace that made her look like a water nymph, treading the land on little silver shoes, shoes with the smallest of bows and the sweetest curve of the heels. Instead of the elaborate jewelry of the other ladies, she wore a string of small pearls like bubbles of water, and bracelets of fine silver. Individual pearls peeked from her hair, upswept save for the few fair curls that tumbled down her neck, caught by a silver ribbon.

The men who were in attendance this afternoon—younger sons not called to sit in Council, older men who thought that they could skip a day this once—felt that something

had changed in the room, that the air they were breathing was suddenly cooler, like wind off the water; the day more like one from childhood in the country, finding a patch of wild mint . . .

The ladies gasped at her splendor and audacity. Some sighed at Diane's ability to pull off something they could not. Even those who recognized the green dress from its previous incarnation could not but admire the effect. Some smiled at the sheer pleasure of seeing their art so well done.

And some did not.

"She looks like a window shade," Lady Davenant muttered to her friend Aurelia Halliday.

"She looks like a classical painting," Aurelia murmured in return.

"Something from the walls of Tremontaine House? I hear they're strapped for cash again. Maybe it's an advertisement," Lady Davenant said wickedly.

"Darling, everyone's strapped for cash. The harvest was bad or something; my husband explained it to me, but it doesn't really make sense. Why should a lack of grain mean I can't have a new carriage? It's not as though we sell the stuff!"

"But your tenants do. If they don't make money, how can you?" Lady Aurelia paled. Her friend patted her hand. "Don't worry, it's not as bad as all that. Ask him again."

"You explain it much better than he does," Amelia pouted.

"Oh, not about the flour. About the carriage. Wear a low-cut bodice. They can't resist it."

"Can you?"

"Darling, it is all I can do not to ravish you before the chocolate is served. But I do require some sustenance. Biscuits and barley water just will not do. I wonder what Clara is waiting for? Afternoon chocolate is a serious affair."

Clara, Lady Galing, was seated in a carved chair of some magnificence, propped up with many cushions. Her skirts were quilted for more warmth, her head was wrapped in a turban of silk, pinned with an emerald ringed with diamonds, and around her shoulders were scarves in deep tones meant to make her color look less sickly and pallid. Lady Galing was indeed not well—in the less reputable gaming houses, bets were even being placed as to whether she would last out the year—but she took her position as wife to the Crescent Chancellor, head of the Council of Lords, very seriously, and gloried in her chance to be an important hostess whose parties everyone wished to attend. If the *ladies* had been so vulgar as to bet on another's health, they would have bet that Lady Galing would drop dead presiding over one of her own musicales.

"My dear!" Lady Galing attempted to rise to greet the duchess. Her two manservants hurried to assist her, but before she could rise, Diane rushed to her hostess in a ripple of silk and took her hand.

"Lady Galing! How well you look! And how kind of you to provide us with delightful entertainment at this most dull season of the year."

The guests were standing around the room, talking, admiring the view from the tall windows onto the garden, flirting and chatting. It wasn't much of a view; the last of winter gripped the landscape, and much of the Galings' fine topiary was still wrapped up

in burlap. But watery sunlight broke through the clouds from time to time, and here and there at the bases of statues peeped an impertinent crocus.

“It is the least I can do,” Lady Galing said, twinkling, “when my husband keeps half your husbands locked up in the Council debating whatever urgent matter afflicts his mind today!”

“Indeed!” Diane laughed a musical laugh. “Without you, I don’t know what we would do for amusement.”

“Or for refreshment.” Lord Asper Lindley was suddenly at her side.

Diane assessed him carefully. Lindley was one of those delicate blond men, a spun-sugar confection, whose appeal was obvious. But such men’s beauty did not last. She thought he had very few years left before the delicacy began to sag.

“Ah! Asper!” Lady Galing turned to him with every appearance of delight. “I have been waiting chocolate on you. Now that you are here, we can begin.”

Lindley raised his perfect eyebrows. “You will give me too great an opinion of myself, dear Clara. For the Duchess Tremontaine”—he bowed to Diane—“one waits chocolate. For me”—and he shrugged well-tailored shoulders—“well, all I can say, dear Clara, is that I am deeply honored.”

It was a magnificent performance, thought the duchess, on both their parts. Poor Lady Galing! Asper and Lord Galing were having a spectacular affair—and the astute were aware that, throw as many parties as his lady pleased, the real way to the Crescent Chancellor’s power and good opinion was through Asper Lindley, now. Perhaps that was Lady Galing’s strategy, too?

Or perhaps she was one of those women who thought her dignity and status were best served, when faced with her husband’s infidelities, by behaving as if they did not exist?

Lady Galing clapped her hands; the footmen bowed and hurried out to bring in the chocolate.

As Lady Davenant had said, chocolate was a serious affair. It was usually the first thing to pass anyone’s lips as they lay in their great beds in the morning (or afternoon, if they were recovering from a particularly late-night ball or supper party or gambling or amorous adventure). Some people insisted on making it fresh themselves, but most were happy to be handed a pot of it by their maid or manservant, ready to pour into little china cups just the way they liked it.

But at an afternoon party, no noble would dream of drinking ready-made. Afternoon required the full regalia: The great pots of hot water, suspended over spirit flames. The chocolate itself, lifted with tongs and grated (with gloved hands) with silver graters made to look like fanciful creatures, into individual cups—or, at large parties, as in this case, smaller pots into which the hot water was poured, then whisked together with silver whisks until it foamed. Only then was the fragrant dark brew poured into the small cups and handed round to the guests, who each added sugar and cream to taste.

In the mornings, the Duchess Tremontaine took her chocolate black; but in the afternoon, she permitted herself a little sugar and a great deal of cream.

She watched to see how Asper Lindley took his, and was rewarded with the sight of him being singularly honored by his hostess herself serving him with lump after lump of

brown sugar.

“Thank you, Clara,” he said. “I’ll tell you when to stop.”

She saw Clara Galing’s hand shake as it returned to the silver sugar bowl again, saw her face, hidden for a moment from all but Diane, contort in rage and disgust.

The truth was plain. Lord Asper Lindley might as well have had a scroll above his head, written in Lord Galing’s hand: *You will show him every courtesy.*

And Clara Galing obeyed to the letter. Out of love, out of fear, who knew? Lindley was a notorious gossip. Lady Galing’s behavior concerning himself would be reported directly back to the Crescent Chancellor. Between the sheets, probably. Diane shuddered, ready to blame it on a chill from the window, if anyone asked.

“And how is dear William?” Lindley, with his sugary chocolate, had made his way to the duchess’s side, not even bothering to offer to fetch her a cup. Fortunately, Lord Humphrey Devize had already claimed the privilege. He knew just how she liked it.

“My husband is well,” the duchess said. “Although I think you see him as much as I do, being both so occupied in Council.”

“Yes, we are quite grown-up now,” said Lindley. “Grown-up and responsible.” He gave her what was meant to be a charming smile. “We were boys together, or should I say young men, when our fathers first saw fit to bring us to the city and put a little town polish on us.” He waited for her to say how much younger than that he looked. But she simply kept an expression of pleasant inquiry upon her face. “Would it be indiscreet of me to say that we discovered some of its more recondite pleasures . . . together?”

The duchess smiled. “No, as long as you don’t enumerate them.” Lindley’s jibes were inexpressibly tedious. He was not a man of wit. It galled her to know that she could demolish him with a few well-chosen words, and that she must on no account do so. And it galled her to know that she must not only continue to endure his conversation as long as it pleased him to afflict her with it, but must pretend to enjoy the experience. Usually she found it restful, talking to idiots; it required so little of her actual attention. But Asper Lindley had a certain social cunning. He knew when he was being ignored; indeed, the duchess thought he needled largely to make sure that it never happened.

She looked Lindley in the eye, so that her peripheral gaze could scan the room for Humphrey with the chocolate, and said, “But, as you say, you are all grown-up and responsible now. And a credit to your houses. In truth, I am surprised to find you here this afternoon, Lord Asper. I know your great interest in politics.”

“Ah,” he said. People always said *Ah* when they needed extra time to think. He was probably trying to figure out whether she’d insulted him or not. He must have decided not, since he went on. “Well, today the Council of Lords is set to discuss barley and shipping. My father’s lands are mostly in cows and sheep, so I thought I might be spared for a little socializing. And besides, poor Clara . . . who knows how much longer we may have the pleasure of her company?”

Over his shoulder, Diane saw the rather large Lord Humphrey wheezing his way through the crowd, balancing her chocolate. It wouldn’t be long now. But Lindley had time for a parting shot: “By the way, I love what you’ve made of that dress.”

“Oh?” The duchess raised her delicately shaped eyebrows to give him time to wonder

if she was going to take umbrage or not. "You don't think it's too much?"

Lord Humphrey caught the last of this. "Too much?" he blustered. "Never! Too much of you would still be not enough, sweetest lady!"

What an old dear he was. He flirted with her shamelessly. Diane turned her attention to him. "You've brought me chocolate! And just the way I like it, too." She sipped delicately, and Asper Lindley took the hint. He bowed and went off to bother someone else.

Diane did not even look after him.

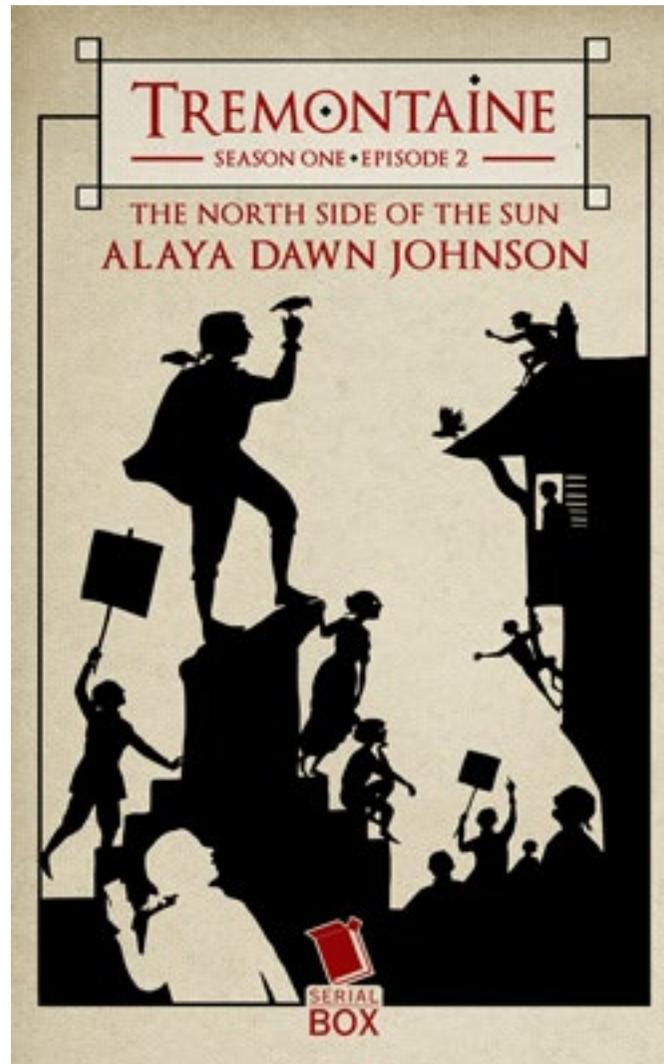
"And now, gentles!" Lady Galing coughed delicately into a handkerchief, drew a deep breath and announced: "Let us withdraw into the Blue Salon. Our dear Miss Sophronia Latimer has consented to soothe our cares and refresh our spirits with a little harp music."

Lord Humphrey had the pleasure of escorting Diane, Duchess Tremontaine, into the Blue Salon. He was tremendously wealthy, and had the Horned God's own luck with cards. She had been considering asking him for the cash to ransom Highcombe and put her back on her feet. He might do it just to be gallant. But men had hidden depths, even amiable men like Lord Humphrey. He was just as likely to expect her to sleep with him, and that she would not do. She had spent her life making sure she owed no one anything.

Diane de Tremontaine settled her green, foamy skirts around her in the small velvet salon chair, and took her cup and saucer back from Lord Humphrey. The long harp recital would give her plenty of time to think. She took a sip of the thick rich chocolate, and considered the letter on her desk, waiting to be sent. It was either a good idea, or merely a clever one. It was certainly a gamble. But the Duchess Tremontaine was very used to winning.

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# Writer Team

## Ellen Kushner

Ellen Kushner's paying jobs have included folksinger, book editor, national public radio host ([Sound & Spirit/WGBH](#)), writing teacher (Clarion, Odyssey, WRX, Hollins Child.Lit. MFA), audiobook narrator (all three Riverside novels for [Neil Gaiman Presents](#)) and pilgrim at Plimoth Plantation. Her Riverside novels begin with *Swordspoint*, followed by *The Privilege of the Sword* (Locus Award, Nebula nominee); *The Fall of the Kings* (written with Delia Sherman) and a growing collection of short stories. She lives in New York City with Delia Sherman, no cats, and a whole lot of airplane and theater ticket stubs she just can't bring herself to throw away. [EllenKushner.com](#). [@EllenKushner](#).

## Alaya Dawn Johnson

Alaya Dawn Johnson is the author of six novels for adults and young adults. Her novel *The Summer Prince* was longlisted for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. Her most recent, *Love Is the Drug*, won the Andre Norton Award. Her short stories have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Interzone*, *Subterranean*, *Zombies vs. Unicorns* and *Welcome to Bordertown*. In addition to the Norton, she has won the Cybils and Nebula Awards and been nominated for the Indies Choice Award and Locus Award. She lives in Mexico City. [AlayaDawnJohnson.com](#). [@alayadj](#).

## Malinda Lo

Malinda Lo is the author of several young adult novels including most recently the science fiction duo logy *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* (Little, Brown). Her first novel, *Ash*, a retelling of Cinderella with a lesbian twist, was a finalist for the William C. Morris YA Debut Award, the Andre Norton Award, the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, and the Lambda Literary Award. Her novel *Huntress* was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. [malindalo.com](#). [@MalindaLo](#).

## Joel Derfner

Joel Derfner is the author of *Gay Haiku*, *Swish: My Quest to Become the Gayest Person Ever* and *What Ended Up Happening Instead*, and *Lawfully Wedded Husband: How My Gay Marriage Will Save the American Family*. (Are you sensing a theme?) Musicals to which he has composed the score have played in New York, London, and various cities in between (going counterclockwise). He lives, alas, in Brooklyn, along with his husband and their small, fluffy dog. [joelderfner.com](#). [@JoelDerfner](#).

## **Racheline Maltese**

Racheline Maltese is a performer and storyteller focused on themes of loss, desire, and fame. With Erin McRae she co-writes the Love in Los Angeles LGBTQ+ contemporary romance series from Torquere Press and the Love's Labours contemporary gay romance series from Dreamspinner Press. From tentacle monsters that rule the New York City subways to lesbian werewolf bodyguards in 19th century Rome, her short fiction is about the practical problems caused by fantastical events. Racheline also writes plays and poetry, and her non-fiction on all things pop-culture has been widely published. [@Racheline\\_M](#).

## **Patty Bryant**

Patty Bryant is a cafe-based writer who publishes in the romance genre under several different pen names. She has an M.A. in archaeology from New York University and, when she is not in the field, lives in Brooklyn, NY. She is passionate about tea, nail polish, and horror movies.