

An Extract From:

The Floating Islands

by

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Chapter One

Trei was fourteen the first time he saw the Floating Islands. He had made the whole long voyage south from Rounn in a haze of loss and misery, not really noticing the harbors in which the ship sometimes anchored or the sea between. But here, where both sea and sky lay pearl-gray in the dawn, the wonder of the Floating Islands broke at last into that haze.

A boy high in the rigging called out in a shrill voice, pointing, and then the deeper voice of an officer rang out and the ship smoothly adjusted its heading. Before them, the Islands rose shimmering out of the dawn mist. They stood high above the sea – too high, even in that first mist-shrouded glimpse. Then the early sun rose up. It turned the air to gold and the sea to sapphire and picked the Islands out of the mist like jewels. In that light, they seemed too beautiful to hold terror or despair or anguish. Trei could hardly bear to look at them, yet could not bring himself to look away. He gripped the railing hard and bit his lip almost till it bled.

Each of the Floating Islands was broad on the top, narrowing to points of jagged rock below. Trei found a place to sit among coiled ropes, near the bow of the ship, out of the way of the busy sailors. He propped his chin in his hands and watched the Islands grow larger as the morning passed. They only seemed more astonishing as the ship approached them. Trei could have believed that someone had painted them on a backdrop and the ship would eventually tear through the canvas to find, waiting, a far less magical scene.

The Islands proved to be farther away than Trei had first thought. All morning, while the dawn cool gave way to the heavy southern heat, the ship sailed toward the nearest of the Islands, drawing close at last only as the sun crested in the sky. Pastures scattered with grazing sheep were visible upon its heights as they approached it, and the fluted pillars of a temple. Trei found his eye persistently trying to fill in the slopes of a mountain below the floating stone, but no matter how he stared, the red rock ran out into nothing but empty air where the gulls wheeled.

Trei craned his neck back and stared upward as they passed under the Island. Drifting mist, contorted trees growing directly out of the rock, gulls' nests, and the odd vein of white marble, all so high above there would have been room below for masts five times the height. Barely audible beyond the shrill cries of the gulls came the delicate thread of some unearthly melody.

“That’s only Talabri,” Mana said, stopping beside Trei. The burly sailor’s tone was dismissive; Trei looked at him with mute amazement that anyone could sound like that while sailing hardly a long stone’s throw from such a miracle.

“Sheep and shepherds, orchards and vineyards, temples and priests.” Mana waved Talabri away with scorn. He enjoyed talking and never minded Trei’s silence. Despite his own distracted indifference, Trei had come to like the sailor’s friendly one-sided conversation. “It’s peaceful, aye, but there’s nothing on Talabri to interest a man. Candra, now – where’s your family, lad, Candra?”

Trei closed his eyes briefly, wishing desperately that his family was on Candra, was anywhere at all in the living world. It took him a moment to manage anything like a normal tone. "Milendri. My uncle's family."

"Oh, Milendri! That's lucky for you, lad, supposing you want to live on an Island held up in the air by nothing but sky-magic. But Milendri's the greatest of all the Floating Islands, they say. Your uncle's family lives in Canpra, I suppose, the king's capital city, what's his name – some up-and-down Island name, nothing but vowels from start to finish."

The king of the Floating Islands was Terinai Naterensei, but Trei said nothing. His uncle's family did indeed live in a city called Canpra, but Trei hadn't really understood that this was anything special.

Mana, never deterred by Trei's silence, went on cheerfully, "I hear Canpra's a splendid city. Not that they let ships' crews up, but they say the old king, three back, built it to rival even Rodounnè. Not that I believe it. But it's true the bit you can see from the sea looks splendid enough."

Trei wondered how a city would look if it was deliberately built to be splendid. In Tolounn, all the towns had just sort of grown up where people had once decided to settle, like the town of Rounn growing up around the Rounn River where, according to family legend, great-grandfather Meraunn had once made his fortune backing the new steam boats over ox-drawn keelboats. He found he was curious about this new city, but didn't know exactly what to ask.

"We won't see Milendri before tomorrow afternoon," Mana rattled on. "We'll be passing islands all day, of course ..."

But Trei was no longer listening. He had just caught sight of his first winged Island fliers, and had attention to spare for nothing else.

There were a dozen of them – no, Trei saw as they approached: fourteen. Fifteen. They flew as geese fly in the fall, in a formation like a spear-point. At first the shape the winged men made was stark as a rune against the empty sky, but as they approached the ship, they broke their formation, wheeled, and circled low. The morning light caught in the feathers of their glorious wings, crimson as blood, except for one man whose wings were black as grief.

As the fliers passed above the ship, Trei saw how each man wore his wings like a strange kind of cloak. Crimson bands crossed the fliers' arms and bodies. Though the wings looked like real wings, he saw clearly that the men were flying by some understandable kind of magic and were not actually winged people. He held his breath, staring up at them.

Then all the fliers tilted their wings and lifted up and up, spiraling back into the sky and away toward Talabri. Trei let out his breath, only then aware that he had been holding it.

“Show-away Island wingmen,” Mana muttered.

“How do they *do* that?” Trei breathed.

The sailor lowered his voice even further. “Don’t they tell stories about the Island wingmen, then, way up in the north? They don’t fly with good solid human magic, but some gauzy dragon stuff. It’s not right for men, is what I say. They like to come down low over foreign ships, especially Tolounese ships. Impress the mainlanders. Like Tolounn isn’t a thousand times the size of all the Floating Islands put together, and a hundred times richer besides, but Islanders don’t know their place.” He spat over the railing and added, “Clannish sorts, and the wingmen are the worst. Stick to men who walk on solid ground, lad, not those crystal-eyed ride-on-air dragon-loving wingmen.”

Trei said nothing. He already knew that if he couldn’t learn to ride the wind on great crimson wings, he would die.

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Milendri was much larger even than Talabri, hard though this was to believe: thirty miles long, Mana said, and nearly as wide. The graceful towers of Canpra, blinding-white upon the edge of the Island, were visible while the ship was still distant. The towers drew the eye insistently, yet as they approached Trei found himself staring at the broken rock that fell away below that edge. At last, strange regularities descending below the towers resolved themselves into great structures that had been carved into the red stone above the sea. He stared in awe, understanding that Canpra’s builders carved their city down into the stone as well as flinging it up toward the sky.

Bridges and airy colonnades were strung between the white towers or out over the waves, but intricate stairways carved into the stone led down and down, to wide galleries almost low enough to feel the spray from high waves. Some of the stairways ... Trei stared. But as they approached, he saw it was true: some of the stairways mounted straight through the air, broad steps following one after another, suspended from nothing. Most were carved of red stone, some of blinding white marble. Nothing but air was visible between each stair-step and the next. The spray broke over the lowest ones – if they were the lowest: it seemed to Trei that those steps might go down and down into the sea, just as they mounted into the sky. But who might follow them down into the depths, if so?

And how was one supposed to climb those stairs, if one did not have wings?

Once Trei stood on the lowest of the stones, however, he found himself grasped firmly, as though the air itself held him in place. Even though the breeze pressed at him, once he was on it, the stair-step felt wide and perfectly secure. And the floating step carried him somehow upward, though he felt no sense of motion; every time he looked down he found himself farther from the rippling sea and the increasingly tiny ship below – already departing. So there was no way back, even if he could make his way down stairs that seemed bent on carrying him upward. Trei sat down in the center

of the rising step, next to the small pack of his pitifully few belongings, and waited to reach the surface of Milendri.

Canpra proved to be enormous, filled with brilliant light, shattering noise, chaotic movement, and crowds of people. Perhaps it *was* splendid, but nothing about the city made sense to Trei. He found it impossible to imagine that it ever could, not if he lived here a hundred years. Now that he stood surrounded by the clamor of the Island city, he found himself suddenly and fiercely homesick for the gentle hills of Rounn. But Rounn was gone. There was no way back home.

Trei blinked hard and used almost the last of his coins to hire a boy to guide him. When he followed his guide, he lowered his head, trying not to look at anything.

“Fourteen-three-forty,” announced the boy at last, turning to look with curiosity at Trei. “Avenue of Flameberry Trees, Fourth Quarter of the Second City. You all right?”

Trei did not know. He was almost sure the *address* was right, but now that he had come here, he was not at all sure of his welcome. His other uncle had not wanted him ... he had never met his mother’s brother, and if this uncle also refused him, he had no idea at all where he might go. He was seized with a conviction that he would find himself stranded, lost and with hardly a coin to his name, in a city and a country he did not know.

Slowly, Trei reached out and touched the brass clapper. The distant reverberation of the clapper’s alert sounded from inside the house. There was a long pause. Trei held his breath. The boy shifted his feet, sighed, and glanced over at Trei, opening his mouth to make some comment or suggestion. But the door opened at last.

It was not Trei’s uncle who peered out at them, but a thin, narrow-faced girl in a plain dress of undyed linen. The girl had a small mouth, a strong chin, and chestnut-colored hair as shiny and crisp as the feathers of a thrush – exactly the shade as Trei’s mother’s. Her eyes were dark, determined, and notably fierce. Trei’s sister had had eyes like those.

The girl glanced at the boy and then looked at Trei. Chestnut eyebrows rose over dark eyes. “Yes?”

“I’m looking ... I’m looking for Serfei Naseida?” said Trei. He tried not to sound frightened, and thought he probably sounded stiff.

The girl tilted her head curiously and stepped back so he could enter. “Please be welcome to our house,” she said. “I shall bring my father to speak with you.”

“All right, then,” said Trei’s guide. He gave Trei a casual flip of his hand, accepted another coin with a grin, and jogged away down the street.

Uncle Serfei proved to be a tall, angular man with sharp cheekbones and smiling, quizzical eyes. He looked nothing like Trei’s mother. But he recognized Trei at once.

The smile disappeared from his eyes, and he stepped forward to take Trei by the shoulders, looking down into his face. “Your mother?” he asked him. “Your family?”

The kindness in his tone brought grief rising unexpectedly into Trei’s throat so that he could not answer. He was unutterably relieved to find himself recognized.

Uncle Serfei’s look became grieved and pitying. Trei looked away. He found the girl ... his cousin ... gazing at him from the doorway. She didn’t look exactly unfriendly. But she didn’t look friendly, either. She said abruptly, “I’ll tell mother,” and vanished into the house.

“Come.” Uncle Serfei laid a gentle hand on Trei’s shoulder. “You’re exhausted, I’m sure. And starving. The kitchen is through here – this is the servants’ half-day, so we must fend for ourselves,” Uncle Serfei explained apologetically. “But Araenè does very well for us in the kitchen. There’s pigeon pie, and I’m sure there are figs. Let me pour you some wine.” He topped the cup up with water and handed it to Trei. “You needn’t – that is, even here we’ve heard what happened at Rounn. We were sure you must all –” he stopped.

“Is it true the whole town was covered by ash?” Araenè asked, following her mother into the kitchen. Trei’s aunt, Edona, was a small, comfortable, softly-rounded woman, who gave her daughter a small frown and Trei a welcoming smile.

“Trei, my dear,” she said warmly. “I’m so happy to see you, and so sorry to see you here alone. You needn’t talk about it if you don’t wish to –”

“It doesn’t matter,” Trei said. He looked at the cup his uncle had put in his hand, and then gulped the watered wine. It wasn’t nearly as strong as he’d have liked. He looked straight at his cousin and said in the flattest tone he could manage, “It was all buried. Mount Ghaonnè took everything. The provincar’s mansion was the only building tall enough to stick out, and it was four stories tall and had a bell-tower on the top. But it wasn’t the ash that killed everybody. They say poisonous air came out of the earth right into the middle of the city, where the baths were, over the hot springs. They say a lot of poison came out suddenly and just filled up the valley. So everyone died from that, before the mountain even exploded. And we – we couldn’t even go down, afterwards –”

Trei had to stop. His cousin, he was satisfied to see, was looking rather ill. So was his Aunt Edona. Trei was sorry for that. He said quickly, “They say it would have been fast.” He had not known whether to believe this assurance. How would anybody know?

“We are so glad you escaped, at least!” Aunt Edona exclaimed, coming to press Trei’s hands. “And we thank the Gods you came to us. How difficult a journey this must have been for you, my dear! Please don’t speak of such terrible things.”

“You are safe now, nephew, and among family once more,” added Uncle Serfei.

Trei put his cup down abruptly and left the kitchens. Then, ashamed, he hesitated at the base of a narrow stair, knowing he should go back.

“I’m sorry.” Araenè turned up, leaning in a doorway. She did look sorry. “I don’t ... I don’t think I really believed that, about Rounn, until you said that. She sent us stones one time. Your mother. Fossils from the river, the kind that coil around, you know? My father loved them. And she sent me some really good recipes for salt-cured fish. I’m sorry she – they all –”

Trei made himself nod.

“Why’d you come here, though? Didn’t your father have family in other parts of Tolounn?”

Her tone wasn’t exactly hostile, but it was hard to see that kind of question as friendly, either. Trei’s other uncle, his father’s brother in Sicuon, had made it clear that summers were one thing, or had been when his father was alive, but as for taking an Island half-blood into a good Tolounese family – and, worse, paying the tax to register a half-blood as a Tolounese citizen – well, that was something else. He wasn’t going to tell her how he’d always thought his Tolounese uncle and aunt liked him. But when he’d begged to stay in Sicuon, in terms he was ashamed to remember, his uncle had only given him some money and sent him away. But Trei wasn’t going to tell this girl about that. He said nothing.

“Well ... let me ... shall I show you the house, then? Your room? You can get something to eat later. Or I can bring you something. But if you’re tired now, that’s all right. Father says we’ll make the low attic over, but you can have my room for now and I’ll go in with mother.”

Trei nodded again, warily. He could see how his cousin hated this disarrangement, but what could he do about it? He resolved to be very happy with the attic as soon as possible.

Araenè led him up the stairs. One wall of the stairwell was pierced every few feet by a narrow window, each letting in a measure of light and air; Trei was surprised to see that it was now nearly dusk.

In the last light of the sun, high over the roof tops of Canpra, men with crimson wings drifted in a high, endless spiral. Trei pressed his palms on the window sill and leaned out, staring up at them.

“What?” Araenè came back and glanced out the window. “Oh – you don’t have kajuraihi in Tolounn, do you?” She sounded pleased about this.

Trei ignored her tone. He leaned out farther, watching the fliers – the kajuraihi – until their slow spiraling flight took them at last out of sight. He said, barely aware he spoke aloud, a sigh of yearning, “Oh, I have to learn that. I have to learn how to fly.”

Araenè stared at him in surprise. “Well, you can’t. A Tolounese boy, join the kajuraihi? That’s Island magic.”

Trei pulled himself back inside, returned his cousin’s stare, and said nothing.

“Well, you might,” Uncle Serfei said judiciously the next morning, when Trei asked him over breakfast. The breakfast was warm wheat bread with figs and honey, not the beef and eggs and sweetened buckwheat porridge of northern Tolounn. Aunt Edora had taken Araenè and gone somewhere, so it was just Trei and Uncle Serfei at the table.

Trei dipped a fig in honey and ate it slowly. He could see his uncle was glad that Trei had asked about the Island’s fliers, that he was anxious Trei should find a good place in Canpra and be happy here. Trei could not imagine being happy – but he longed to fly.

“You’re fourteen, isn’t that so? So you’re the right age for it,” Uncle Serfei spread honey on a slice of bread, regarding Trei thoughtfully. “It’s true we don’t want the Tolounese getting a feel for dragon magic – especially now they’ve got Toipakom pacified; the Little Emperor is getting restless for another conquest, so it’s said, and there’s no obvious direction for him to turn but toward us. But then, you’re not Tolounese anymore. In fact, you never were, really, were you? Your father couldn’t have registered you as a Tolounese citizen until your majority, isn’t that the law in Tolounn?”

Trei nodded although, distracted by his uncle’s comment about conquest, he’d only half-heard the question. Trei had been very young when Tolounn had conquered Toipakom, but his tutor had made him study that conquest. Trei’s tutor had approved of the subjugation of Toipakom because, he said, it wasn’t right for a little island like that to take on the airs of a real nation. Trei’s father had shaken his head and said who cared what airs some minor country put on? But he had added that the Great Emperor was wise to allow the Little Emperor to conquer all the world, as trade could only benefit from uniformity of law and an absence of tariffs. Trei remembered that, because his mother had rolled her eyes and said something biting about Tolounese aggression.

But Trei hadn’t quite put those comments together to suggest a possible attempt to conquer the Floating Islands. He said, “You don’t really think ...” but then did not quite know how to complete that question.

“Oh, well.” Uncle Serfei gave Trei a wry smile. “It’s something we think about, here. Don’t worry; I’m sure nothing will happen. Tolounn hasn’t ever tried seriously to conquer us. Anyway, how could they?” He waved his bread in the air above the table, miming the height of the Floating Islands above the sea. “It’s just, we can’t help but be aware ... not even the Emperors of Tolounn would provoke Yngul, but the Little Emperor is an aggressive man. If not Yngul, I’m sure he’s considering what less formidable nation he might conquer. Cen Periven, for example. Small enough to control, rich enough to pay for the effort ten times over – conquering Cen Periven would secure his place in history far better than merely taking little Toipakom! But if he wants Cen Periven, he’d need to take us first, unless he wanted to risk having us behind him while he attacked it, which I doubt.”

“But ...” Trei began, but stopped. If Tolounn *did* attack the Islands – but his uncle was right: he wasn’t Tolounese anymore. Except he didn’t at all feel like an Islander, could hardly imagine feeling at home here. If he wasn’t an Islander, yet wasn’t really Tolounese ...

Uncle Serfei broke into his confusion, his casual wave and matter-of-fact tone dismissing Trei’s confusion. “Anyway, none of that’s to say you couldn’t try for a place in the next kajurai audition. Kajuraihi ... ah. I meant to say, kajuraihi embody the spirit of the Islands, but that sounds pretentious, doesn’t it? Though it’s true, in a way. Even nowadays.” He made a little self-deprecating gesture, absently layered more honey on the bread until it dripped off the edges, and ate it in a couple of bites.

Then he said, “Kajuraihi have been soldiers, Trei, a first line of defense for the Islands, but not for a long time. Now they’re more often couriers. Discreet couriers at the highest level, but still, fundamentally messengers. Does that sound like something you’d like to do?”

Trei didn’t answer. If the question had been just that – do you want to be a courier? – then the answer would have been *No*. But if the question was, Are you illing to become a courier if it means you can fly? – in that case, he thought, the answer would be *Yes*. Because when he imagined walking in the streets of the city, watching winged men soar overhead and knowing he would never be among them ... the thought was almost a physical ache within him.

Uncle Serfei seemed to see something of this in Trei’s face. He added kindly, “Not *all* kajuraihi are couriers, of course. Some are attached to ambassadors’ staffs; some are ambassadors themselves. It’s sometimes expedient for the king to have a man with broad authority who can be in Cen Periven or Tolounn, or even Yngul, *fast*. Kajuraihi can fly faster than even the fastest ship can sail – it’s said kajuraihi can bend even the fiercest winds to their will. I don’t know whether that’s true,” he added scrupulously.

Trei made a noncommittal sound. He tried to imagine being an ambassador. It was not a position he’d ever felt any desire for, before. He said after a moment, doubtfully, “But my father was Tolounese. I don’t ... your king surely wouldn’t want me to speak with his voice?”

Uncle Serfei waved a second piece of bread at Trei. “*Your* king, too! *You’re* not Tolounese! You’re my nephew, Alana’s son, and as eligible to audition as anybody’s son. Anyway, that’s what I’ll argue when I petition for a place for you in the audition.”

Trei nodded uncertainly.

“Mind, now, every boy dreams of the kajuraihi when he’s your age. Most don’t ever win their wings: it’s a hard path to follow, the one that mounts to the clouds. Best not to fix all your dreams on the sky, eh? I’m sure Alana’s son is clever enough for the ministry. Or you might even find yourself with a gift for magery, who knows?” Uncle Serfei looked wistful. “The odd mage used to emerge from the Naseida family from time to time, though we haven’t had one for the past few generations.”

Trei could hardly say anything to this. He certainly couldn't tell Uncle Serfei that he didn't want to be a minister of anything, or that magecraft would be even worse. Until he'd seen the winged men, Trei had assumed that he would someday be a merchant-captain. Now ... he just knew he wanted to fly. Trei looked up at his uncle. "I don't care how hard it is. Please. I want to fly. I need ..." his voice trailed off, and he opened his hands in inarticulate longing.

"Well, then, I'll petition for a place for you," promised Uncle Serfei, reaching to pat his shoulder reassuringly. "More figs? Bread? After breakfast, we'll see about making a good, respectable Island boy out of you. Clothing, new shoes, what else? Let me see. We can register you at the library for the coming quarter ..."

It emerged that the library was where Island boys went to school. A common school. Trei's heart sank at the thought: dozens of boys together in a large room, sharing their books and their teachers with the rest instead of having a private tutor – even the wealthiest boys.

"These are mostly boys from ministry families," Uncle Serfei explained. "And the sons of magistrates, scholars, famous physicians, men like that ... important men, you know."

"Mages?"

"No, no." Uncle Serfei gestured extravagantly with a piece of bread, dripping honey across the table. "The mages have their own school somewhere. No one knows where. Maybe in Canpra, maybe somewhere not exactly on Milendri at all. It's said a boy with the gift will find it himself when he's ready. No, the boys at the library aren't likely to be mages. But plenty of those boys will have posts in the ministries someday, so it's important they know one another. Now. The quarter changes in just a few days, I believe, so you can start at the library then. If you apprentice with the kajuraihi later, that's fine, but a little while in library classes will do nothing but help you."

"Does Araenè go to the library for classes, too?" Trei asked. He did not want to attend classes with ministers' sons – and he didn't think he liked his cousin anyway – but at least she would be someone he knew.

Uncle Serfei gave him a startled look, then smiled. "Girls do sometimes, in Tolounn, don't they? No, Trei. Island girls have private tutors sometimes. A few write tolerable poetry, I suppose, but it's not as though they were going to be scholars or ministers or magistrates, is it?"

Trei thought of how his sister would have responded to this comment, but he said nothing.

Island clothing was lighter, cooler, and far more brightly colored than anything made in northern Tolounn. Trei put on a sleeveless green shirt, which he belted with a gold sash over sapphire-blue pants. He felt like he was dressing in a costume, not in real clothing. After he was dressed, Trei knew he should go find his cousin and her

parents. But he sat cross-legged on the bed, gazed out the window, and didn't move toward the door.

Outside his door, someone clapped. Araenè opened the door without waiting for his call – well, but it *was* her room, really, Trei supposed – and stepped in. She wore a dark green dress with a gold sash, and her hair was pinned up with a pearl comb. She looked far more elegant than she had the previous evening, but no more friendly. She looked Trei up and down. He felt his face warm, but said nothing.

But his cousin made no comment about his change of clothing. “Do you like steamed fish?” she asked. “I used skin-on taki fillets and made silver sauce, only I used wine instead of lemon, and less sugar.”

“Oh?” Trei wondered what he was supposed to say to this.

Araenè sighed and turned to go. She said over her shoulder, “Supper's always half-past sixth bell, so we'd best move along.”

The fish was delicious. You peeled the black skin away and drizzled the translucent sauce over the flaky fish. There were thin green-flecked pancakes to go with the fish. You tore off pieces and picked up bits of fish with them, then drizzled on more sauce and added some crunchy green vegetable he didn't recognize and ate the packets you'd made. Flavors then unfolded one after another in your mouth, complex and wonderful. Trei slowed down after the first bite to make his food last longer.

“Araenè is truly gifted,” Aunt Edora said fondly, noting Trei's expression. “Her husband will be a lucky man.”

“If she were a boy, she'd earn a place in the king's own kitchens,” Uncle Serfei added, smiling proudly at his daughter. “She'd wind up a master of all the eight arts and five arts and be famous.”

Araenè didn't look pleased by these compliments. Her mouth tightened, and she fixed her eyes on her plate. Trei said almost at random, to break the uncomfortable pause, “Eight arts and how many?”

“Sauces and creams, relishes and chutneys, mousses and whipped dishes, savory dishes with fruit, meat dishes, fish and seafood, vegetable dishes, and breads,” Araenè recited to her plate. She looked up, frowning fiercely. “And the five confectionary arts: cream sweets, frozen sweets, grain sweets, sweets made with fruit, and pastries. People in Tolounn don't know how to cook.”

“Now, Araenè –” Aunt Edora began.

Her daughter just looked stubborn. “Not really cook. Cen Periven has real chefs, but Tolounn? Just heating things until they're edible isn't really *cooking*.” Her lip curled in disdain. Trei thought of how the food at his home had differed from the food made by his friends' servants, about the way his mother, unlike the mothers of his friends, had sometimes taken over the cooking of their household. His mother's occasional tart comments about Tolounnese cooking, heard and disregarded all his

life, fell suddenly into place. He asked Araenè, “Do you really know how to make all those things? Sauces and mousses and savory things and all those others?”

His cousin flushed and looked down again.

“She really does,” Aunt Edora assured Trei.

Araenè looked at Trei and added grudgingly, “Not that Tolounn hasn’t its own arts, I’m sure.” She sounded like she didn’t know of any and didn’t think they’d count for much anyway.

“Araenè –” Aunt Edora said.

“Cen Periven prides itself on the eternal arts, and we on the ephemeral. Tolounn’s only art is the art of war,” Uncle Serfei said grimly.

His wife patted his hand. “Not at the table, love, I beg you.”

Uncle Serfei looked embarrassed. He said to Trei, “Well, we do claim that our Island chefs are more skilled than any elsewhere. And Araenè truly is gifted.”

“Pastries are hard to get right,” Araenè muttered to her plate.

“You make wonderful pastries,” Aunt Edora said firmly. “What did you make tonight, love?”

Araenè had made tiny crisp pastries filled with cream that was pink and delicately rose-scented. Each pastry was topped with a single candied rose petal.

“They’re almost too pretty to eat,” Trei said fervently, holding his third pastry up to admire it and trying to decide whether he had room left to eat it. His mother had never attempted anything like these.

His cousin smiled at last. “They’re meant to be eaten. That’s why it’s an *ephemeral* art.”

Trei ate the pastry in two bites and was sorry it was the last one. “You really ought to be cooking for the king!” he told his cousin.

Araenè lost her smile again, so that Trei understood that she did actually want to be a royal chef, and famous. Only she couldn’t because, he supposed, she was a girl. From the way they acted, he thought that neither of her parents really understood this about their daughter, even though it was obvious. No wonder she was fierce. No one had ever tried to tell his sister she couldn’t draw or paint, and someday Marrè probably *would* have been famous. He wanted suddenly to show Marrè’s sketches to his cousin, to tell Araenè about his sister. He thought the two girls would have understood each other, that they would have been friends. His throat closed with the effort to restrain tears.

Uncle Serfei said to Trei, rescuing him from a public outcry of grief, “I checked this afternoon, and the next kajurai auditions will take place in forty-four days. That’s a nice piece of luck; they only have auditions every few years. Tomorrow I’ll petition for you to audition, and then while we wait for a response you can attend proper Island classes. I hope you had a decent grounding off there in Rounn.”

Trei recovered himself, stung. Rounn might have been far north, but it had hardly been some little cow-mire village. “Of course I did. But –” he started to say that he didn’t want to attend library classes, but stopped himself. Uncle Serfei had already agreed to try to get a place for him with the Island fliers. It would be shameful – childish – ungrateful, even – to argue about the library.

But he wished Araenè could also attend the classes.

Chapter Two

Araenè's Tolounese cousin caused her much less trouble than she had feared. He kept out of her things – Araenè cleared out three of her drawers and half a wardrobe for him and covertly checked every day to be sure everything was exactly as she had left it in the rest of the drawers. *Especially* in the back of her most-private wardrobe. As far as she could tell, her cousin never poked about. He seemed to understand he was intruding. Probably he was as eager to move into his own personal attic as she was to have him out of her room.

Araenè was surprised to find that the attic looked like becoming a fairly nice room, after everything was taken out and the walls dusted and the floor scrubbed. Mother bustled happily about the business of choosing the rugs and linens, delighting over a bedframe of twisted iron and matching iron lamps. Araenè thought the linens pale and insipid, the ornate bedframe and lamps overdone. But Trei, apparently reluctant to offend his uncle and aunt, agreed with Mother in all her choices. Araenè made no comment, so eager to have her own room back that she scrubbed and dusted with a will. Then, after Mother complimented her industry, she was a little ashamed – but still eager to have her cousin safely installed in his own room and out of hers.

Trei was a quiet boy. Really quiet. He was polite to Mother and Araenè thought he sincerely liked Father, but he didn't follow Araenè around, and he stayed out of the kitchens when she was concentrating. Nor did Trei often leave the house, except, as soon as his classes were arranged, to go to the library – though he was obviously, boy-like, completely sky-mad. Araenè thought that in his place, she would have been wild to explore Canpra. Her cousin could have roamed the whole city if he liked. A boy's freedom was wasted on Trei, Araenè decided. Absolutely *wasted*.

In general she was glad her cousin kept his distance from her, and was willing to let her keep her distance from him. The very last thing she wanted was a new shadow clinging to her heel. She was very glad classes had been arranged for him; it was good to have some of her privacy back.

Now, at last, the Moon's Day after Trei's arrival, Araenè finally found an opportunity to put that privacy to real *use*. She folded back the shutters of her room. The late morning heat rolled into the room at once, but she only leaned out and studied the narrow alley behind the house. No one was about: it would be too hot until dusk for anyone to willingly venture into the streets. There was a high, pale haze across the sky, blurring the brilliant sun, but this didn't mute the heavy, smothering heat of the afternoon.

Father was at the ministry, in the First City, at the edge of the island; he would be gone until long past dusk. As was the custom on Moon's Day, Mother had gone to pay calls on other Second City matrons. By now she would be comfortably ensconced in the home of one of her friends, where she and other visitors would sip cooling ices and exchange all the Second City gossip. Trei, of course, was at the library. Even the servants were out: Araenè had given both of them permission to visit the market and take the afternoon off.

So Araenè was alone. That made it a perfect day. Wholly perfect.

Araenè stepped back into her room and turned to gaze at herself in her mirror. Dark green trousers and a dark red shirt, both from that carefully-hidden stash in the back of her own wardrobe. A dusky-purple sash, pinned on the right side. Her hair bound up and tucked under a hat with a broad, floppy brim – the hat was ridiculous, but conveniently popular among the sillier young men right now. Slender pins to hold the hat firmly in place. She had sewn pads into her shirt to broaden her shoulders and wore thick bracelets, foppish but very masculine, to disguise the fineness of her wrists.

Araenè glanced at herself in the mirror one last time. There was nothing she could do about her slender girl's throat, but no one had ever seemed to notice this flaw. Little more than the change of clothing was required: in a year or two she might have more difficulty, but Araenè did not yet take after her generously-figured mother. If she was lucky, she'd take after her father's side of the family instead. She nodded, satisfied: it was not a girl who looked back at her from that mirror, but a boy. A vain boy, a boy who apparently thought too much of himself, yes. But a boy.

She made one more cautious inspection of the alley, then swung neatly out the window, hung by her finger-tips for an instant, and dropped. It was several feet to the cobbles; Araenè bent her knees as she hit, put out her hands for balance, and straightened. She touched the brim of her boy's hat to make sure it was still in place, and then walked quickly down the alley, turned the corner, and let her demure girl's step lengthen to a boy's free stride.

* * * * *

The avenues of the Second City radiated away from the white towers of the First City. Its graceful avenues were arranged in even, precise concentric arcs, cut through by long straight streets that gave swift access to the First City. Araenè knew where to find the nearest open market, where the shops were that carried the most interesting Yngulin silks or the newest imports from Cen Periven. She knew where the finest restaurants were, the high-class ones which well-bred women, if escorted, could patronize. Every Second City woman knew these things.

But Araenè also knew the three fastest ways to get from her house to the University, and she knew her way around the University, too, and she doubted any other well-bred Second City woman knew *that*.

If one stayed on proper streets, then the University lay nearly a bell from Araenè's home. But she could cut more than half that time by crossing through two private gardens and climbing up and over the roof of a shop that sold second-hand clothing. Though it was important not to be spotted in the gardens, no one looked askance at boys taking the roof-top shortcut. Students, perennially late for one or another lecture or demonstration, used this shortcut as though it were one of the official student pathways, and paid for the privilege by donating clothing to the shop (if they were

wealthy) or buying clothing there (if they were poor). Long ago someone had fixed hand- and foot-holds to make the climb even faster, and now Araenè went up and over the shop almost as quickly as she might have walked down a street.

The southeastern half of the University was First City, all white marble and wrought iron. But gradually the University had pressed out into the Second City, and – in keeping with the decree of the ministry of stoneworks – as it passed that traditional boundary, its architecture shifted to the low style and red stone of the Second City. But the University ran right up to and past the outer border of the Second City, and so along its northwestern edge it dissolved into the congested, narrow, odd-angled Third City streets.

This, of course, was where the used-clothing shop lay, and this was also Araenè's favorite part of the University. She loved the narrow crowded streets, the freedom, the noise, and the unpredictable excitement of Third City. But she did not have time to venture out into the maze of Third City, not if she was to catch Master Petrei's long-awaited lecture – she'd been sure, after her cousin's unexpected arrival, that she would miss it, an outrageous disappointment.

But this perfect day had rescued her after all. Araenè did a dance step or three in sheer delight at regaining the freedom of the streets, and a passing older student shook his head at her in mock disapproval and called, "Not so happy, youngster: don't you know a show of joy makes the masters think we can handle extra work?"

Araenè laughed. "I *can* handle extra work," she called back, boy-bold. "So I've no need of a sober face, though I thank you for your concern!"

The other student grinned and gave her the gesture that meant *and good luck to you*, with its implication that really you were riding too high and could expect a fall.

"Time enough to flinch when I'm falling," Araenè called over her shoulder, and ran on.

Once across the rooftop shortcut, she hurried past the main Classics hall on her left and one of the Rhetoric theaters on her right. After that, there was only a small courtyard before the Ephemeral Arts building where Master Petrei would be lecturing. A flight of stairs led down into the relative dimness of the thankfully-cool lecture hall.

She made her way quietly along the back of the hall and found a place to stand, since there were few seats left.

"Hsst! Arei!" a voice whispered, and a discreet hand lifted in the very back row, beckoning Araenè to one of these few.

Gratefully, Araenè crept forward and slipped into the offered seat.

"You're always late! Even for Master Petrei!" murmured her benefactor, Hanaiki Cenfenisai, a boy a year or so older than Araenè. She had met Hanaiki two years ago. She remembered everything about that day vividly: Master Toranvei Hosidai had been visiting from Bodonè. Furious that she could not attend his lecture, agonized at

the rules that constricted her life, amazed to find herself by chance with the entire day to herself, Araenè had hidden her hair under a hat for the very first time and made her way across Canpra to the University. She had timidly asked impatient passers-by and older students, all of whom gave her confusing, complicated directions; she had been amazed at the size and complexity of the city and the University. Twice she had almost crept back home, but then she had found the right hall after all and paid the fee for the right to slip inside.

Hanaiki – tall, sarcastic, and self-possessed – had borrowed a quill from her, broken it, and insisted on buying her supper after the lecture to make up for it. She'd barely dared speak to him, but he'd spent the meal dissecting Master Toranvei's fascinating lecture, until Araenè forgot her agonized shyness and started to enjoy herself. He'd been the first boy to ever treat Araenè –Arei – with the casual, uncomplicated acceptance one male offered another. His was a friendship Araenè cherished.

Now Araenè shrugged and whispered back, "I know!" She didn't apologize – a boy wouldn't apologize. She whispered instead, "Can I see –"

Hanaiki shifted his notes so that Araenè could see them.

The lecture was a good one, all about special Yngulin techniques that you could use to capture the essence of spices in hot oil for the last-minute finishing of a dish. Master Petrei was talking about finishing savory dishes, but Araenè instantly started thinking about using the same technique for finishing sweets. Grain-based sweets were the obvious extension: saffron and cardamom with rice, for example. But could the technique be used to flavor pastries? Or the creams one filled them with? What about using butter instead of oil? Well, but butter would burn at the high temperatures Master Petrei seemed to consider necessary for the technique... . Oil couldn't be substituted for butter in pastry, not if you wanted the pastry delicate and flaky, but, hmmm ... one might use clarified butter ...

"A good lecture," Hanaiki said afterwards, walking with Araenè through the warren of Third City alleys. The afternoon sun pounded down upon the streets; the cobbles cast the heat back into the air and gave the thick afternoon air an almost physical body and weight. Hanaiki took off his own floppy hat and fanned himself with it. "Hot!" he complained. "And that lecture made me hungry. Want to run over to Cesera's? Everyone's going."

Araenè gave Hanaiki a playful – masculine – shove. "Everything makes you hungry. Yes, I would, but no, I can't."

"Your father's unreasonable," Hanaiki began.

"I grant you've the right of it, and indeed there's no possibility of denying it. But for all that, and for good and all, he's –"

"Still my dear, my honored, my own progenitor – and besides, he controls the family purse," they said together, finishing a quote from a play ragingly popular among the students.

“I’ll need to run as it is,” Araenè added.

“It’s far too hot to run! Much better come to Cesera’s,” Hanaiki coaxed.

Araenè laughed and shook her head. “I truly can’t! But you go, and start a contest of pastry-making – maybe you’ll even win.” She made the gesture which meant *good luck to you*.

Hanaiki pulled a mock-sorrowful face and said, “Ah, that’s why I want you to come! You never do fall!”

Araenè laughed again and heartlessly left her friend on his own. Yes, a good lecture. A wonderful day altogether. But a glance at the sun made her blink: she hadn’t exaggerated as much as she’d thought when she’d said she needed to run. Thinking about the lecture, Araenè followed a couple of other students over the rooftop of the clothing shop without paying much attention to where she put her hands and feet, scrambled down the other side, turned automatically to the left, and strode into the Third City alleyways, heading for a familiar shortcut.

Some of Third City was red stone or red brick, but the rest was built of cheaper yellow brick or dingy plaster. Most of the buildings housed small shops below, selling hand-crafts, cheap copper jewelry, dried herbs, old books – whatever could help support the families that lived above the shops. The buildings were crowded tightly together, sometimes leaning out over the narrow alleys so far that they roofed tunnels through which the alleys threaded. Children ran in noisy packs, weaving in and out among their elders, intent on business Araenè could not even imagine. She had never been able to decide whether she should envy them their freedom or pity them their poverty – both, maybe.

Monkeys ran along the rooftops: mostly the goldflame marmosets and some of the larger brown ones with long white moustaches. Children fed them, even when their parents warned that no one was going to hand *them* a dinner free out of the air and did they think bread grew from the cobblestones? Sapphire-winged birds perched on clotheslines and hopped along the cobbles, independent and quick, finding their own crumbs in the streets. Araenè liked the birds best. She bought cumin bread from a cart to crumble for them, though she did eat a few bites of the fragrant, chewy bread herself. She could buy pastries on her way home, she decided: spicy lamb and lentil pastries. She knew a vendor who made good ones. That was the sort of thing she might have made if she’d spent the afternoon at home, and there were figs and pomegranates, so she could make a compote for dessert, that would be easy – she scattered the last of the bread crumbs, lengthened her stride, and looked up.

And stopped, so suddenly that a man behind her almost bumped into her and sheered aside with a growled comment about empty-minded boys who couldn’t keep out of the way on public streets.

Araenè stared in confusion at the buildings around her. Where was she? She had turned left from the clothing shop – hadn’t she? Yes, because she had passed Verenkei’s book shop on the corner. And then hadn’t she turned right and cut through the alley after the cart selling roasted chickens? Or had she? She knew, with a sinking

feeling all through her body, that she should have crossed into Second City by now, that she did not recognize the buildings around her, and that she was lost. And that the sun, never minding Araenè's urgent necessities, was still continuing its inexorable slide toward the west.

A woman at a pastry-cart was happy to provide directions, along with a plum tart. The tart's crust was tough and its filling too sour. Araenè gave the pastry to a little boy in a ragged shirt and turned distractedly down the alley the vendor had indicated. Nothing looked familiar. All she found were more maze-like alleyways between crowded Third City buildings. She hurried down one and then another, but found nothing familiar. It might lack half a bell till dusk now, if that much. Araenè was filled with a growing conviction that she would not make it home before dark and that her parents would be waiting, appalled and worried, when she finally found her way back. Tears prickling at the backs of her eyes, she stopped in a doorway to catch her breath and try to recover her nerve.

"Here, now," a kind voice said near her. "You do look worried, youngster."

Araenè looked up, startled.

The speaker, a large shapeless man of uncertain age, was sitting on the step in the next doorway over. He was holding a pewter mug, which he waved gently toward Araenè. "You know your own trouble best, no doubt, and I'm sure I'm just an interfering old fool, and a drunken fool at that. But I'm old enough to be forgiven for interfering, and so I'll just say, if you're in some little trouble, child, and you clearly are, you might ask over there." He gestured with his mug toward a doorway set in a red brick wall across the alleyway. Liquid sloshed over the edge of the mug and spilled across the stones of the doorstep with the yeasty smell of ale. There was something else mingled with that smell, though: a wilder, greener sort of herby scent that Araenè almost felt she knew, but to which she could not put a name.

Araenè sniffed and rubbed her sleeve across her eyes, but she thought she managed to keep her voice steady. "Who's over there?"

"Not a 'who,' exactly," the man said, with another vague wave of his mug. "Nor exactly a 'what.' You might say, a 'where.' But it's a good place to go if you've lost your way – not that I'm saying that's your trouble, hmm?"

The man *might* be drunk, but then the edges of his words were clear, and Araenè hadn't seen him drink out of that mug yet. "Who *are* you?" she asked.

"Not a very interesting question," the shapeless man chided. "You might do better, hmm?" He climbed unsteadily to his feet, gripping the wall for support, and shambled through the door and out of sight.

For a moment, Araenè only stared at the swaying curtain that hung over the doorway through which the man had vanished. Then she got up, took a step toward that doorway, hesitated, turned, and ran across the street toward the door in the red brick wall. From up close, this door proved to be of heavy oak, each quarter of it carved

with a different spiraling symbol, none of which Araenè recognized; a surprising door for any Third City shop or dwelling. The door had no clapper.

In fact, the building itself didn't really seem like a Third City building. The brick in which the door was set was a rich red, except that every now and then a straw-yellow brick was set among the red ones. Araenè got the impression that if she backed up again and really looked, she might find a pattern in the placement of the yellow bricks. But she didn't back up. She put her hand on the heavy door. It opened under her hand, swinging with well-oiled ease. Within was a dim hallway paneled in rich woods, where shadows fled reluctantly from the late sunlight Araenè had admitted. Down the hall, she just made out a curtained doorway, and she was almost certain she heard voices.

Araenè stepped through the heavy door, leaving it open behind her. But the moment she stepped through the door, it seemed somehow far behind her – not to the eye: when she looked nervously over her shoulder, it was still there, standing ajar to let through a bright beam of sunlight. But somehow, though only a step away, the door gave the impression of being remote. Unreachable. And the light that fell through it seemed attenuated, as though in this hallway it lost all its hot power.

Afterwards, Araenè couldn't understand why she didn't run back through the door into the ordinary Third City afternoon. But she did not run. She walked down the hallway to the curtained doorway, pulled the thick velvet curtain aside, and went into the room that had been hidden behind the curtain.

The room was large – more than large: looming. Araenè had a sense that the walls were farther away than they seemed to be, even a sense that maybe the room was changing size as she watched. Despite the numerous lamps, it did not seem well-lit: the walls, or maybe just the air within the room, seemed to drink up the light. A single massive table took up almost all the available space. The table was cluttered with books and loose papers, spheres of polished stone and different kinds of crystals and metal that ranged from fist-sized to the size of a large melon, tall brass scales and thin copper plates.

Around the table stood five boys, the youngest perhaps Araenè's age and the oldest several years older. They looked around as she came in, but the man at the head of the table rapped his knuckles on the table and the boys all jumped guiltily and turned back to him.

The man was so dark skinned that Araenè had at first completely missed him in the shadowed room. His eyes were all she could see clearly, and the shine of his white teeth, especially because he wasn't wearing the jewel-toned fabrics of the Floating Islands, but a plain dark robe that fell without ornament from shoulder to ankle. Then, as her eyes adjusted to the strange light, she saw him better. Tall, lean rather than broad, with severe hawk features and a stern set to his mouth, this man was like no one Araenè had ever seen before. She had heard all her life of Yngul, but never expected to see a man from that country. Now she found that all her imagination had fallen short, and stood speechless.

“Come here, boy,” the man said to her, brief and decisive. “Take this.” He held out to Araenè a sphere of polished volcanic glass, large enough that he had to hold it with both hands.

Araenè opened her mouth, closed it again, walked forward, and took the sphere. It was heavy and cool, translucent as light slid across it. It tasted of cool anise and smoky cumin, with sparkly undertones of ginger and lemon. Araenè blinked and stared down at the glass sphere, but the tastes didn’t fade or seem to be her imagination: anise and cumin, ginger and lemon. She looked wonderingly up at the face of the Yngulin man.

“Vision is always a useful gift,” the man said to all the boys. His voice was smoky and mysterious as the sphere, his eyes hard to read. “Particularly in these tense times – but I believe you will find that all times are tense.” He turned his attention to Araenè. “So, now, boy – shift the Dannè sphere toward a more open configuration.”

A more open configuration? Araenè stared down at the sphere, turning it over in her hands and wondering what ‘more open’ could possibly mean. The ginger undertone became more prominent, tingling across her fingers as well as her tongue – a strange sensation.

“Good,” said the man, and took back the sphere. “You see,” he said to the boys, holding it up. They returned an appreciative murmur, and he smiled. He said to Araenè, “And what would you expect to see within this particular sphere, given such a shift in orientation?”

Araenè stared at him. Spheres and spicy colors and a strange room that seemed suddenly far smaller, pressing in on her – she took a step back and stammered, “I have to, I – I have to go home –”

“If you must,” said the Yngulin man. “But I shall assuredly see you again.”

The statement had the force of a command, and Araenè found herself nodding.

“Bring this back to me,” the man added, and handed her the sphere again. Araenè took it automatically and tucked it under her arm. She took another step back, then another, and found herself back in the hallway. Without thinking – she did not seem able to keep her mind focused on anything – she turned, walked back to the door, opened it, and stepped through.

She found herself not in the narrow alleyways of the Third City maze, but in the infinitely more familiar and welcome alley behind her own home, looking up at her own window. When she turned, bewildered, to stare back the way she had come, there was no carved door behind her: only the other side of her own alley. It was just dusk: though the sun was below sight, faint glimmers of violet and peach still traced the banks of clouds in the west.

Araenè let out a breath she had not been aware of holding. Cimè and Ti might be back, though maybe not, but neither Mother nor Father should have returned. Not quite yet – but soon. She took a step toward the house and then stopped, staring down

at the sphere she still carried under her arm. Her brows drew together: the thing seemed even more strange and unsettling now, and her own response to it stranger still. The smoky taste of cumin tickled the back of her throat, and the sharper accents of lemon and ginger. The anise seemed almost missing, just a faint tickle on her tongue and across her palms.

Almost, Araenè dropped the sphere in the street and left it for the neighborhood children to find. But in the end she put it down her shirt so she would have her hands free, checked quickly for any unwelcome eyes that might be watching, and made the climb back to her window with extra care, that she should not accidentally break the sphere against the stones of the wall.

She had entirely forgotten that it was not, at the moment, her room.

Her cousin was sitting on her bed, reading some heavy, dull book from, Araenè presumed, one of his library classes. Araenè didn't see him until she was already halfway through the window, and then it was too late to retreat. Taken thoroughly aback, Trei stared. Since she could hardly pretend that she wasn't climbing through the window dressed in boy's clothing, Araenè raised her chin and stared back, daring him to say anything.

The cousin's gaze shifted from Araenè's face to her hands, lingered for a moment on her masculine bracelets, lifted to take in her boy's hat, and moved back to her face. No fool, he let the book fall and spread his hands placatingly. "It's not my concern," he assured her. He asked after a moment, as though unable to help himself, "Do all Island girls, um ... ?"

Araenè had never considered this question before. For all she knew, dressing up as a boy and slipping out of the confinement of the home was a universal stage through which all girls passed. When you were five, you loved to help the servants in the kitchens; when you were eight, you cried because your father wouldn't let you have a marmoset; when you were ten, you fretted desperately after some handsome young master of ephemera and thought you would die if he never noticed you; and when you were twelve, you dressed up in boy's clothing and ventured out into the world. But ... "I doubt it," she concluded. It was impossible to imagine the girls she knew engaging in such a dramatic, dangerous rebellion. Though she wondered now if they would think the same about her, if anybody asked them.

"Umm ..." Trei swallowed whatever he'd been about to say, picked up his book again, and pretended to be fascinated by whatever he'd been reading.

Araenè pulled wardrobe doors open so that they would offer her privacy. Without really paying attention to what she was doing, she put the black sphere behind a false back she'd made to fit one of her drawers, checked to make sure her cousin was still looking at his book, and rapidly changed out of her boy's things back into a proper dress. A simple one, that fastened up the front so she could reach the hooks without help. She asked around the edges of the doors, "Is Cimè back from the market? Ti?" She hesitated after asking after the servants, afraid to extend the query to include Mother and Father: what if they'd come back early?

“The servants were here when I got back from the library. Cimè asked me if I knew where you’d gone. She seemed a little worried,” Trei told her, and added with unexpected perceptiveness, “But your parents are still away.”

Araenè came around the doors and stared at her cousin, wondering what to tell him, how she could persuade him to say nothing about what he’d seen.

“You might have gone up to the attic and fallen asleep,” Trei suggested. “I don’t think Cimè or Ti have gone up there – not since I’ve been home. Maybe before, though,” he added, ducking his head doubtfully.

“It’s a good idea,” Araenè admitted aloud. “It will work no matter what. If Cimè went up to the attic earlier, I’ll pretend I hadn’t gone up yet and she just happened to miss me.” She hesitated. “You won’t – that is, you’d be willing –”

“I won’t contradict you,” Trei promised.

Araenè felt driven to ask, though she was almost afraid of what kind of answer she would get, “Why are you ... I mean, why would you ... ?” And what would he want from her in return?

Her cousin met her eyes, a level, honest look. He said in a low voice, “You’re so ... you remind me so much of my ... of Marrè. My sister. You aren’t ... you aren’t like her, really. But if she’d lived here, I think she might have been like you.”

“Oh.” Araenè had somehow not really thought of what her cousin might feel, losing his sister. His mother and father, yes, she’d been sorry for his loss, although she’d also found herself thinking how amazing it would be to travel all the tremendous distance from northern Tolounn to the Floating Islands by yourself. Though of course that journey wouldn’t seem amazing at all if your whole family had just died.

But, truthfully, she hadn’t spent much effort imagining how Trei actually *felt*. She’d been too busy resenting the disruption he’d brought to *her* family. Araenè felt heat creeping up her face. She crossed the room slowly, settling at the foot of the bed. “Would you tell me about her? Marrè?”

Her cousin sat up, laying the book aside. His eyes searched her face ... not sure she was really interested, Araenè thought, not confident of kindness from her. Wondering, probably, whether she was trying to purchase his silence with a show of sympathy. She blushed again, ashamed he might think so.

But Trei must have decided she was sincere, because he got up and went to her desk. There was a large book she didn’t recognize lying there, an expensive one, with gold letters on its dark leather binding. Trei took several loose pages from this book – oh, not pages from the actual book, Araenè saw, but sheets of heavy, cream-colored paper, expensive paper, too costly to be used even in a nice book like that one.

Her cousin held these for a moment, looking down at them, facing away from Araenè – she thought he was trying to make sure he’d be composed when he turned around, and didn’t say a word to hurry him.

Coming back to the bed at last, Trei carefully laid one of these papers down on the bedspread so that Araenè could see it. The paper wavered a little as he put it down, but Trei's expression was calm. The calm broke a little when he said, "This was Marrè."

The drawing, a deceptively simple ink sketch, showed the upper body and face of a girl, not quite a woman, in quarter-profile. The girl was elegant, serene, dignified; her hair was up on the side of her head in a young woman's figure-eight braid. Her hand rested gracefully on a delicate little table before her; a sheet of paper and a quill lay on the table next to her hand, and you could just see that the paper held the very sketch at which you were actually looking.

But that was not the only echo contained within the sketch: it also showed a mirror that stood beside the girl. In this mirror you could see her reflected, this time in three-quarters profile. In the mirror, you could see that strands of hair had come loose from the braid to curl around her ear and down the back of her neck. Somehow, there was a different look to her eye in the mirror. Though her expression in the mirror seemed at first glance the same, this angle of view did not give an impression of serenity. In the mirror, there was a hint of mischief in the girl's eye, a wryness to her mouth, which suggested that her hair would never really be perfect – even that a casual imperfection was something she enjoyed and wanted you to enjoy. That she might be ready to step into womanhood, but not into any staid, demure womanhood. You could imagine this girl dressing up in boy's clothing and climbing out of windows. It was almost hard to imagine that she never had.

Araenè looked up, shaking her head. "Your sister drew this? This was her? This is amazing –"

Trei's mouth trembled, then tightened. He said after a moment, "Marrè would never have stayed here. In the Floating Islands, I mean. Or at least, not in Canpra. Girls ... girls stay at home, here, don't they? Girls don't study or go out, or, or anything. Do they?"

"Girls visit other girls. And then they sit around and gossip about young men and do needlework, and go home and write letters to one another about young men, and do more needlework." Araenè couldn't help her disdainful tone. "Is it really different in Tolounn?"

Trei offered a diffident shrug. "Marrè studied drawing and things with the best tutors, and she didn't have to dress up like a boy to do it. Her tutors –" Trei stopped, and then went on in a low voice, "Her tutors said she should do a showing. Mother was going to arrange it for next spring. Father said she should wait until after she got married, so her fame wouldn't drive her dowry up too high. But really he was so proud. He said once – he said she would be as famous someday as Kekuonn Terataan –" he stopped again.

Araenè said nothing. She had a terrible image in her mind of the girl in this drawing, sitting at the table pictured in this sketch, quill in hand and that mischievous look in

her eyes, when the poisonous gas and hot ash poured out of the fire-mountain and came down upon Rounn. She didn't know what to say.

She was saved from needing to say anything, because at that moment her mother called.

Trei flinched and gathered up the sketch, taking it and the others back to the desk and putting them again into the large book.

Araenè got up and prepared to go down the stairs to Mother. But, lingering, she said to Trei, "May I see the other drawings sometime? Would you ... you wouldn't mind showing them to me?"

Her cousin gave a small nod.

"And maybe you could tell me about her? Sometime? If you, I mean ... if you wouldn't mind?"

"I'd like to," Trei said in a low voice.

Araenè nodded, and ran out as her mother called once more. The strange detour she'd taken to get home already seemed like a dream, and she refused to think about the glass sphere hidden in the back of her drawer.

The Floating Islands is available now, published by Random House in the US.

Visit www.rachelneumeier.com for more about Rachel and her writing, and to read excerpts from her other books for adult and young adult fantasy readers.