



The Mansion of Truth, the Square of Seas,  
the Great City of Minaris  
Five o'clock in the evening



room. “You still have that star over your head, you know, so something good must have happened, even if you don’t recognize it now.”

Cass snorted with disbelief and gave Lin an account of her terrible day.

“Oh, Cass, how devastating, and after all your hard work,” she said sympathetically, handing her a china beaker of bitter tea.

“And now I am doomed to a life of lonely awfulness with Madame Carpera, stuck inside that gloomy house. Mrs Potts has told me I have to go.”

“Perhaps it won’t be so terrible?” Lin said diplomatically.

“It will be,” Cass said matter-of-factly. “You know I cannot bear sitting still or being cooped up, and it will mean both.”

“Come, let us think,” said Lin. “There must be another option.”

Cass sighed, thinking she might cry again.

“No, there isn’t. The only thing I’ve ever been good at is acrobatics. And there’s no other Circus in the Longest World apart from at Pingquing.” Pingquing was the Great City of the Farthest Lands, and many months’ journey from Minaris.

“No, you can’t go there,” Lin said decidedly.

Tears began to fall from Cass’s eyes again. She pulled Enzo’s handkerchief out of her pocket.

“That’s very beautiful,” Lin said, distracted by the sight of it.

“I know – it’s ...” She was about to tell Lin about Enzo but then found she wasn’t in the mood to. “I borrowed it from someone.”

Lin turned her attention back to Cass’s future.

“If you can’t do anything else, why don’t you *go* somewhere else?” she suggested. “I know you’ve always wanted to see the world. Do you have any family anywhere?”

Cass shook her head. “My parents were both orphans, my father a Minarian one, and my mother from the Island of Women.”

“Of course,” Lin said, remembering. Then after a moment’s thought she said, “Well, you could still go there, couldn’t you?”

This hadn’t occurred to Cass but Lin was right. After her mother died, Lady Sigh, who was the present head of the Island, had written to Mrs Potts, suggesting Cass make her home there. Mrs Potts had refused on her behalf.

“Do you know anything about the Island of Women?” Cass asked, thinking of the picture in her room. “Mrs Potts always says it’s a very strange place.”

“I don’t think it’s strange at all except, I suppose, for its lack of men. It’s meant to be very beautiful and I love the fact that if you are a woman they will always let you stay there. However, I also know that magic is forbidden on the Island so it’s not the place for me,” Lin answered with a smile. “But it sounds perfect for you!” she joked. “I’m sure there would be plenty you could do – the orphanage must be huge and I know they grow a lot of crops. And you would probably have plenty of time to practise your acrobatics. You could come back to Minaris in a year when the Circus Boat returns. And you could use the money your parents left you for the passage. Surely Mrs Potts can’t object to that.”

“Mrs Potts will never let me go,” Cass said sadly. “She is determined that I should work for Madame Carpera.”

Lin sighed and said, “She does love you, you know. In her own way. And she is just doing what

she thinks is best.”

Cass was in no mood to hear this. “She never listens to what I want,” she replied. “It’s all about her and being able to boast about me to her ghastly, gossipy friends like Mrs Cortini.”

Lin glanced at the darkening sky out of the window. “I’m sorry, Cass, but I have to get ready for my clients. Why don’t you try to delay Madame Carpera and then we can talk again tomorrow?”

Cass said goodbye and thanked her for the tea. She skated slowly across the square towards the Mansion of Fortune, thinking about Lin’s idea of going to the Island of Women. It would solve all her problems and the thought of the picture in her room, the colours and the sunshine, drew her like a magnet.

She paused in the middle of the square by the statue of a famous magician and looked around. Much as she loved Tig and Lin, Cass knew she didn’t belong there – how can an obtuse live surrounded by magic?

So on a whim she decided to skate back down to the port, just to see how much a voyage to the