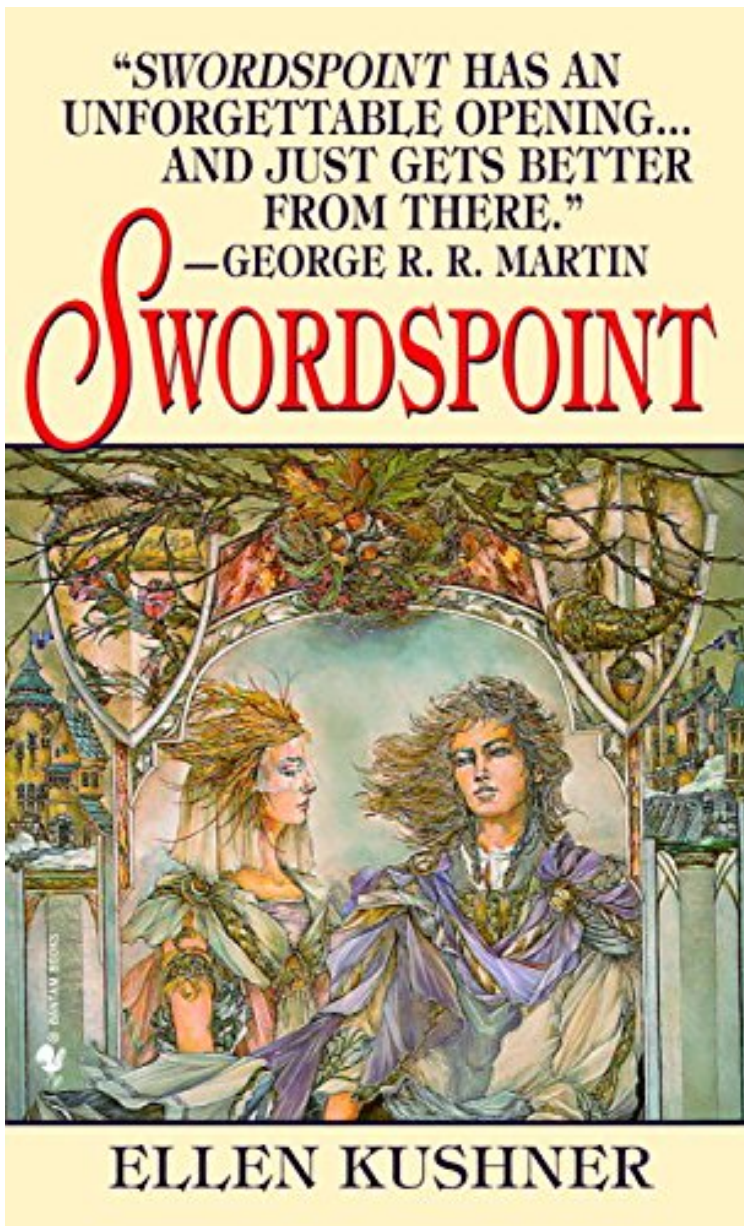


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# Swordspoint



*Par Ellen Kushner*  
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**Par Ellen Kushner : Swordspoint**  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe cult classic fantasy of manners, now with three bonus stories Swordspoint has an unforgettable opening and just gets better from there.George R. R. Martin Hailed by critics as a bravura performance (Locus) and witty, sharp-eyed, [and] full of interesting people (Newsday), this acclaimed novel, filled with remarkable plot twists and unexpected humor, takes fantasy to an unprecedented level of elegant writing and scintillating wit. Award-winning author Ellen Kushner has created a world of unforgettable characters whose political ambitions, passionate love affairs, and age-old rivalries collide with deadly

results. On the treacherous streets of Riverside, a man lives and dies by the sword. Even the nobles on the Hill turn to duels to settle their disputes. Within this elite, dangerous world, Richard St. Vier is the undisputed master, as skilled as he is ruthless until a death by the sword is met with outrage instead of awe, and the city discovers that the line between hero and villain can be altered in the blink of an eye.

Chapter I Snow was falling on Riverside, great white feather-puffs that veiled the cracks in the facades of its ruined houses; slowly softening the harsh contours of jagged roof and fallen beam. Eaves were rounded with snow, overlapping, embracing, sliding into each other, capping houses all clustered together like a fairy-tale village. Little slopes of snow nestled in the slats of shutters still cozily latched against the night. It dusted the tops of fantastical chimneys that spiraled up from frosted roofs, and it formed white peaks in the ridges of the old coats of arms carved above the doorways. Only here and there a window, its glass long shattered, gaped like a black mouth with broken teeth, sucking snow into its maw.

Let the fairy tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. And it therefore follows that evil lurks behind each broken window, scheming malice and enchantment; while behind the latched shutters the good are sleeping their just sleeps at this early hour in Riverside. Soon they will arise to go about their business; and one, maybe, will be as lovely as the day, armed, as are the good, for a predestined triumph. . . . But there is no one behind the broken windows; only eddies of snow drift across bare floorboards. The owners of the coats of arms have long since abandoned all claims to the houses they crest, and moved up to the Hill, where they can look down on all the city. No king rules them any more, for good or ill. From the Hill, Riverside is a tiny splotch between two riverbanks, an unsavory quarter in a prosperous city. The people who live there now like to think of themselves as evil, but they're really no worse than anyone else. And already this morning more than one drop of blood has been shed.

The blood lies on the snow of a formal winter garden, now trampled and muddy. A man lies dead, the snow filling in the hollows of his eyes, while another man is twisted up, grunting, sweating frog-ponds on the frozen earth, waiting for someone to come and help him. The hero of this little tableau has just vaulted the garden wall and is running like mad into the darkness while the darkness lasts. The falling snow made it hard for him to see. The fight hadn't badly winded him, but he was hot and sweaty, and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He ignored it, making for Riverside, where no one was likely to follow him. He could have stayed, if he'd wanted to. The swordfight had been very impressive, and the party guests had been well entertained. The winter garden party and its outcome would be talked about for weeks. But if he stayed, the swordsman knew that he would be offered wine, and rich pastry, and asked boring questions about his technique, and difficult questions about who had arranged the fight. He ran on. Under his cloak, his shirt was splattered with blood, and the Watch would want to know what he was doing up on the Hill at this hour. It was their right to know; but his profession forbade him to answer, so he dodged around corners and caught his breath in doorways until he'd left the splendors of the Hill behind, working his way down through the city. It was breaking dawn when he came to the river, flowing murky green under the Bridge. No one waited there to challenge him, so he set his foot on the stone, plowing through snowdrifts and the messy trails of other late-night workers who'd come before him, until he'd put the river safely between himself and the rest of the city. He stood now in Riverside, where the Watch never dared to come. People knew him here, and wouldn't bother him. But when he opened the door to his landlady's, there was a considerable crowd assembled, all wanting to know about the fight. Other Riversiders had been on the Hill too, that night, burgling houses and collecting gossip, and already the rumors had begun. The swordsman answered their questions with as much civility as he could muster, suddenly awash with exhaustion. He gave Marie his shirt to wash, and climbed the stairs to his own rooms. Less than an hour earlier, Marie the whore and laundress, who also rented out rooms by the week, had lain snoring lightly in the arms of a dear client, unaware of the impending excitement. Her friend was a sailor turned coiner, whose wooden leg leaned handily against the headboard. He was her fifth and last of the night, and she, not as young as she once was, slept through the initial pounding on her shutters. The sailor stirred uneasily, dreaming of storms. When the knock came harder, Marie bolted up with a cry, then shrieked at the cold outside the blanket. "Marie! Marie!" The voice through the shutter was muffled but insistent. "Open up and tell us all about it!" Marie sighed. It must be St Vier again: every time the swordsman got up to something they came to her to find out the details. This time, it was annoying to admit, she didn't know--but then, she didn't have to tell them that. With the laugh that had always made her popular, Marie got up and unbolted the door to the house. Her sailor huddled in a corner of the bed while her friends trooped in, taking over the room with the ease of familiarity. It was the right room for socializing, having been the front parlor

when the house was a noble's town house. The cherubs painted on the ceiling were flecked with mold; but most of the laurel-leaf molding still framed the walls, and the fireplace was real marble. Marie's friends spread their wet cloaks out on the gilded escritoire, now missing all its drawers, and over the turquoise velvet chair no one could sit on because of the uncertainty of its legs. Lightfinger Lucie coaxed the fire to a blaze, and Sam Bonner produced a jug of something that made the sailor feel much better. "You know," said Sam ponderously, "your St Vier's gone and killed a duke this time." Sam Bonner was a former pickpocket with an unhandy taste for the bottle. He'd been repeating the same thing for half an hour now, and his friends were getting tired of correcting him. "Not the duke, Sam," one of them tried again. "He's working for the duke. He killed two swordsmen, see, in the duke's garden." "No, no, in Lord Horn's garden. Three swordsmen, I heard," another asserted, "and from a very reliable source. Two dead, one wounded, and I'm taking odds on whether he'll live till morning!" "Done!" Marie sat on the bed with the blankets wrapped around her feet, letting the betting and the squabbling swirl around her. "Who's dead?--Lynch--de Maris--Not a scratch on him--Horn's garden--Hired St Vier?--Not St Vier, Lynch--Wounded--Dying--Who's paying St Vier?--Horn--the duke--the devil--How much?--More'n you'll ever see--" More people trickled in, adding to the clamor. "St Vier's been killed--captured--Five to one--" They barely noticed when another man came in and silently took a place just inside the door. Sam Bonner was roaring, "Well, I say he's the best dam' swordsman in the whole dam' city! No, I'm lying--in the world!" The young man by the doorway smiled, and said, "Excuse me. Marie?" He was younger than most of them there; dark-haired, of average height, his face dirty and stubbled. "Who the hell is that?" Sam Bonner growled. "The best dam' swordsman in the world," Lightfinger Lucie answered with pardonable malice. "I'm sorry to bother you," the swordsman said to Marie, "but you know how the stains set." He took off his cloak, revealing a white shirt ugly with blood. He pulled the shirt over his head, and tossed it into a corner. For a moment the iron tang of blood cut through the smells of whisky and wet wool. "I can pay you next week," he said. "I made some money." "Oh, that's fine with me," Marie said with offhanded airiness, showing off. He turned to go, but they stopped him with the shouting of his name: "St Vier!" "St Vier! Who's dead, then?" "De Maris," he answered curtly. "And maybe Lynch, by now. Excuse me, please." No one reached out a hand to stop him as he walked through the door. The smell of frying fish made the swordsman's stomach lurch. It was his young gentleman, the University student, wrapped in his scholar's robe, hovering like a black bat over the frying pan in the ornamented fireplace. "Good morning," St Vier said. "You're up early." "I'm always up early, Richard." The student didn't turn around. "You're the one who stays out all night killing people." His voice was its usual cool drawl, taunting in its nonchalance. The accent, with its crisp consonants and long vowels, took Richard back to the Hill: for a moment he was once again crouched amid the topiary of the pleasure garden, hearing the same tones ringing on the air from the party guests. "Who was the poor soul this time?" "Just a couple of swordsmen. It was supposed to be a duel with Hal Lynch, I thought I told you. Our patrons set it up to take place at this crazy garden party of Lord Horn's. Can you imagine, having a party outdoors in this weather?" "They would have had furs. And admired the landscaping." "I suppose." While he spoke, the swordsman was cleaning his sword. It was a light, flexible dueling weapon of a sort only he, with his reputation and his reflexes, could carry around Riverside with authority. "Anyway, Lynch got started, and then de Maris popped out of the shrubbery and started coming at me." "Whatever for?" Richard sighed. "Who knows? He's Horn's house swordsman; maybe he thought I was attacking his master. Anyway, Lynch stepped aside, and I killed de Maris. He was out of practice," he added, polishing the blade with a soft cloth. "Lynch was good enough, he always has been. But our patrons wanted it past first blood, so I think I killed him. I think. . . ." He scowled. "It was a clumsy stroke. I slipped on some old ice." The young man poked at the fish. "Do you want some?" "No, thanks. I'm just going to bed." "Well, it's revolting cold," the scholar said with satisfaction. "I shall have to eat it all myself." "Do that." St Vier passed into the adjoining room, which contained a clothes chest that also held his swords, wrapped in oilcloth, and a large, heavily carved bed. He had bought the bed the last time he had any money; seen it in a Riverside market stall full of odds and ends retrieved from the old houses, and fallen in love with it. He looked at the bed. It did not appear to have been slept in. Curious, he returned to the front room. "How was your night?" he asked. He noticed the pair of wet boots standing in the corner. "Fine," the scholar answered, daintily picking bones out of his fish. "I thought you said you were tired." "Alec," said Richard. "It really isn't safe for you to be going out alone here after dark. People get wild, and not everyone knows who you are yet." "No one knows who I am." Alec dreamily laced his long fingers in his hair. His hair was fine and leaf-brown, worn down his back in the long tail that was the defiant emblem of University scholars. He had been in Riverside since autumn, and his clothes and

his accent were the only signs of where he had come from. "Look." Alec's eyes, turned to the window, were dark and green, like the water under the Bridge. "It's still snowing. You can die in the snow. You're cold, but it doesn't hurt. They say you get warmer and warmer, and then you fall asleep. . . ." "We can go out later. If anyone is trying to kill you, I'd better know about it." "Why?" "I can't let them," the swordsman said; "it would ruin my reputation." He yawned. "I hope at least you had your knife with you." "I lost it." "Again? Well, never mind. I can get you another when the money for the fight comes in." St Vier shook out his arms, and flexed them against the wall. "If I don't go to sleep soon, I'm going to start waking up, and then I'll feel rotten for the rest of the day. 'Night, Alec." "Good night, Richard." The voice was low and amused; of course, it was morning. But he was much too tired to care. He placed his sword within reach of the bed, as he always did. As he drifted off, he seemed to see a series of white images, scenes carved in snow. Frosty gardens, their branches lush with white roses and crystal thorns; ladies with floating spun-sugar hair escorted by ivory gallants; and, for himself, opponents with long bright swords of clear and gleaming ice.

Chapter II

By midday, most of the nobles on the Hill could be counted on to be awake. The Hill sat lordly above the rest of the city, honeycombed with mansions, landscaped lawns, elaborate gates, and private docks on the cleanest part of the river. Its streets had been built expressly wide and smooth enough to accommodate the carriages of nobles, shortly after carriages had been invented. Usually, mornings on the Hill were passed in leisurely exchange of notes written on colored, scented, and folded paper, read and composed in various states of dishabille over cups of rich chocolate and crisp little triangles of toast (all the nourishment that ought to be managed after a night's reveling); but on the morning after the garden duel, with the night's events ripe for comment, no one had the patience to wait for a reply, so the streets were unusually crowded with carriages and pedestrians of rank. The Duke of Karleigh was gone from the city. From what anyone could discover, the duke had left Lord Horn's party not an hour after the fight, gone home, ordered up his carriage despite the snow, and departed before dawn for his estates in the south without a word to anyone. The first swordsman who had fought St Vier, a man named Lynch, had died at around ten that morning, so there was no asking him whether Karleigh had hired him for the duel, although the duke's abrupt departure upon Lynch's defeat seemed to confirm that he had. St Vier had disappeared back into Riverside, but whoever had hired him was expected to step forward momentarily to claim the stylish and elegant victory over Karleigh. So far, no one had.

Revue de presse

Fans of Scott Lynch's Locke Lamora novels will adore Kushner's artful, witty and richly told tales of swords and rogues and gallants (both male and female). (LOVE READING)