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**I
WORLD
IN
RUIN**

Twice before Lila had made this journey, but always as a passenger.

Always using Kell's magic.

Never her own.

And never alone.

But there was no time to think, no time to be afraid, and certainly no time to wait.

Chest heaving and pulse high, Lila swallowed and said the words, as boldly as she could. Words that belonged only on the lips of a blood magician. An *Antari*. Like Holland. Like Kell.

"As Travars."

The magic sang up her arm, and through her chest, and then the city lurched around her, gravity twisting as the world gave way.

Lila thought it would be easy or, at least, *simple*.

Something you either survived, or did not.

She was wrong.



A world away, Holland was drowning.

He fought to the surface of his own mind, only to be forced back down into the dark water by a will as strong as iron. He fought, and clawed, and gasped for air, strength leaching out with every violent thrash, every desperate struggle. It was worse than dying, because dying gave way to death, and this did not.

There was no light. No air. No strength. It had all been taken, severed, leaving only darkness and, somewhere beyond the crush, a voice shouting his name.

Kell's voice—

Too far away.

Holland's grip faltered, slipped, and he was sinking again.

All he had ever wanted was to bring the magic back—to see his world spared from its slow, inexorable death—a death caused first by the fear of another London, and then by the fear of his own.

All Holland wanted was to see his world restored.

Revived.

He knew the legends—the dreams—of a magician powerful enough to do it. Strong enough to breathe air back into its starved lungs, to quicken its dying heart.

For as long as Holland could remember, that was all he'd wanted.

And for as long as Holland could remember, he had wanted the magician to be *him*.

Even before the darkness bloomed across his eye, branding him with the mark of power, he'd wanted it to be him. He'd stood on the banks of the Sijlt as a child, skating stones across the frozen surface, imagining that he would be the one to crack the ice. Stood in the Silver Wood as a grown man, praying for the strength to protect his home. He'd never wanted to be *king*, though in the stories the magician always was. He didn't want to rule the world. He only wanted to save it.

Athos Dane had called this arrogance, that first night, when Holland was dragged, bleeding and half conscious, into the new king's chambers. Arrogance and pride, he'd chided, as he carved his curse into Holland's skin.

Things to be broken.

And Athos had. He'd broken Holland one bone, one day, one order at a time. Until all Holland wanted, more than the ability to save his world, more than the strength to bring the magic back, more than *anything*, was for it to end.

It was cowardice, he knew, but cowardice came so much easier than hope.

And in that moment by the bridge, when Holland lowered his guard and let the spoiled princeling Kell drive the metal bar through his chest, the first thing he felt—the first and last and *only* thing he felt—was relief.

That it was finally over.

Only it wasn't.

It is a hard thing, to kill an *Antari*.

When Holland woke, lying in a dead garden, in a dead city, in a dead world, the first thing he felt then was pain. The second thing was freedom. Athos Dane's hold was gone, and Holland was alive—broken, but alive.

And stranded.

Trapped in a wounded body in a world with no door at the mercy of another king. But this time, he had a *choice*.

A chance to set things right.

He'd stood, half dead, before the onyx throne, and spoken to the king carved in stone, and traded freedom for a chance to save his London, to see it bloom again. Holland made the deal, paid with his own body and soul. And with the shadow king's power, he had finally brought the magic back, seen his world bloom into color, his people's hope revived, his city restored.

He'd done everything he could, given up everything he had, to keep it safe.

But it still was not enough.

Not for the shadow king, who always wanted more, who grew stronger every day and craved chaos, magic in its truest form, power without control.

Holland was losing hold of the monster in his skin.

And so he'd done the only thing he could.

He'd offered Osaron another vessel.

"*Very well . . .*" said the king, the demon, the god. "*But if they cannot be persuaded, I will keep your body as my own.*"

And Holland agreed—how could he not?

Anything for London.

And Kell—spoiled, childish, headstrong Kell, broken and powerless and snared by that damned collar—had still refused.

Of course he had refused.

Of course—

The shadow king had smiled then, with Holland's own mouth, and he had fought, with everything he could summon, but a deal was a deal and the deal was done and he felt Osaron surge up—that single, violent motion—and Holland was shoved down, into the dark depths of his own mind, forced under by the current of the shadow king's will.

Helpless, trapped within a body, within a deal, unable to do anything but watch, and feel, and drown.

"Holland!"

Kell's voice cracked as he strained his broken body against the frame, the way *Holland* had once, when Athos Dane first bound him. Broke him. The cage leached away most of Kell's power; the collar around his throat cut off the rest. There was a terror in Kell's eyes, a desperation that surprised him.

"Holland, you bastard, fight back!"

He tried, but his body was no longer his, and his mind, his tired mind, was sinking down, down—

Give in, said the shadow king.

"Show me you're not weak!" Kell's voice pushed through. "Prove you're not still a slave to someone else's will!"

You cannot fight me.

"Did you really come all the way back to lose like this?"

I've already won.

"Holland!"

Holland hated Kell, and in that moment, the hatred was almost enough to drive him up, but even if he wanted to rise to the other *Antari's* bait, Osaron was unyielding.

Holland heard his own voice, then, but of course it wasn't his. A twisted imitation by the monster wearing his skin. In Holland's hand, a crimson coin, a token to another London, Kell's London, and Kell was swearing and throwing himself against his bonds until his chest heaved and his wrists were bloody.

Useless.

It was all useless.

Once again he was a prisoner in his own body. Kell's voice echoed through the dark.

You've just traded one master for another.

They were moving now, Osaron guiding Holland's body. The door closed behind them, but Kell's screams still hurled themselves against the wood, shattering into broken syllables and strangled cries.

Ojka stood in the hall, sharpening her knives. She looked up, revealing the crescent scar on one cheek, and her two-toned eyes, one yellow, the other black. An *Antari*

forged by their hands—by their mercy.

"Your Majesty," she said, straightening.

Holland tried to rise up, tried to force his voice across their—*his*—lips, but when speech came, the words were Osaron's.

"Guard the door. Let no one pass."

A flicker of a smile across the red slash of Ojka's mouth. "As you wish."

The palace passed in a blur, and then they were outside, passing the statues of the Dane twins at the base of the stairs, moving swiftly beneath a bruised sky through a garden now flanked by trees instead of bodies.

What would become of it, without Osaron, without *him*? Would the city continue to flourish? Or would it collapse, like a body stripped of life?

Please, he begged silently. This world needs me.

"*There is no point,*" said Osaron aloud, and Holland felt sick to be the thought in their head instead of the word. "*It is already dead,*" continued the king. "*We will start over. We will find a world worthy of our strength.*"

They reached the garden wall and Osaron drew a dagger from the sheath at their waist. The bite of steel on flesh was nothing, as if Holland had been cut off from his very senses, buried too deep to feel anything but Osaron's grip. But as the shadow king's fingers streaked through the blood and lifted Kell's coin to the wall, Holland struggled up one last time.

He couldn't win back his body—not yet—not all of it—but perhaps he didn't need everything.

One hand. Five fingers.

He threw every ounce of strength, every shred of will, into that one limb, and halfway to the wall, it stopped, hovering in the air.

Blood trickled down his wrist. Holland knew the words to break a body, to turn it to ice, or ash, or stone.

All he had to do was guide his hand to his own chest.

All he had to do was shape the magic—

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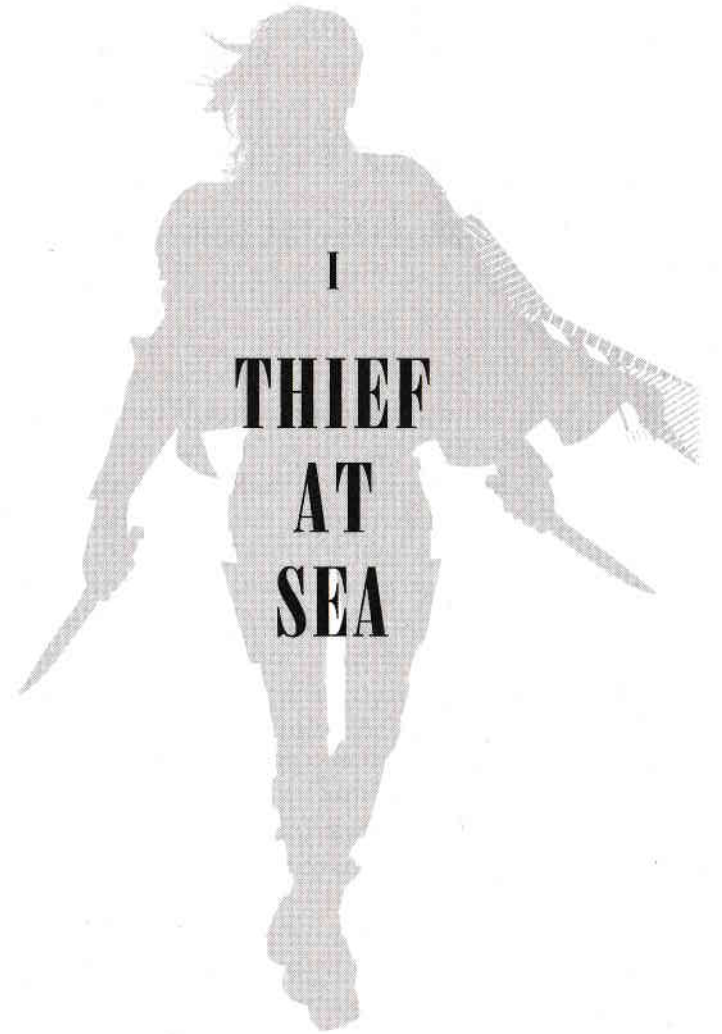
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**a
gathering
of
shadows**

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**THE ARNESIAN SEA**

Delilah Bard had a way of finding trouble.

She'd always thought it was better than letting trouble find *her*, but floating in the ocean in a two-person skiff with no oars, no view of land, and no real resources save the ropes binding her wrists, she was beginning to reconsider.

The night was moonless overhead, the sea and sky mirroring the starry darkness to every side; only the ripple of water beneath the rocking boat marked the difference between up and down. That infinite reflection usually made Lila feel like she was perched at the center of the universe.

Tonight, adrift, it made her want to scream.

Instead, she squinted at the twinkle of lights in the distance, the reddish hue alone setting the craft's lanterns apart from the starlight. And she watched as the ship—*her* ship—moved slowly but decidedly *away*.

Panic crawled its way up her throat, but she held her ground.

I am Delilah Bard, she thought as the ropes cut into her skin. I am a thief and a pirate and a traveler. I have set foot in three different worlds, and lived. I have shed the blood of royals and held magic in my hands. And a ship full of men cannot do what I can. I don't need any of you.

I am one of a damned kind.

Feeling suitably empowered, she set her back to the ship, and gazed out at the sprawling night ahead.

It could be worse, she reasoned, just before she felt cold water licking her boots and looked down to see that there was a hole in the boat. Not a large hole by any stretch, but the size was little comfort; a small hole could sink a boat just as effectively, if not as fast.

Lila groaned and looked down at the coarse rope cinched tight around her hands, doubly grateful that the bastards had left her legs free, even if she was trapped in an abominable dress. A full-skirted, flimsy green contraption with too much gossamer and a waist so tight she could hardly breathe and *why in god's name* must women *do* this to themselves?

The water inched higher in the skiff, and Lila forced herself to focus. She drew what little breath her outfit would allow and took stock of her meager, quickly dampening inventory: a single cask of ale (a parting gift), three knives (all concealed), half a dozen flares (bequeathed by the men who'd set her adrift), the aforementioned dress (damn it to hell), and the contents of that dress's skirts and pockets (necessary, if she was to prevail).

Lila took up one of the flares—a device like a firework that, when struck against any surface, produced a stream of colored light. Not a burst, but a steady beam strong enough to cut the darkness like a knife. Each flare was supposed to last a quarter of an hour, and the different colors had their own code on the open water: yellow for a sinking ship, green for illness aboard, white for unnamed distress, and red for pirates.

She had one of each, and her fingers danced over their ends as she considered her options. She eyed the rising water and settled on the yellow flare, taking it up with both hands and striking it against the side of the little boat.

Light burst forth, sudden and blinding. It split the world in two, the violent gold-white of the flare and the dense black nothing around it. Lila spent half a minute cursing and

blinking back tears at the brightness as she angled the flare up and away from her face. And then she began to count. Just as her eyes were finally adjusting, the flare faltered, flickered, and went out. She scanned the horizon for a ship but saw none, and the water in the boat continued its slow but steady rise up the calf of her boot. She took up a second flare—white for distress—and struck it on the wood, shielding her eyes. She counted the minutes as they ticked by, scouring the night beyond the boat for signs of life.

"Come on," she whispered. "Come on, come on, come on . . ." The words were lost beneath the hiss of the flare as it died, plunging her back into darkness.

Lila gritted her teeth.

Judging by the level of the water in the little boat, she had only a quarter of an hour—one flare's worth of time—before she was well and truly in danger of sinking.

Then something snaked along the skiff's wooden side. Something with teeth.

If there is a god, she thought, *a celestial body, a heavenly power, or anyone above—or below—who might just like to see me live another day, for pity's or entertainment's sake, now would be a good time to intercede.*

And with that, she took up the red flare—the one for pirates—and struck it, bathing the night around her in an eerie crimson light. It reminded her for an instant of the Isle River back in London. Not *her* London—if the dreary place had ever been hers—or the terrifyingly pale London responsible for Athos and Astrid and Holland, but *his* London. Kell's London.

He flashed up in her vision like a flare, auburn hair and that constant furrow between his eyes: one blue, one black. *Antari*. Magic boy. Prince.

Lila stared straight into the flare's red light until it burned the image out. She had more pressing concerns right now. The water was rising. The flare was dying. Shadows were slithering against the boat.

Just as the red light of the pirate's flare began to peter out, she saw it.

It began as nothing—a tendril of mist on the surface of the sea—but soon the fog drew itself into the phantom of a ship. The polished black hull and shining black sails reflected the night to every side, the lanterns aboard small and colorless enough to pass for starlight. Only when it drew close enough for the flare's dying red light to dance across the reflective surfaces did the ship come into focus. And by then, it was nearly on top of her.

By the flare's sputtering glow, Lila could make out the ship's name, streaked in shimmering paint along the hull. *Is Ranes Gast*.

The Copper Thief.

Lila's eyes widened in amazement and relief. She smiled a small, private smile, and then buried the look beneath something more fitting—an expression somewhere between grateful and beseeching, with a dash of wary hope.

The flare guttered and went out, but the ship was beside her now, close enough for her to see the faces of the men leaning over the rail.

"*Tosa!*" she called in Arnesian, getting to her feet, careful not to rock the tiny, sinking craft.

Help. Vulnerability had never come naturally, but she did her best to imitate it as the men looked down at her, huddled there in her little waterlogged boat with her bound wrists and her soggy green dress. She felt ridiculous.

"*Kers la?*" asked one, more to the others than to her. *What is this?*

"A gift?" said another.

"You'd have to share," muttered a third.

A few of the other men said less pleasant things, and Lila tensed, glad that their accents were too full of mud and ocean spray for her to understand all the words, even if she gleaned their meaning.

"What are you doing down there?" asked one of them, his skin so dark his edges smudged into the night.

Her Arnesian was still far from solid, but four months at sea surrounded by people who spoke no English had certainly improved it.

"*Sensan,*" answered Lila—*sinking*—which earned a laugh from the gathering crew. But they seemed in no hurry to haul her up. Lila held her hands aloft so they could see the rope. "I could use some help," she said slowly, the wording practiced.

"Can see that," said the man.

"Who throws away a pretty thing?" chimed in another.

"Maybe she's all used up."

"Nah."

"Hey, girl! You got all your bits and pieces?"

"Better let us see!"

"What's with all the shouting?" boomed a voice, and a moment later a rail-thin man with deep-set eyes and receding black hair came into sight at the side of the ship. The others shied away in deference as he took hold of the wooden rail and looked down at Lila. His eyes raked over her, the dress, the rope, the cask, the boat.

The captain, she wagered.

"You seem to be in trouble," he called down. He didn't raise his voice, but it carried nonetheless, his Arnesian accent clipped but clear.

"How perceptive," Lila called back before she could stop herself. The insolence was a gamble, but no matter where she was, the one thing she knew was how to read a mark. And sure enough, the thin man smiled.

"My ship's been taken," she continued, "and my new one won't last long, and as you can see—"

He cut her off. "Might be easier to talk if you come up here?"

Lila nodded with a wisp of relief. She was beginning to fear they'd sail on and leave her to drown. Which, judging by the crew's lewd tones and lewder looks, might actually be the

better option, but down here she had nothing and up there she had a chance.

A rope was flung over the side; the weighted end landed in the rising water near her feet. She took hold and used it to guide her craft against the ship's side, where a ladder had been lowered; but before she could hoist herself up, two men came down and landed in the boat beside her, causing it to sink *considerably* faster. Neither of them seemed bothered. One proceeded to haul up the cask of ale, and the other, much to Lila's dismay, began to haul up *her*. He threw her over his shoulder, and it took every ounce of her control—which had never been plentiful—not to bury a knife in his back, especially when his hands began to wander up her skirt.

Lila dug her nails into her palms, and by the time the man finally set her down on the ship's desk beside the waiting cask ("Heavier than she looks," he muttered, "and only half as soft . . .") she'd made eight small crescents in her skin.

"Bastard," growled Lila in English under her breath. He gave her a wink and murmured something about being soft where it mattered, and Lila silently vowed to kill him. Slowly.

And then she straightened and found herself standing in a circle of sailors.

No, not sailors, of course.

Pirates.

Grimy, sea stained and sun bleached, their skin darkened and their clothes faded, each and every one of them with a knife tattooed across his throat. The mark of the pirates of the *Copper Thief*. She counted seven surrounding her, five tending to the rigging and sails, and assumed another half dozen below deck. Eighteen. Round it up to twenty.

The rail-thin man broke the circle and stepped forward.

"*Solase*," he said, spreading his arms. "What my men have in balls, they lack in manners." He brought his hands to the shoulders of her green dress. There was blood under his nails. "You are shaking."

"I've had a bad night," said Lila, hoping, as she surveyed the rough crew, that it wasn't about to get worse.

The thin man smiled, his mouth surprisingly full of teeth. "*Anesh*," he said, "but you are in better hands now."

Lila knew enough about the crew of the *Copper Thief* to know that was a lie, but she feigned ignorance. "Whose hands would those be?" she asked, as the skeletal figure took her fingers and pressed his cracked lips to her knuckles, ignoring the rope still wound tightly around her wrists. "Baliz Kasnov," he said. "Illustrious captain of the *Copper Thief*."

Perfect. Kasnov was a legend on the Arnesian Sea. His crew was small but nimble, and they had a penchant for boarding ships and slitting throats in the darkest hours before dawn, slipping away with their cargo and leaving the dead behind to rot. He may have looked starved, but he was an alleged glutton for treasure, especially the consumable kind, and Lila knew that the *Copper Thief* was sailing for the northern coast of a city named Sol in hopes of ambushing the owners of a particularly large shipment of fine liquor. "Baliz Kasnov," she said, sounding out the name as if she'd never heard it.

"And you are?" he pressed.

"Delilah Bard," she said. "Formerly of the *Golden Fish*."

"Formerly?" prompted Kasnov as his men, obviously bored by the fact she was still clothed, began to tap into the cask. "Well, Miss Bard," he said, linking his arm through hers conspiratorially. "Why don't you tell me how you came to be in that little boat? The sea is no place for a fair young lady such as yourself."

"*Vaskens*," she said—*pirates*—as if she had no idea the word applied to present company. "They stole my ship. It was a gift, from my father, for my wedding. We were meant to sail toward Faro—we set out two nights ago—but they came out of nowhere, stormed the *Golden Fish* . . ." She'd practiced this speech, not only the words but the pauses. "They . . . they killed my husband. My captain. Most of my crew." Here Lila

let herself lapse into English. "It happened so fast—" She caught herself, as if the slip were accidental.

But the captain's attention snagged, like a fish on a hook. "Where are you from?"

"London," said Lila, letting her accent show. A murmur went through the group. She pressed on, intent on finishing her story. "The *Fish* was small," she said, "but precious. Laden down with a month's supplies. Food, drink . . . money. As I said, it was a gift. And now it's gone."

But it wasn't really, not yet. She looked back over the rail. The ship was a smudge of light on the far horizon. It had stopped its retreat and seemed to be waiting. The pirates followed her gaze with hungry eyes.

"How many men?" asked Kasnov.

"Enough," she said. "Seven? Eight?"

The pirates smiled greedily, and Lila knew what they were thinking. They had more than twice that number, and a ship that hid like a shadow in the dark. If they could catch the fleeing bounty . . . she could feel Baliz Kasnov's deep-set eyes scrutinizing her. She stared back at him and wondered, absently, if he could do any magic. Most ships were warded with a handful of spells—things to make their lives safer and more convenient—but she had been surprised to find that most of the men she met at sea had little inclination for the elemental arts. Alucard said that magical proficiency was a valued skill, and that true affinity would usually land one gainful employment on land. Magicians at sea almost always focused on the elements of relevance—water and wind—but few hands could turn the tide, and in the end most still favored good old-fashioned steel. Which Lila could certainly appreciate, having several pieces currently hidden on her person.

"Why did they spare you?" asked Kasnov.

"Did they?" challenged Lila.

The captain licked his lips. He'd already decided what to do about the ship, she could tell; now he was deciding what to

do about her. The Copper Thieves had no reputation for mercy.

"Baliz . . ." said one of the pirates, a man with skin darker than the rest. He clasped the captain's shoulder and whispered in his ear. Lila could only make out a few of the muttered words. *Londoners. Rich. And ransom.*

A slow smile spread across the captain's lips. "*Anesh,*" he said with a nod. And then, to the entire gathered crew, "Sails up! Course south by west! We have a golden fish to catch."

The men rumbled their approval.

"My lady," said Kasnov, leading Lila toward the steps. "You've had a hard night. Let me show you to my chamber, where you'll surely be more comfortable."

Behind her, she heard the sounds of the cask being opened and the ale being poured, and she smiled as the captain led her belowdecks.

Kasnov didn't linger, thank god.

He deposited her in his quarters, the rope still around her wrists, and vanished again, locking the door behind him. To her relief, she'd only seen three men belowdecks. That meant fifteen aboard the *Copper Thief*.

Lila perched on the edge of the captain's bed and counted to ten, twenty, then thirty, as the steps sounded above and the ship banked toward her own fleeing vessel. They hadn't even bothered to search her for weapons, which Lila thought a bit presumptuous as she dug a blade from her boot and, with a single practiced gesture, spun it in her grip and slashed the ropes. They fell to the floor as she rubbed her wrists, humming to herself. A shanty about the Sarows, a phantom said to haunt wayward ships at night.

How do you know when the Sarows is coming?

(Is coming is coming is coming aboard?)

Lila took the waist of her dress in two hands, and ripped; the skirt tore away, revealing close-fitting black pants—holsters pinning a knife above each knee—that tapered into her boots. She took the blade and slid it up the corset at her back, slicing the ribbons so she could breathe.

*When the wind dies away but still sings in your ears,
(In your ears in your head in your blood in your bones.)*

She tossed the green skirt onto the bed and slit it open from hem to tattered waist. Hidden among the gossamer were half a dozen thin sticks that passed for boning and looked like flares, but were neither. She slid her blade back into her boot and freed the tapers.

*When the current goes still but the ship, it drifts along,
(Drifts on drifts away drifts alone.)*

Overhead, Lila heard a thud, like dead weight. And then another, and another, as the ale took effect. She took up a piece of black cloth, rubbed charcoal on one side, and tied it over her nose and mouth.

*When the moon and the stars all hide from the dark,
(For the dark is not empty at all at all.)
(For the dark is not empty at all.)*

The last thing Lila took from deep within the folds of the green skirt was her mask. A black leather face-piece, simple but for the horns that curled with strange and menacing grace over the brow. Lila settled the mask on her nose and tied it in place.

How do you know when the Sarows is coming?

(Is coming is coming is coming aboard?)

A looking glass, half-silvered with age, leaned in the corner of the captain's cabin, and she caught her reflection as footsteps sounded on the stairs.

*Why you don't and you don't and you won't see it coming,
(You won't see it coming at all.)*

Lila smiled behind the mask. And then she turned and pressed her back against the wall. She struck a taper against the wood, the way she had the flares—but unlike flares, no light poured forth, only clouds of pale smoke.

An instant later, the captain's door burst open, but the pirates were too late. She tossed the pluming taper into the room and heard footsteps stumble, and men cough, before the drugged smoke brought them down.

*Two down, thought Lila, stepping over their bodies.
Thirteen to go.*

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Shades of Magic: The Steel Prince – Night of Knives

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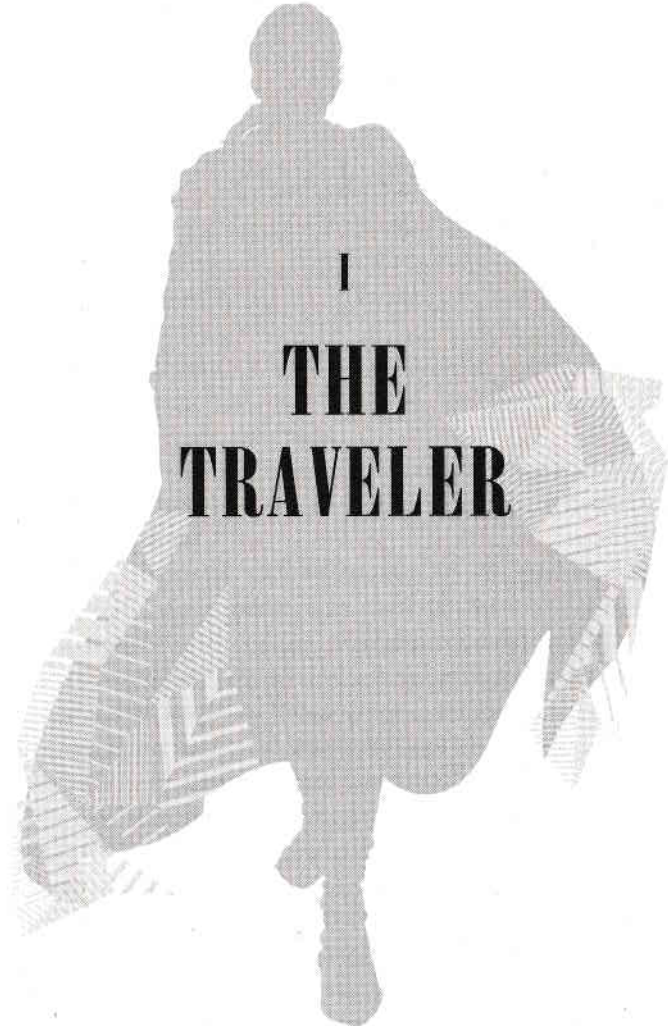
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I
**THE
TRAVELER**



Kell wore a very peculiar coat.

It had neither one side, which would be conventional, nor two, which would be unexpected, but *several*, which was, of course, impossible.

The first thing he did whenever he stepped out of one London and into another was take off the coat and turn it inside out once or twice (or even three times) until he found the side he needed. Not *all* of them were fashionable, but they each served a purpose. There were ones that blended in and ones that stood out, and one that served no purpose but of which he was just particularly fond.

So when Kell passed through the palace wall and into the anteroom, he took a moment to steady himself—it took its toll, moving between worlds—and then shrugged out of his red, high-collared coat and turned it inside out from right to left so that it became a simple black jacket. Well, a simple black jacket elegantly lined with silver thread and adorned with two gleaming columns of silver buttons. Just because he adopted a more modest palette when he was abroad (wishing neither to offend the local royalty nor to draw attention) didn't mean he had to sacrifice style.

Oh, kings, thought Kell as he fastened the buttons on the

coat. He was starting to think like Rhy.

On the wall behind him, he could just make out the ghosted symbol made by his passage. Like a footprint in sand, already fading.

He'd never bothered to mark the door from *this* side, simply because he never went back this way. Windsor's distance from London was terribly inconvenient considering the fact that, when traveling between worlds, Kell could only move between a place in one and the same *exact* place in another. Which was a problem because there was no Windsor Castle a day's journey from *Red* London. In fact, Kell had just come through the stone wall of a courtyard belonging to a wealthy gentleman in a town called Disan. Disan was, on the whole, a very pleasant place.

Windsor was not.

Impressive, to be sure. But not pleasant.

A marble counter ran against the wall, and on it a basin of water waited for him, as it always did. He rinsed his bloody hand, as well as the silver crown he'd used for passage, then slipped the cord it hung on over his head, and tucked the coin back beneath his collar. In the hall beyond, he could hear the shuffle of feet, the low murmur of servants and guards. He'd chosen the anteroom specifically to avoid them. He knew very well how little the Prince Regent liked him being here, and the last thing Kell wanted was an audience, a cluster of ears and eyes and mouths reporting the details of his visit back to the throne.

Above the counter and the basin hung a mirror in a gilded frame, and Kell checked his reflection quickly—his hair, a reddish brown, swept down across one eye, and he did not fix it, though he did take a moment to smooth the shoulders of his coat—before passing through a set of doors to meet his host.

The room was stiflingly warm—the windows latched despite what looked like a lovely October day—and a fire raged oppressively in the hearth.

George III sat beside it, a robe dwarfing his withered frame

and a tea tray untouched before his knees. When Kell came in, the king gripped the edges of his chair.

"Who's there?" he called out without turning. "Robbers? Ghosts?"

"I don't believe ghosts would answer, Your Majesty," said Kell, announcing himself.

The ailing king broke into a rotting grin. "Master Kell," he said. "You've kept me waiting."

"No more than a month," he said, stepping forward.

King George squinted his blind eyes. "It's been longer, I'm sure."

"I promise, it hasn't."

"Maybe not for *you*," said the king. "But time isn't the same for the mad and the blind."

Kell smiled. The king was in good form today. It wasn't always so. He was never sure what state he'd find his majesty in. Perhaps it had seemed like more than a month because the last time Kell visited, the king had been in one of his moods, and Kell had barely been able to calm his fraying nerves long enough to deliver his message.

"Maybe it's the year that has changed," continued the king, "and not the month."

"Ah, but the year is the same."

"And what year is that?"

Kell's brow furrowed. "Eighteen nineteen," he said.

A cloud passed across King George's face, and then he simply shook his head and said, "Time," as if that one word could be to blame for everything. "Sit, sit," he added, gesturing at the room. "There must be another chair here somewhere."

There wasn't. The room was shockingly sparse, and Kell was certain the doors in the hall were locked and unlocked from without, not within.

The king held out a gnarled hand. They'd taken away his rings, to keep him from hurting himself, and his nails were cut to nothing.

"My letter," he said, and for an instant Kell saw a glimmer of George as he once was, Regal.

Kell patted the pockets of his coat and realized he'd forgotten to take the notes out before changing. He shrugged out of the jacket and returned it for a moment to its red self, digging through its folds until he found the envelope. When he pressed it into the king's hand, the latter fondled it and caressed the wax seal—the red throne's emblem, a chalice with a rising sun—then brought the paper to his nose and inhaled.

"Roses," he said wistfully.

He meant the magic. Kell never noticed the faint aromatic scent of Red London clinging to his clothes, but whenever he traveled, someone invariably told him that he smelled like freshly cut flowers. Some said tulips. Others stargazers. Chrysanthemums. Peonies. To the king of England, it was always roses. Kell was glad to know it was a pleasant scent, even if he couldn't smell it. He could smell Grey London (smoke) and White London (blood), but to him, Red London simply smelled like home.

"Open it for me," instructed the king. "But don't mar the seal."

Kell did as he was told, and withdrew the contents. For once, he was grateful the king could no longer see, so he could not know how brief the letter was. Three short lines. A courtesy paid to an ailing figurehead, but nothing more.

"It's from my queen," explained Kell.

The king nodded. "Go on," he commanded, affecting a stately countenance that warred with his fragile form and his faltering voice. "Go on."

Kell swallowed. "Greetings to his majesty, King George III," he read, "from a neighboring throne."

The queen did not refer to it as the *red* throne, or send greetings from *Red* London (even though the city was in fact quite crimson, thanks to the rich, pervasive light of the river), because she did not think of it that way. To her, and to everyone else who inhabited only one London, there was

little need to differentiate among them. When the rulers of one conversed with those of another, they simply called them *others*, or *neighbors*, or on occasion (and particularly in regard to White London) less flattering terms.

Only those few who could move among the Londons needed a way to keep them straight. And so Kell—inspired by the lost city known to all as Black London—had given each remaining capital a color.

Grey for the magic-less city.

Red, for the healthy empire.

White, for the starving world.

In truth, the cities themselves bore little resemblance to one another (and the countries around and beyond bore even less). The fact they were all called *London* was its own mystery, though the prevailing theory was that one of the cities had taken the name long ago, before the doors were all sealed and the only things allowed through were letters between kings and queens. As to which city had first laid claim to the name, none could agree.

"We hope to learn that you are well," continued the queen's letter, "and that the season is as fair in your city as it is in ours."

Kell paused. There was nothing more, save a signature. King George wrung his hands.

"Is that all it says?" he asked.

Kell hesitated. "No," he said, folding the letter. "That's only the beginning."

He cleared his throat and began to pace as he pulled his thoughts together and put them into the queen's voice. "Thank you for asking after our family, she says. The King and I are well. Prince Rhy, on the other hand, continues to impress and infuriate in equal measure, but has at least gone the month without breaking his neck or taking an unsuitable bride. Thanks be to Kell alone for keeping him from doing either, or both."

Kell had every intention of letting the queen linger on his own merits, but just then the clock on the wall chimed five, and Kell swore under his breath. He was running late.

"Until my next letter," he finished hurriedly, "stay happy and stay well. With fondness. Her Highness Emira, Queen of Arnes."

Kell waited for the king to say something, but his blind eyes had a steady, faraway look, and Kell feared he had lost him. He set the folded note on the tea tray and was halfway to the wall when the king spoke up.

"I don't have a letter for her," he murmured.

"That's all right," said Kell softly. The king hadn't been able to write one for years. Some months he tried, dragging the quill haphazardly across the parchment, and some months he insisted on having Kell transcribe, but most months he simply told Kell the message and Kell promised to remember.

"You see, I didn't have the time," added the king, trying to salvage a vestige of his dignity. Kell let him have it.

"I understand," he said. "I'll give the royal family your regards."

Kell turned again to go, and again the old king called out to stop him.

"Wait, wait," he said. "Come back."

Kell paused. His eyes went to the clock. Late, and getting later. He pictured the Prince Regent sitting at his table in St. James, gripping his chair and quietly stewing. The thought made Kell smile, so he turned back toward the king as the latter pulled something from his robe with fumbling fingers.

It was a coin.

"It's fading," said the king, cupping the metal in his weathered hands as if it were precious and fragile. "I can't feel the magic anymore. Can't smell it."

"A coin is a coin, Your Majesty."

"Not so and you know it," grumbled the old king. "Turn out your pockets."

Kell sighed. "You'll get me in trouble."

"Come, come," said the king. "Our little secret."

Kell dug his hand into his pocket. The first time he had visited the king of England, he'd given him a coin as proof of who he was and where he came from. The story of the other Londons was entrusted to the crown and handed down heir to heir, but it had been years since a traveler had come. King George had taken one look at the sliver of a boy and squinted and held out his meaty hand, and Kell had set the coin in his palm. It was a simple lin, much like a grey shilling, only marked with a red star instead of a royal face. The king closed his fist over the coin and brought it to his nose, inhaling its scent. And then he'd smiled, and tucked the coin into his coat, and welcomed Kell inside.

From that day on, every time Kell paid his visit, the king would insist the magic had worn off the coin, and make him trade it for another, one new and pocket-warm. Every time Kell would say it was forbidden (it was, expressly), and every time the king would insist that it could be their little secret, and Kell would sigh and fetch a fresh bit of metal from his coat.

Now he plucked the old lin out of the king's palm and replaced it with a new one, folding George's gnarled fingers gently over it.

"Yes, yes," cooed the ailing king to the coin in his palm.

"Take care," said Kell as he turned to go.

"Yes, yes," said the king, his focus fading until he was lost to the world, and to his guest.

Curtains gathered in the corner of the room, and Kell pulled the heavy material aside to reveal a mark on the patterned wallpaper. A simple circle, bisected by a line, drawn in blood a month ago. On another wall in another room in another palace, the same mark stood. They were as handles on opposite sides of the same door.

Kell's blood, when paired with the token, allowed him to move *between* the worlds. He needn't specify a place because