

Excerpt

Enchanted Journey

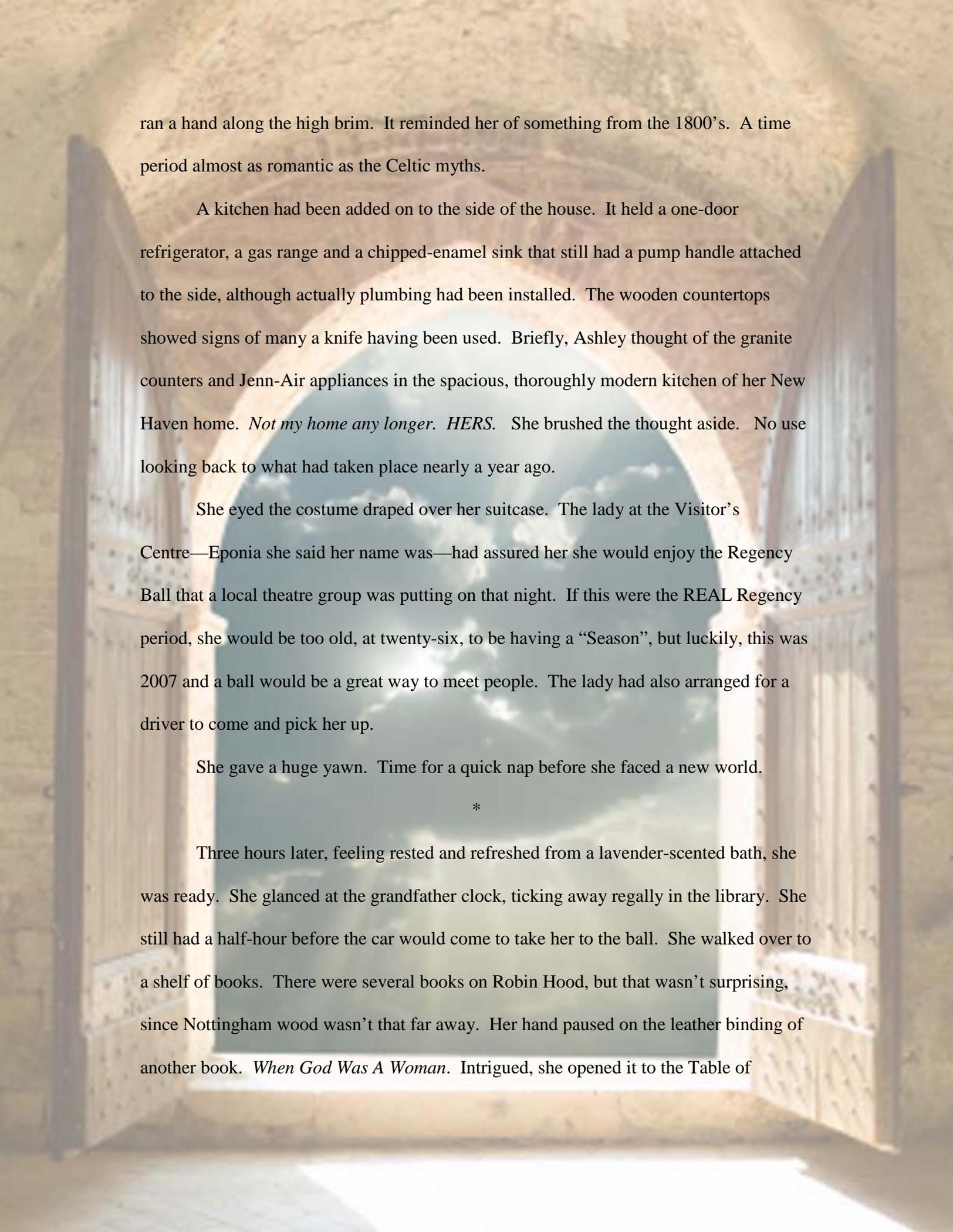
Prologue

Ashley Bouvier stepped inside the door of her room in the ivy-covered, thatched Bed-and Breakfast nestled in the countryside near York, set her suitcase down, and heaved a sigh of relief. The flight from New York had been exhausting and the train ride from London long, but it had been worth it. She was in England, home to the old Celtic legends of gods and goddesses who rewarded virtue and punished transgressors. For the next month, she wouldn't have to deal with the ramifications of the divorce from her lying, cheating dh—dear/damn husband—who'd married his secretary a week later.

She took a deep breath as she brushed her long, brown hair back, inhaling the fresh scent of country air. There would be trails to walk and moors to explore. Right now, she wanted to see the house that would be home for a month.

Ashley walked down the hallway of the old, two-story house, deciding that it was really charming. Downstairs, a huge stone-hewn fireplace took up nearly one whole wall, its hearth large enough to step in. As a history teacher, she envisioned, in earlier times, that a tripod had stood in it, a cast-iron kettle hanging over a fire, filled with savory stew. Comfortable, over-stuffed chairs sat invitingly close, a soft woolen throw folded over each one. Shorn, no doubt, from the local sheep.

The bathroom was quaint and rustic with a commode and a chain she actually had to pull to get it to flush. A four-footed claw tub stood in one corner. She smiled as she



ran a hand along the high brim. It reminded her of something from the 1800's. A time period almost as romantic as the Celtic myths.

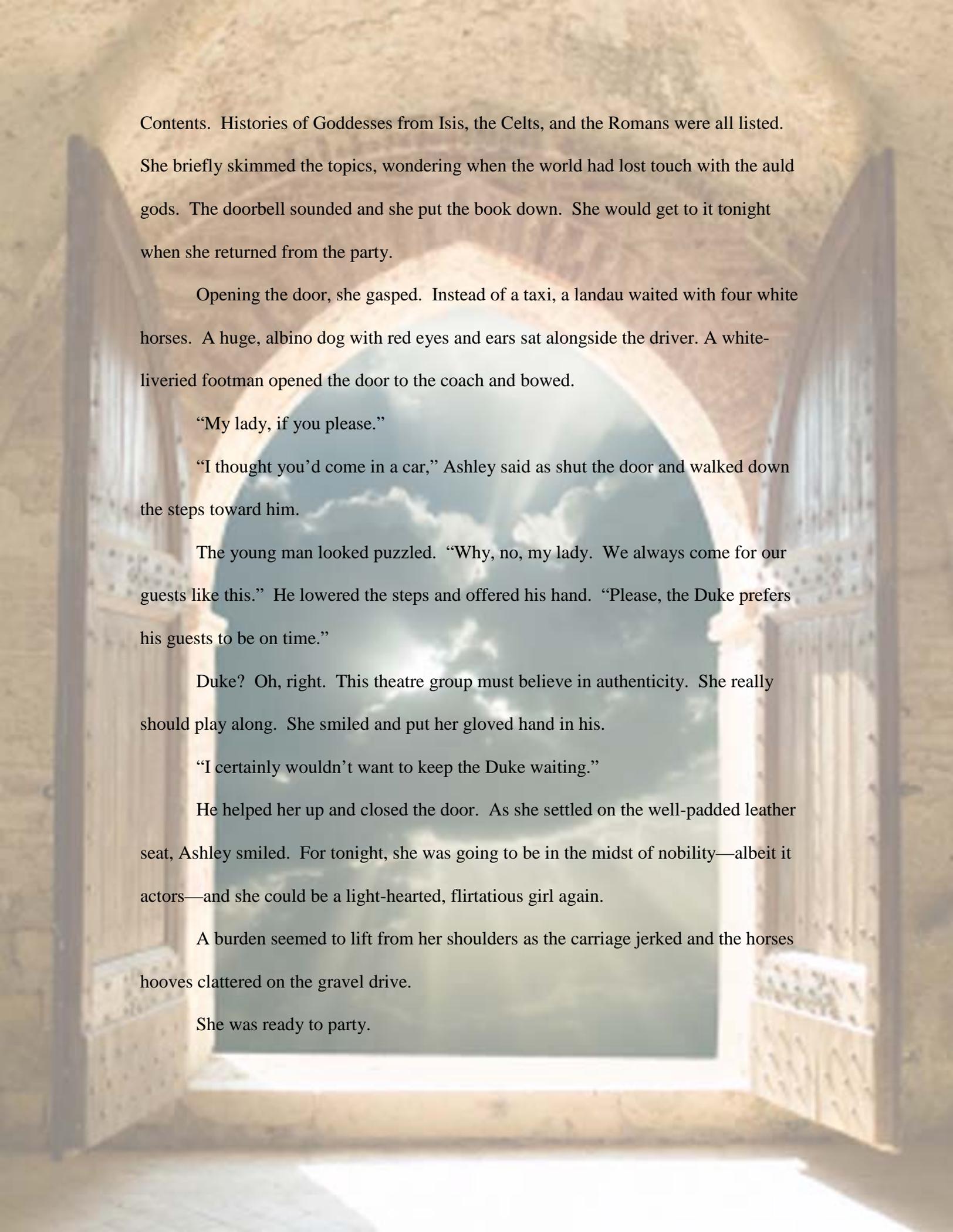
A kitchen had been added on to the side of the house. It held a one-door refrigerator, a gas range and a chipped-enamel sink that still had a pump handle attached to the side, although actually plumbing had been installed. The wooden countertops showed signs of many a knife having been used. Briefly, Ashley thought of the granite counters and Jenn-Air appliances in the spacious, thoroughly modern kitchen of her New Haven home. *Not my home any longer. HERS.* She brushed the thought aside. No use looking back to what had taken place nearly a year ago.

She eyed the costume draped over her suitcase. The lady at the Visitor's Centre—Eponia she said her name was—had assured her she would enjoy the Regency Ball that a local theatre group was putting on that night. If this were the REAL Regency period, she would be too old, at twenty-six, to be having a "Season", but luckily, this was 2007 and a ball would be a great way to meet people. The lady had also arranged for a driver to come and pick her up.

She gave a huge yawn. Time for a quick nap before she faced a new world.

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Three hours later, feeling rested and refreshed from a lavender-scented bath, she was ready. She glanced at the grandfather clock, ticking away regally in the library. She still had a half-hour before the car would come to take her to the ball. She walked over to a shelf of books. There were several books on Robin Hood, but that wasn't surprising, since Nottingham wood wasn't that far away. Her hand paused on the leather binding of another book. *When God Was A Woman.* Intrigued, she opened it to the Table of



Contents. Histories of Goddesses from Isis, the Celts, and the Romans were all listed. She briefly skimmed the topics, wondering when the world had lost touch with the auld gods. The doorbell sounded and she put the book down. She would get to it tonight when she returned from the party.

Opening the door, she gasped. Instead of a taxi, a landau waited with four white horses. A huge, albino dog with red eyes and ears sat alongside the driver. A white-liveried footman opened the door to the coach and bowed.

“My lady, if you please.”

“I thought you’d come in a car,” Ashley said as she shut the door and walked down the steps toward him.

The young man looked puzzled. “Why, no, my lady. We always come for our guests like this.” He lowered the steps and offered his hand. “Please, the Duke prefers his guests to be on time.”

Duke? Oh, right. This theatre group must believe in authenticity. She really should play along. She smiled and put her gloved hand in his.

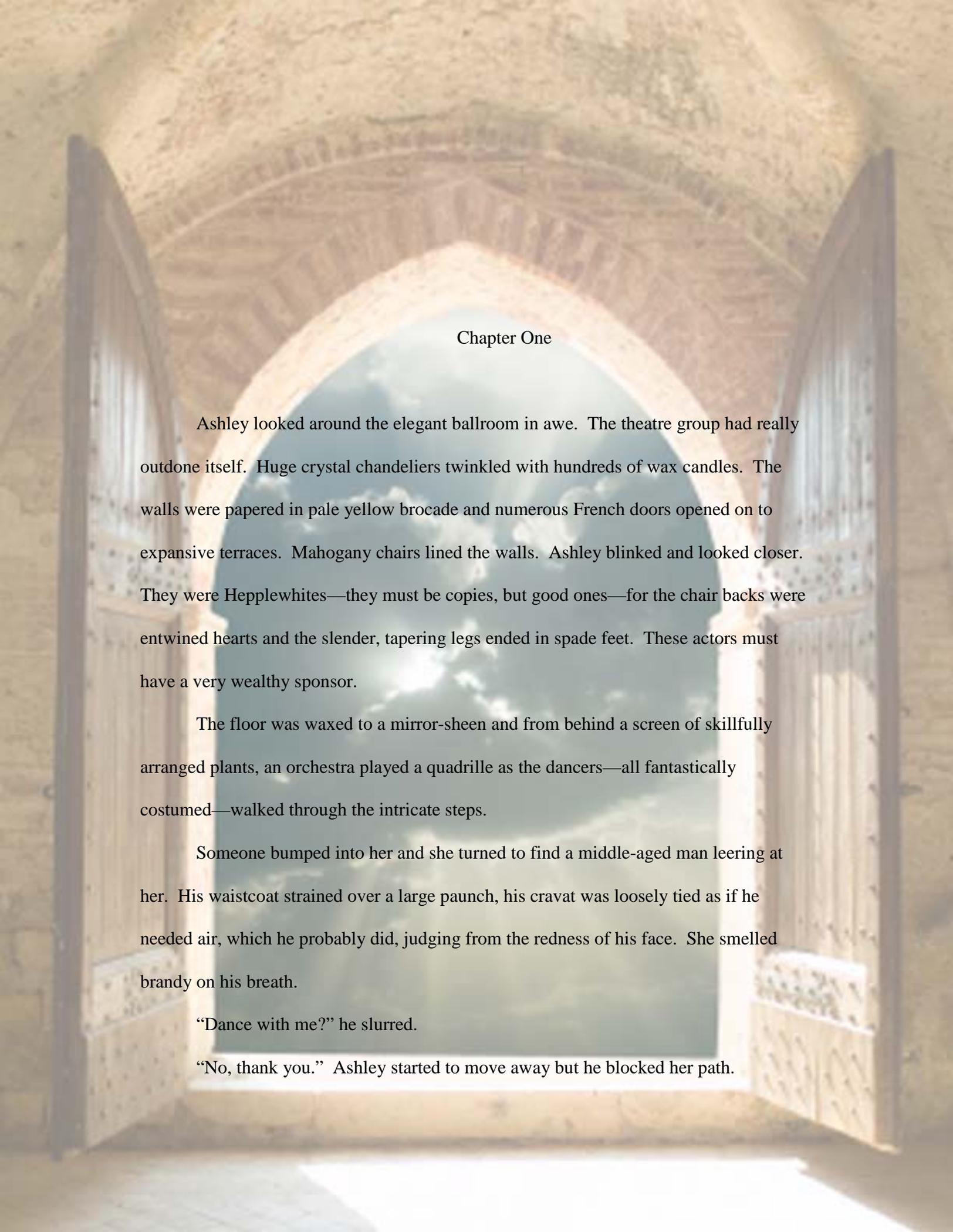
“I certainly wouldn’t want to keep the Duke waiting.”

He helped her up and closed the door. As she settled on the well-padded leather seat, Ashley smiled. For tonight, she was going to be in the midst of nobility—albeit it actors—and she could be a light-hearted, flirtatious girl again.

A burden seemed to lift from her shoulders as the carriage jerked and the horses hooves clattered on the gravel drive.

She was ready to party.





Chapter One

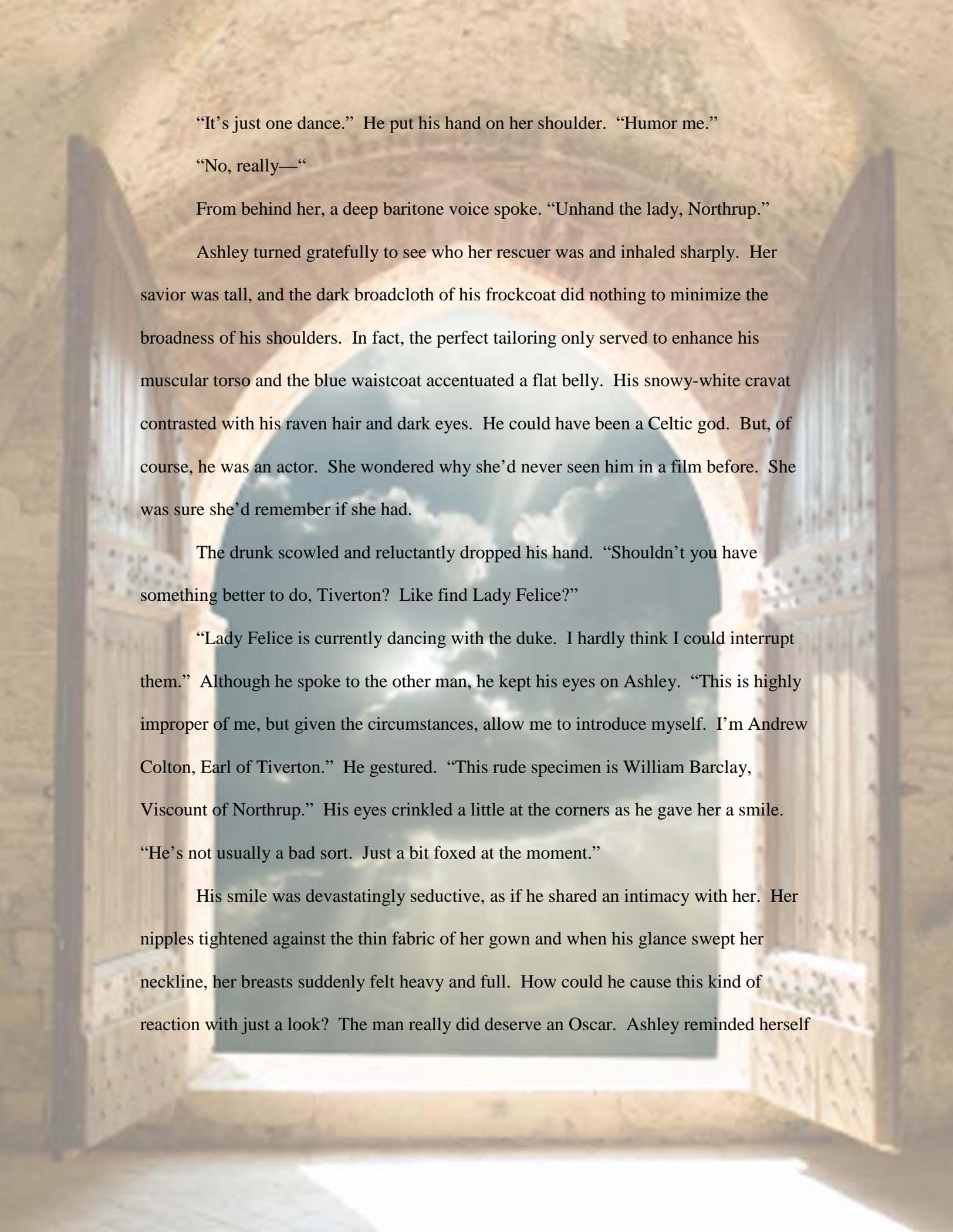
Ashley looked around the elegant ballroom in awe. The theatre group had really outdone itself. Huge crystal chandeliers twinkled with hundreds of wax candles. The walls were papered in pale yellow brocade and numerous French doors opened on to expansive terraces. Mahogany chairs lined the walls. Ashley blinked and looked closer. They were Hepplewhites—they must be copies, but good ones—for the chair backs were entwined hearts and the slender, tapering legs ended in spade feet. These actors must have a very wealthy sponsor.

The floor was waxed to a mirror-sheen and from behind a screen of skillfully arranged plants, an orchestra played a quadrille as the dancers—all fantastically costumed—walked through the intricate steps.

Someone bumped into her and she turned to find a middle-aged man leering at her. His waistcoat strained over a large paunch, his cravat was loosely tied as if he needed air, which he probably did, judging from the redness of his face. She smelled brandy on his breath.

“Dance with me?” he slurred.

“No, thank you.” Ashley started to move away but he blocked her path.



“It’s just one dance.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Humor me.”

“No, really—“

From behind her, a deep baritone voice spoke. “Unhand the lady, Northrup.”

Ashley turned gratefully to see who her rescuer was and inhaled sharply. Her savior was tall, and the dark broadcloth of his frockcoat did nothing to minimize the broadness of his shoulders. In fact, the perfect tailoring only served to enhance his muscular torso and the blue waistcoat accentuated a flat belly. His snowy-white cravat contrasted with his raven hair and dark eyes. He could have been a Celtic god. But, of course, he was an actor. She wondered why she’d never seen him in a film before. She was sure she’d remember if she had.

The drunk scowled and reluctantly dropped his hand. “Shouldn’t you have something better to do, Tiverton? Like find Lady Felice?”

“Lady Felice is currently dancing with the duke. I hardly think I could interrupt them.” Although he spoke to the other man, he kept his eyes on Ashley. “This is highly improper of me, but given the circumstances, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Andrew Colton, Earl of Tiverton.” He gestured. “This rude specimen is William Barclay, Viscount of Northrup.” His eyes crinkled a little at the corners as he gave her a smile. “He’s not usually a bad sort. Just a bit foxed at the moment.”

His smile was devastatingly seductive, as if he shared an intimacy with her. Her nipples tightened against the thin fabric of her gown and when his glance swept her neckline, her breasts suddenly felt heavy and full. How could he cause this kind of reaction with just a look? The man really did deserve an Oscar. Ashley reminded herself

that she was play-acting, too. So the men wanted to be an earl and a viscount. Well, why not? This might really be fun.

