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books

The Fragile Threads of Power



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TITAN BOOKS

WHITE LONDON, *seven years ago*

It came in handy, being small.

People talked of growing up like it was some grand accomplishment, but small bodies could slip through narrow gaps, and hide in tight corners, and get in and out of places other bodies wouldn't fit.

Like a chimney.

Kosika shimmied down the last few feet and dropped into the hearth, sending up a plume of soot. She held her breath, half to keep from inhaling ash and half to make sure no one was home. Lark had said the place was empty, that no one had come or gone in more than a week, but Kosika figured it was better to be silent than sorry, so she stayed crouched in the fireplace a few moments, waiting, listening until she was sure she was alone.

Then she scooted onto the edge of the hearth and slipped off her boots, tying the laces and hanging them around her neck. She hopped down, bare feet kissing the wooden floor, and set off.

It was a nice house. The boards were even, and the walls were straight, and though the shutters were all latched, there were a lot of windows, and thin bits of light got in around the edges, giving her just enough to see by. She didn't mind robbing nice houses, especially when people just up and left them unattended.

She went to the pantry first. She always did. People who lived in houses

this nice didn't think of things like jam and cheese and dried meat as precious, never got hungry enough to worry about running out.

But Kosika was always hungry.

Sadly, the pantry shelves were sparse. A sack of flour. A pouch of salt. A single jar of compote that turned out to be bitter orange (she hated bitter orange). But there, in the back, behind a tin of loose tea, she found a waxy paper bag of sugar cubes. More than a dozen of them, small and brown and shining like crystals. She'd always had a sweet tooth, and her mouth began to water even as she tucked one in her cheek. She knew she should only take one or two and leave the rest, but she broke her own rules and shoved the whole bag in her pocket, sucking on the cube as she went off in search of treasure.

The trick was not to take too much. People who had *enough* didn't notice when one or two of their things went missing. They figured they'd simply misplaced them, put them down and forgotten where.

Maybe, she told herself, the person who'd lived here was dead. Or maybe they had simply gone on a trip. Maybe they were rich, rich enough to have a second home in the country, or a really big ship.

She tried to imagine what they were doing as she padded through the darkened rooms, opening cupboards and drawers, looking for the glint of coins, or metal, or magic.

Something twitched at the edge of her sight, and Kosika jumped, dropping into a crouch before she realized it was only a mirror. A large, silvered looking glass, propped on a table. Too big to steal, but still she drifted toward it, had to stand on her toes to see her face reflected back. Kosika didn't know how old she was. Somewhere between six and seven. Closer to seven, she guessed, because the days were just starting to get shorter, and she knew she was born right at the point where summer gave way to fall. Her mother said that was why she looked like she was caught between, neither here nor there. Her hair, which was neither blond nor brown. Her eyes, which were neither green nor grey nor blue.

(Kosika didn't see why a person's looks even mattered. They weren't like coin. They didn't spend.)

Her gaze dipped. Below the mirror, on the table, there was a drawer.

It didn't have a knob or a handle, but she could see the groove of one thing set into another, and when she pressed against the wood, it gave, a hidden clasp released. The drawer sprang out, revealing a shallow tray, and two amulets, made of glass or pale stone, one bound in leather and the other in thin strands of copper.

Amplifiers.

She couldn't read the symbols scratched into the edges, but she knew that's what they were. Talismans designed to capture power, and bind it to you.

Most people couldn't afford magic-catchers—they just carved the spells straight into their skin. But marks faded, and skin sagged, and spells turned with time, like rotten fruit, while a piece of jewelry could be taken off, exchanged, refilled.

Kosika lifted one of the amulets, and wondered if the amplifiers were worth less, or even more, now that the world was waking up. That's what people called the *change*. As if the magic had just been sleeping all these years, and the latest king, Holland, had somehow shaken it awake.

She hadn't seen him yet, now with her own eyes, but she'd seen the old ones, once, the pale twins who rode through the streets, their mouths stained dark with other people's blood. She'd felt only a pang of relief when she heard they were dead, and if she was honest, she hadn't cared much at first about the new king, either. But it turned out Holland was different. Right after he took the throne, the river began to thaw, and the fog began to thin, and everything in the city got a little brighter, a little warmer. And all at once, the magic began to flow again. Not much of it, sure, but it was there, and people didn't even have to bind it to their bodies using scars or spellwork.

Her best friend, Lark, woke up one morning with his palms prickling, the way skin did sometimes after it went numb, and you had to rub the feeling back. A few days later, he had a fever, sweat shining on his face, and it scared Kosika to see him so sick. She tried to swallow up the fear, but it made her stomach hurt, and all night she lay awake, convinced that he would die and she'd be even more alone. But then, the next day, there he was, looking fine. He ran toward her, pulled her into an alley, and held

out his hands, cupped together like he had a secret inside. And when he opened his fingers, Kosika gasped.

There, floating in his palms, was a small blue flame.

And Lark wasn't the only one. Over the last few months, the magic had sprouted up like weeds. Only it never really grew inside the grown-ups—at least, not in the ones who wanted it most. Maybe they'd spent too long trying to force magic to do what they wanted, and it was angry.

Kosika didn't care if it skipped them, so long as it found *her*.

It hadn't, not yet.

She told herself that was okay. It had only been a few months since the new king took the throne and brought the magic with him. But every day, she checked her body, hoping to find some hint of change, studied her hands and waited for a spark.

Now Kosika shoved the amplifiers in her pocket with the sugar cubes, and slid the secret drawer shut, and headed for the front door. Her hand was just reaching for the lock when the light caught on the wooden threshold and she jerked to a stop. It was spelled. She couldn't read the marks, but Lark had taught her what to look for. She looked balefully back at the chimney—it was a lot harder going up than down. But that's exactly what she did, climbing into the hearth, and shoving her boots back on, and shimmying up. By the time Kosika got back onto the roof, she was breathless, and soot-stained, and she popped another sugar cube into her mouth as a reward.

She crept to the edge of the roof and peered down, spotting Lark's silver-blond head below, hand outstretched as he pretended to sell charms to anyone who passed, even though the charms were just stones painted with fake spells and he was really standing there to make sure no one came home while she was still inside.

Kosika whistled, and he looked up, head cocked in question. She made an X with her arms, the sign for a spell she couldn't cross, and he jerked his head toward the corner, and she liked that they had a language that didn't need words.

She went to the other side of the roof and lowered herself down the gutter, dropping to a crouch on the paving stones below. She straightened

and looked around, but Lark wasn't there. Kosika frowned, and started down the alley.

A pair of hands shot out and grabbed her, hauling her into the gap between houses. She thrashed, was about to bite one of the hands when it shoved her away.

"Kings, Kosika," said Lark, shaking his fingers. "Are you a girl or a beast?"

"Whichever one I need to be," she shot back. But he was smiling. Lark had a wonderful smile, the kind that took over his whole face and made you want to smile, too. He was eleven, gangly in that way boys got when they were growing, and even though his hair was as pale as the Sijlt before it thawed, his eyes were warm and dark, the color of wet earth.

He reached out and patted the soot off her clothes. "Find anything good?"

Kosika took out the amplifiers. He turned them over in his hands, and she knew he could read the spells, knew they were a good find by the way he studied them, nodding to himself.

She didn't tell Lark about the sugar, and she felt a little bad about it, but she told herself he didn't like sweet things, not as much as she did, and it was her reward for doing the hard work, the kind that got you caught. And if she'd learned anything from her mother, it was that you had to look out for yourself.

Her mother, who had always treated her like a burden, a small thief squatting in her house, eating her food and sleeping in her bed and stealing her heat. And for a long time, Kosika would have given anything to be noticed, to feel wanted, by someone else. But then children started waking up with fire in their hands, or wind beneath their feet, or water tipping toward them like they were downhill, and Kosika's mother started noticing her, studying her, a hunger in her eyes. These days, she did her best to stay out of the way.

Lark pocketed the amulets—she knew whatever he got for them, he'd give her half, he always did. They were a team. He ruffled her in-between hair, and she pretended not to like the way it felt, the weight of his hand on her head. She didn't have a big brother, but he made her feel like she did.

And then he gave her a gentle push, and they broke apart, Lark toward wherever it was he went, and Kosika toward home.

She slowed as the house came into sight.

It was small and thin, like a book on a shelf, squeezed between two others on a road barely large enough for a cart, let alone a carriage. But there *was* a carriage parked in front, and a short man standing by the front door. The stranger wasn't knocking, just standing there, smoking a taper, thin white smoke pluming around his head. His skin was covered in tattoos, the kind the grown-ups used to bind magic to them. He had even more than her mother. The marks ran over his hands and up his arms, disappearing under his shirt and reappearing at his throat. She wondered if that meant he was strong, or weak.

As if the man could feel her thinking, his head swiveled toward her, and Kosika darted back into the shadow of the nearest alley. She went around to the back of the house, climbed the crates beneath the window. She slid the frame up, even though it was stiff and she'd always had a fear that it would swing back down and cut her head right off as she was climbing through. But it didn't, and she shimmied over the sill, and dropped to the floor, holding her breath.

She heard voices in the kitchen.

One was her mother's, but she didn't recognize the other. There was a sound, too. The *clink clink clink* of metal. Kosika crept down the hall, and peered around the doorway, and saw her mother and another man sitting at the table. Kosika's mother looked like she always did—tired and thin, like a piece of dried fruit, all the softness sucked away.

But the man, she'd never seen before. He was stringy, like gristle, his hair tied back off his face. A black tattoo that looked like knots of rope traced the bones on his left hand, which hovered over a stack of coins.

He lifted a few and let them fall, one by one, back onto the stack. That was the sound she'd heard.

Clink clink clink.

Clink clink clink.

Clink clink clink.

“Kosika.”

She jumped, startled by her mother's voice, and by the kindness in it.

"Come here," said her mother, holding out her hand. Black brands ringed each of her fingers and circled her wrist, and Kosika resisted the urge to back away, because she didn't want to make her mother mad. She took a cautious step forward, and her mother smiled, and Kosika should have known then, to stop out of reach, but she took another slow step toward the table.

"Don't be rude," snapped her mother, and there, at least, was the tone she knew. "Her magic hasn't come in yet," her mother added, addressing the man, "but it will. She's a strong girl."

Kosika smiled at that. Her mother didn't often say nice things.

The man smiled, too. And then he jerked forward. Not with his whole body, just his tattooed hand. One second it was there on the coins and the next it was around her wrist, pulling her close. Kosika stumbled, but he didn't let go. He twisted her palm up, exposing the underside of her forearm, and the blue veins at her wrist.

"Hmm," he said. "Awfully pale."

His voice was wrong, like rocks were stuck inside his throat, and his hand felt like a shackle, heavy and cold around her wrist. She tried to twist free, but his fingers only tightened.

"She does have some fight," he said, and panic rose in Kosika, because her mother was just sitting there, watching. Only she wasn't watching *her*. Her eyes were on the coins, and Kosika didn't want to be there anymore. Because she knew who this man was.

Or at least, *what* he was.

Lark had warned her about men and women like him. Collectors who traded not in objects, but in people, anyone with a bit of magic in their veins.

Kosika *wished* she had magic, so she could light the man on fire, scare him away, make him let go. She didn't have any power, but she did at least remember what Lark told her, about where to hit a man to make him hurt, so she wrenched backward with all her weight, forcing the stranger to his feet, and then she kicked him, hard, as hard as she could, right between his legs. The man made a sound like a bellows, all the air whooshing out, and the hand around her wrist let go as he crashed into the table, toppling the stack of coins as she shot toward the door.

Her mother tried to grab her as she passed, but her limbs were too slow, her body worn out from all those years of stealing magic, and Kosika was out the door before she remembered the other man, and the carriage. He came at her in a wreath of smoke, but she ducked beneath the circle of his arms, and took off down the narrow road.

Kosika didn't know what they'd do if they caught her.

It didn't matter.

She wouldn't let them.

They were big but she was fast, and even if they knew the streets, she knew the alleys and the steps and all nine walls and the narrow gaps in the world—the ones that even Lark couldn't fit through anymore. Her legs started to hurt and her lungs were burning, but Kosika kept running, cutting between market stalls and shops until the buildings staggered and the path climbed into steps and gave way onto the Silver Wood.

And even then, she didn't stop.

None of the other children would go into the wood. They said it was dead, said it was haunted, said there were faces in the trees, eyes watching from the peeling grey bark. But Kosika wasn't scared, or at least, not as scared of the dead forest as she was of those men, with their hungry eyes and shackle hands. She crossed the first line of trees, straight as bars on a cage, and kept going one row, two, three, before pressing herself back against a narrow trunk.

She closed her eyes, and held her breath, and tried to listen past the hammer of her heart. Listen for voices. Listen for footsteps. But the world was suddenly quiet, and all she heard was the murmur of wind through the mostly bare branches. The rustle of it on brittle leaves.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. A dozen wooden eyes stared back from the trees ahead. She waited for one of them to blink, but none of them did.

Kosika could have turned back then, but she didn't. She'd crossed the edge of the woods, and it had made her bold. So she went deeper, walking until she couldn't see the rooftops, or the streets, or the castle anymore, until it felt like she wasn't in the city at all, but somewhere else. Somewhere calm. Somewhere quiet.

And then she saw him.

The man was sitting on the ground, his back against a tree, his legs out and his chin dropped against his chest, limp as a rag doll, but the sight of him still made her gasp, the sound loud as a snapping stick in the silent woods. She clapped a hand over her mouth and ducked behind the nearest tree, expecting the man's head to jerk up, his hand to reach for a weapon. But he didn't move. He must have been asleep.

Kosika chewed her lip.

She couldn't leave—it wasn't safe to go home, not yet—and she didn't want to put her back to the man on the ground, in case he tried to surprise her, so she sank down against another tree, legs crossed, making sure she could see the sleeping stranger. She dug in her pockets, came up with the waxy bag of sugar.

She sucked on the cubes one at a time, eyes darting now and then to the man against the tree. She decided to save one of the sugar cubes for him, as thanks for keeping her company, but an hour passed, and the sun sank low enough to scrape the branches, and the air went from cool to cold, and the man still didn't move.

She had a bad feeling, then.

"Os?" she called out, wincing as the sound of her voice broke the silence of the Silver Wood, the word bouncing off the hard trees.

Hello? Hello? Hello?

Kosika got to her feet and made her way toward the man. He didn't look very old, but his hair was silver white, his clothes finely made, too nice to be sitting on the ground. He wore a silver half-cloak, and she knew, as soon as she got close enough, that he wasn't sleeping.

He was dead.

Kosika had seen a dead body before, but it had been much different, limbs askew and insides spilled out onto the cobblestones. There was no blood on the man beneath the tree. He looked like he'd just gotten tired, and decided to sit down and rest, and never managed to get back up. One arm was draped in his lap. The other hung at his side. Kosika's gaze followed it down to his hand where it touched the ground. There was something beneath his fingers.

She leaned closer, and saw that it was grass.

Not the hard, brittle blades that coated the rest of the Silver Wood, but soft, new shoots, small and green and spreading out beneath him like a cushion.

She ran her fingers over it, recoiling when her hand accidentally grazed his skin. The man was cold. Her eyes went to his half-cloak. It looked nice, and warm, and she thought of taking it, but she couldn't bring herself to touch him again. And yet, she didn't want to leave him, either. She took the last of the sugar cubes from the waxy bag and set it in his palm, just as a sound shattered the quiet.

The scrape of metal and the thud of boots.

Kosika leapt up, darting into the trees for cover. But they weren't coming after her. She heard the steps slow, then stop, and she stopped, too, peering around a narrow trunk. From there, she couldn't see the man on the ground, but she saw the soldiers standing over him. There were three of them, their silver armor glinting in the thin light. Royal guards.

Kosika couldn't hear what they were saying, but she saw one kneel, heard another let out a ragged sob. A sound that splintered the woods, and made her wince, and turn her back, and run.

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**CLOCKS,
LOCKS,
AND
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RED LONDON, *now*

Master Haskin had a knack for fixing broken things.
The sign on his shop door said as much.

ES HAL VIR, HIS HAL NASVIR, it declared in neat gold font.

Once broken, soon repaired.

Ostensibly, his business was devoted to the mending of clocks, locks, and household trinkets. Objects guided by simple magic, the minor cogs that turned in so many London homes. And of course, Master Haskin *could* fix a clock, but so could anyone with a decent ear and a basic understanding of the language of spells.

No, most of the patrons that came through the black door of Haskin's shop brought stranger things. Items "salvaged" from ships at sea, or lifted from London streets, or claimed abroad. Objects that arrived damaged, or were broken in the course of acquisition, their spellwork having rattled loose, unraveled, or been ruined entirely.

People brought all manner of things to Haskin's shop. And when they did, they invariably encountered his apprentice.

She was usually perched, cross-legged, on a rickety stool behind the counter, a tangle of brown curls piled like a hat on her head, the unruly mass bound up with twine, or netting, or whatever she could find in a pinch. She might have been thirteen, or twenty-three, depending on the light. She sat like a child and swore like a sailor, and dressed as if no one had ever

taught her how. She had thin quick fingers that were always moving, and keen dark eyes that twitched over whatever broken thing lay gutted on the counter, and she talked as she worked, but only to the skeleton of the owl that sat nearby.

It had no feathers, no flesh, just bones held together by silver thread. She had named the bird Vares—*prince*—after Kell Maresh, to whom it bore little resemblance, save for its two stone eyes, one of which was blue, the other black, and the unsettling effect it had on those it met—the result of a spell that spurred it now and then to click its beak or cock its head, startling unsuspecting customers.

Sure enough, the woman currently waiting across the counter jumped.

“Oh,” she said, ruffling as if she had feathers of her own. “I didn’t know it was *alive*.”

“It’s not,” said the apprentice, “strictly speaking.” In truth, she often wondered where the line was. After all, the owl had only been spelled to mimic basic movements, but now and then she’d catch him picking at a wing where the feathers would be, or notice him staring out the window with those flat rock eyes, and she swore that he was thinking *something* of his own.

The apprentice returned her attention to the waiting woman. She fetched a glass jar from beneath the counter. It was roughly the size of her hand, and shaped like a lantern with six glass sides.

“Here you are then,” she said as she set it on the table.

The customer lifted the object carefully, brought it to her lips, and whispered something. As she did, the lantern lit, the glass sides frosting a milky white. The apprentice watched, and saw what the woman couldn’t—the filaments of light around the object rippled and smoothed, the spellwork flowing seamlessly as the woman brought it to her ear. The message whispered itself back, and the glass went clear again, the vessel empty.

The woman smiled. “Marvelous,” she said, bundling the mended secret-keeper away inside her coat. She set the coins down in a neat stack, one silver lish and four red lin.

“Give Master Haskin my thanks,” she added, already turning away.

“I will,” called the apprentice as the door swung shut.

She swept the coins from the counter, and hopped down from her stool, rolling her head on her shoulders to stretch.

There was no Master Haskin, of course.

Once or twice when the shop was new, she'd dragged an old man from the nearest tavern, paid him a lin or two to come and sit in the back with his head bent over a book, just so she could point him out to customers and say, "The master is busy working now," since apparently a man half in his cups still inspired more faith than a sharp-eyed girl who looked even younger than her age, which was fifteen.

Then she got tired of spending the coin, so she propped a few boxes and a pillow behind a mottled glass door and pointed to that instead.

These days she didn't bother, just flicked her fingers toward the back of the shop and said, "He's busy." It turned out, no one really cared, so long as the fixing got done.

Now, alone in the shop, the apprentice—whose name, not that anyone knew it, was Tesali—rubbed her eyes, cheekbones bruised from the blotters she wore all day, to focus her gaze. She took a long swig of black tea, bitter and over-steeped, just the way she liked it—and still hot, thanks to the mug, one of the first things she'd ever spelled.

The day was thinning out beyond the windows, and the lanterns around the shop began to glow, warming the room with a buttery light that glanced off the shelves and cases and worktops, all of them well stocked, but not cluttered, toeing the line between a welcome fullness and a mess.

It was a balance Tes had learned from her father.

Shops like this had to be careful—too clean, and it looked like you were lacking business. Too messy, and customers would take that business elsewhere. If everything they saw was broken, they'd think you were no good at fixing. If everything they saw was fixed, they'd wonder why no one had come to claim it.

Haskin's shop—*her* shop—struck the perfect balance.

There were shelves with spools of cable—copper and silver, mostly, the best conduits for magic—and jars full of cogs and pencils and tacks, and piles of scrap paper covered in the scrawls of half-worked spells. All the things she guessed a repair shop might keep on hand. In truth, the cogs,