# A Darker Shade of Magic

*A Darker Shade of Magic* introduces a spellbinding multiverse where four parallel Londons exist, each with varying degrees of magic:

- **Grey London**: Dull, magic-starved, and ruled by mad King George III.
- **Red London**: Thriving with magic, ruled by the Maresh dynasty.
- **White London**: A brutal, magic-hoarding wasteland ruled by the ruthless **Antari** twins.
- **Dead London**: A forbidden, lifeless ruin.

Enter **Kell**, one of the last **Antari**—rare magicians who can travel between worlds—who smuggles artifacts between Londons as a royal courier. But when he accidentally brings a dangerous relic from **Black London** into his world, he teams up with **Delilah "Lila" Bard**, a cunning thief hungry for adventure, to stop a power that could unravel all four Londons.

With its lush prose, morally grey characters, and high-stakes magic, Schwab crafts a dazzling tale of adventure, betrayal, and the cost of power.

## Chapter 1: The traveler I

Kell, a traveler capable of moving between parallel versions of London, wears a magical coat with multiple sides, each serving a distinct purpose. By turning it inside out, he can alter its appearance to blend in or stand out in different worlds. After arriving in a version of Windsor Castle located in Disan, he adjusts his coat to a modest black design to avoid drawing attention. The act of traveling between worlds leaves a faint, fading mark, and Kell reflects on the logistical challenges of moving between

locations that don’t align perfectly across dimensions.

Upon entering the palace, Kell prepares to meet King George III, rinsing a bloodied hand and a silver coin used for passage. The anteroom is deliberately chosen to avoid servants and guards, as his visits are discreet. The king, blind and frail, greets Kell with a mix of paranoia and wit, questioning the passage of time and his own sanity. Their exchange reveals a strained yet familiar dynamic, with Kell humoring the king’s erratic behavior while delivering a letter from his queen.

The letter, though brief, is a diplomatic formality from Red London, addressed to King George as a neighboring ruler. Kell reads it aloud, omitting its brevity to spare the king’s feelings. The king, nostalgic for the magic of Red London, inhales the scent of roses lingering on the paper. Kell reflects on how each London—Grey, Red, and White—is distinguished by its magical state, with Red London being his vibrant home. The naming of the cities remains a mystery, though Kell’s color-coded system helps him navigate their differences.

The chapter concludes with Kell’s internal observations about the disjointed nature of the parallel Londons and their rulers’ perceptions. While the queen of Red London sees her city as the default, Kell’s unique perspective allows him to recognize their distinctions. The encounter with King George underscores the fragility of cross-world diplomacy and the melancholy of a once-great ruler now diminished by time and madness. Kell’s role as a messenger bridges these worlds, yet he remains acutely aware of their separateness.

# Chapter 2: The traveler II

The chapter opens with Kell, a mysterious traveler, transitioning from the dreary confines of Windsor to the opulent setting of St. James Palace, where he meets the Prince Regent. The prince, annoyed by Kell’s tardiness, questions his priorities, particularly his visits to the mad king. Their exchange reveals tension, as the prince disapproves of Kell indulging the king’s delusions of magic and other worlds. Kell defends his actions, emphasizing his duty to the king, while the prince dismisses such interactions as harmful. The dialogue underscores the strained relationship between the two, with Kell subtly resisting the prince’s authority.

As the conversation continues, Kell delivers a letter to the prince, who deliberately prolongs his response to assert dominance. Kell, unfazed, amuses himself by extinguishing candles with magic, further irritating the prince. The prince then insists Kell accompany him on a walk, during which he probes Kell’s plans, suggesting he stay for dinner. Kell, wary of the prince’s motives, declines, sensing an ulterior motive—perhaps to exploit his abilities for spectacle. The prince’s persistence highlights his desire to control or expose Kell, while Kell remains evasive, prioritizing discretion.

The tension escalates when Kell reveals his Antari identity, displaying his heterochromatic eyes—one blue, the other entirely black—a mark of his magical power. This unnerves the prince, prompting Kell to deliver a warning about the dangers of magic and the fate of Black London, a world consumed by its own hunger for power. He implies that Grey London’s survival hinges on its ignorance of magic, subtly chastising the prince’s ambition. The prince, visibly unsettled, finally relinquishes the letter, and Kell departs, having made his point about the peril of meddling with forces beyond their world.

After leaving the palace, Kell reflects on his encounters with the king and prince, weary of their demands. He wanders through Grey London, pausing on a bridge over the Thames, where he momentarily stills the water with his magic. The chapter closes with Kell contemplating his reflection, hinting at his dual nature and the weight of his role as a bridge between worlds. The scene captures his isolation and the quiet power he wields, setting the stage for his next actions in the city.

# Chapter 3: The traveler III

The chapter introduces the Stone’s Throw, a grimy yet enduring tavern that exists in various forms across different versions of London. Despite its dilapidated appearance and watered-down drinks, the tavern serves as a constant, almost magical fixture in Kell’s life. It attracts those drawn to the idea of magic, particularly in Grey London, where believers and the curious gather. Kell, a magician, uses the tavern as a meeting place for his dealings, making him a fixed point in its ever-changing reality. The tavern’s patrons are lured by rumors of Kell’s abilities, adding to its mystique.

Kell prepares for a meeting with a client by examining a rare wooden game box containing elemental tokens—earth, water, sand, oil, and bone—used in his world to test magical affinity. The box, commonplace in Red London, is a coveted item in magic-starved Grey London. Kell anticipates dealing with a Collector, a wealthy individual who values magical artifacts as curiosities rather than tools. However, his expectations are disrupted when an Enthusiast named Ned approaches him. Enthusiasts, unlike Collectors, seek magic for practical use, a prospect Kell finds both irritating and dangerous.

Ned, an awkward young man with a poorly drawn power rune tattoo, reveals his desire for “a bit of earth” from another world, believing it will grant him magical abilities. Kell dismisses the request, knowing that the doors between worlds are closed and only Antari like himself can traverse them. He reflects on the decline of Antari, with only himself and Holland remaining as the last of their kind. Ned’s ignorance of magic’s true nature highlights the futility of his aspirations, yet Kell engages him in a test involving the elemental game box.

Kell challenges Ned to manipulate one of the elements without touching it, offering a cryptic bargain. The interaction underscores the tension between Kell’s disdain for Enthusiasts and his reluctant role as a gatekeeper of magical knowledge. The chapter

closes with Kell’s amusement at Ned’s naivety, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of magic’s limitations and the consequences of its misuse. The tavern, as always, remains the backdrop for these exchanges, a silent witness to the interplay of power and desire.

# Chapter 4: Red royal I

The chapter opens with guards Gen and Parrish playing cards outside Prince Rhy’s chambers. Parrish loses repeatedly, grumbling about his losses before leaving to relieve himself. The scene establishes their camaraderie and the relaxed atmosphere of their duty, underscored by Prince Rhy’s leniency and fondness for his guards. The ornate setting, including the cherrywood doors adorned with the royal emblem, hints at the opulence of the palace and Rhy’s privileged yet approachable nature.

Upon returning, Parrish finds Gen absent and hears a conversation inside Rhy’s chambers. The voice belongs to Holland, an Antari from another world, whose eerie presence unsettles Parrish. Holland’s unnerving demeanor—cold, shadow-like, and almost inhuman—contrasts sharply with Rhy’s warmth. Parrish, torn between duty and curiosity, overhears their exchange, which begins with polite formality but carries an undercurrent of tension and flirtation.

Holland reveals he’s delivering a birthday gift from his rulers, carefully chosen within the city to avoid breaking laws against interworld exchanges. Rhy hesitates but accepts, questioning the gift’s purpose. Holland cryptically replies, “For strength,” leaving the prince—and Parrish—intrigued. The moment is interrupted by palace clocks, masking further dialogue as Holland exits, his parting words and a coin left with Parrish implying a magical influence over the guard’s memory.

The chapter closes with Parrish alone, clutching the coin and grappling with a fading recollection of the encounter. The scene underscores Holland’s enigmatic power and the subtle threats lurking beneath courtly interactions. The blend of casual guard banter, royal opulence, and supernatural intrigue sets the stage for deeper political and magical tensions, leaving the reader questioning Holland’s true motives and the significance of his gift.

# Chapter 5: Red royal II

The chapter opens with Kell crossing from one version of London to another, arriving at Red London, where the river Isle glows with magical energy. Unlike the Thames, the Isle is a vibrant source of power, likened to a vein or artery. Kell reflects on the nature of magic, believing it originates from blood—a balance of harmony when red, but corrupting when black. As an Antari, he embodies both: his blood remains crimson, but his black eye symbolizes chaos. Despite his strength, the dark mark unsettles others, a constant reminder of his duality.

Red London's royal palace, the Soner Rast, arches over the river, a glittering centerpiece of the city. People flock to it, drawn by the Isle's magic—scholars study it, magicians seek its power, and visitors adorn its banks with flowers. Kell pauses to admire the palace, momentarily seeing it through the eyes of an awestruck outsider. However, a sharp pain in his arm snaps him back to reality, and he moves toward the bustling Night Market, where vendors sell enchanted trinkets, food, and vials of glowing river water. The market thrums with life, a vibrant mix of magic and mundane energy.

As Kell navigates the market, he catches a boy who stumbles into his path. The child's initial gratitude turns to fear when he notices Kell's black eye, and his mother bows deeply, addressing him with reverence. Kell, uncomfortable with the attention, tries to downplay the encounter, but the crowd's whispers spread, disrupting the festive atmosphere. The moment highlights his isolation; while his brother Rhy thrives in the public eye, Kell longs to blend in. The incident forces him to abandon his anonymity, and he retreats toward the palace, the crowd parting in hushed respect.

At the palace steps, Kell transforms his worn coat into a royal red garment, marking his return to his formal role. The guards acknowledge him with subtle nods, sparing him the discomfort of excessive deference. Pausing at the entrance, he fastens his

gold buttons and steps inside, leaving behind the vibrant but isolating world of Red London. The chapter closes with Kell embracing his duty, yet the tension between his public identity and private self lingers, underscored by the contrast between his crimson blood and ink-black eye.

# Chapter 6: Red royal III

The chapter opens with a scene in the royal courtyard, where King Maxim, Queen Emira, and Prince Rhy are enjoying tea under the night sky. Rhy enthusiastically discusses his upcoming twentieth birthday celebrations, arguing for extended festivities despite his father’s mild disapproval. The queen teasingly questions his motives, hinting at her desire to find him a suitable match. Kell, the adopted royal sibling, joins them and reluctantly supports Rhy’s party plans, though he privately finds the idea excessive. The family dynamic is warm yet layered with subtle tensions, particularly around Kell’s sense of belonging.

Kell’s return from a trip prompts concern from the king and queen, who note his exhaustion. The queen’s affectionate gesture—checking Kell’s well-being by touching his cheek—highlights her maternal care, though Kell’s fair complexion and reddish hair contrast with the royal family’s darker features, emphasizing his outsider status. Despite their love for him, Kell’s internal conflict about his place in the family lingers. After tea, Rhy follows Kell into the hallway, where their playful banter quickly turns serious as Rhy confronts him about his secret activities.

Rhy accuses Kell of smuggling items between Londons, a dangerous and illegal practice known as transference. Their confrontation reveals a deeper history: two years prior, Kell confessed to Rhy about his smuggling, driven by a need to assert independence despite the royal family’s generosity. Rhy, hurt by Kell’s admission of feeling like a “possession,” had reacted violently but kept his secret. Now, Rhy warns Kell to stop his reckless behavior, emphasizing the legal and personal risks. Kell deflects with humor, but Rhy’s earnest plea—rooted in brotherly love—underscores the stakes.

The chapter closes with Rhy affirming his loyalty to Kell, declaring, “There is nothing I would not give you.” Kell acknowledges this, and their exchange ends on a bittersweet

note, with Rhy urging Kell to abandon his dangerous habits for the sake of their bond. Kell’s promise to stand by Rhy’s future kingship contrasts with his unresolved rebellion, leaving their relationship poised between trust and tension. The scene encapsulates the novel’s themes of family, identity, and the consequences of secrecy.

# Chapter 7: Grey thief I

Lila Bard, a skilled thief, lives by the principle that anything worth having is worth taking. In this chapter, she steals a silver pocket watch from a gentleman on a crowded street, admiring its craftsmanship while remaining undetected. The watch symbolizes freedom to her, a small but meaningful escape from poverty or imprisonment. Her confidence is tested when a constable approaches, asking for the time. Lila maintains her composure, disguising her voice and hiding her face under a stolen top hat, though she risks exposure by lighting the constable's pipe with a sliver of wood from the street.

The encounter with the constable stirs a thrill in Lila, who enjoys flirting with danger. She reflects on past criticisms from Barron, who accused her of seeking trouble, but she dismisses his concerns, believing trouble finds everyone eventually. Her boldness is evident as she engages with the constable, who warns her about a notorious thief targeting the area. Unbeknownst to him, Lila is the very thief he describes, and she struggles to suppress her amusement as he hands her a WANTED poster bearing a vague sketch of her disguised self.

Lila's philosophy as a thief is revealed: she targets the wealthy, who are less vigilant, rather than the poor, who guard their possessions closely. She sees the world divided into smart and stupid parts, and she prides herself on navigating them deftly. The constable's warning about the audacious thief only reinforces her confidence in her methods. After the constable leaves, Lila's relief is palpable, but her pride in her cunning outweighs any fear of being caught.

The chapter concludes with Lila removing her hat to reveal the mask and cap hidden inside, a silent celebration of her dual identity. She heads to the docks, whistling, embodying both the danger and freedom she craves. Her actions underscore her rebellious spirit and her belief that living fully means embracing risk, even if it means

walking a fine line between survival and self-destruction.

# Chapter 8: Grey thief II

The chapter introduces Lila Bard, a young woman with aspirations of becoming a pirate, as she returns to her dilapidated ship, the *Sea King*. The vessel is in poor condition, barely seaworthy, yet Lila finds a sense of belonging on its creaking deck. Despite its decay, she clings to the dream of sailing the high seas, imagining the freedom and adventure it would bring. The contrast between her vivid fantasies and the grim reality of the rotting ship highlights her determination and longing for a life beyond the confines of London’s docks.

Lila’s nightly ritual aboard the *Sea King* provides her with a fleeting sense of safety and familiarity in a city where she is constantly on guard. She retreats to her hidden cabin, shedding her disguise and weapons, including her prized revolver, Caster. The cabin, though modest and damp, offers a rare refuge where she can momentarily let her guard down. The description of her surroundings—cracked mirrors, scattered maps, and a dying stove—paints a picture of a life lived on the edge, yet one she has carved out for herself with resilience.

As Lila reflects on her appearance and identity, she rejects conventional notions of femininity, scornful of the performative weakness of the women she encounters. Her pride in her sharp wit and self-sufficiency is evident, as is her disdain for those who feign fragility. The night’s stolen goods weigh heavily in her pocket, a tangible reminder of her survival tactics in a world that offers her little. Her hardened exterior masks a deeper weariness, hinted at by her fleeting moments of vulnerability when alone.

The chapter concludes with an interaction between Lila and Powell, the drunken owner of the *Sea King*, who demands his cut of her earnings. Their tense exchange reveals the precarious nature of their arrangement—Lila relies on Powell for shelter, while he tolerates her criminal activities for profit. Despite her sharp retorts and confident

demeanor, the encounter underscores the fragility of her situation. The chapter leaves Lila on the brink of exhaustion, yet undeterred, her dreams of piracy and freedom still burning brightly beneath the surface.

# Chapter 9: Grey thief III

Lila returns to the Stone’s Throw tavern after a year-long absence, her reunion with Barron, the owner, tinged with tension. Their last encounter ended badly when he kicked her out for stealing from a patron, leading to her storming off in anger. Now, she finds him on the tavern steps, and their exchange is laced with sarcasm and unspoken history. Barron feigns indifference, while Lila, though defiant, feels the pull of the place despite her disdain for taverns. The remnants of a fire at the docks linger in the background, hinting at recent chaos.

Their conversation reveals Lila’s involvement in the burning of the Sea King, a brig owned by Powell, which surprises Barron. She takes pride in shocking him, masking her vulnerability with bravado. When she asks to rent a room, Barron reminds her of her past insults, but she deflects with a shrug and a shared cigar. Their dynamic is a mix of grudging respect and unresolved tension. Lila’s reluctance to admit she needs help contrasts with Barron’s subtle concern, as he questions her well-being despite their rocky history.

Lila offers a silver watch as payment, a keepsake she values for the choices it represents. Barron refuses it, trusting she’ll pay eventually, a gesture that hints at their complicated bond. As she pockets the watch, she reflects on her meager possessions—a hat, a map, weapons, and the watch—symbols of her transient life. Barron lets her in but warns her not to steal from his patrons, a condition she accepts with a stiff nod. The broken glass inside the tavern underscores the disorder she’s stepping back into, yet she assures him her stay is temporary.

Alone for a moment, Lila gazes at the tavern, comparing it unfavorably to the freedom of a pirate ship. She consoles herself with the thought that she’s not returning in defeat but in hiding, reveling in her newfound notoriety as the “Shadow Thief.” A wanted poster outside the tavern depicts her as a fearsome figure, a caricature she

finds amusing. With a wink at her own legend, she steps inside, embracing the irony of her situation—a thief seeking refuge in the very place she once cursed.

# Chapter 10: White Throne I

The chapter opens with Prince Rhy and Kell engaged in a lesson on elemental magic, though Rhy is more preoccupied with planning a masquerade or costume ball. Despite his playful distractions, Kell insists on focusing their session. Rhy attempts to manipulate earth within a glass orb but struggles, only managing a slight movement after much effort. His frustration grows as he reflects on his inability to master magic despite his fluency in multiple languages. Kell explains that magic requires humility and respect, as the elements are indifferent to Rhy’s royal status.

Rhy’s frustration deepens as he compares his struggles to Kell’s natural affinity for magic. Kell, an Antari, can command elements effortlessly, even without speaking, though blood magic remains a unique challenge. Rhy envies Kell’s abilities, particularly his power to travel between worlds, and asks about the other Londons. Kell hesitates, knowing that sharing such knowledge might only burden Rhy, who can never visit those places himself. He dismisses the question, calling the other worlds “uneventful,” and redirects Rhy’s attention back to the lesson.

The dynamic between the two reveals Rhy’s underlying insecurity and Kell’s protective nature. Rhy jokes about using magic to attract romantic partners, but his humor masks a deeper sense of inadequacy. Kell teases him but also recognizes Rhy’s genuine frustration. When Rhy suggests abandoning the lesson to go out, Kell reluctantly agrees, though he suspects Rhy’s motives are more about distraction than finding a future spouse. Their banter underscores their close bond, even as Rhy struggles with his limitations.

The chapter concludes with Rhy’s playful insistence on seeking adventure in the city, framing their outing as a mission to find a mate. Kell, though skeptical, humors him, and their exchange highlights the contrast between Rhy’s carefree charm and Kell’s more disciplined demeanor. The unresolved tension around Rhy’s magical struggles

and Kell’s secrets about the other Londons lingers, setting the stage for future developments. The scene captures their brotherly rapport while hinting at deeper emotional undercurrents.

# Chapter 11: White Throne II

Kell steps into White London, a stark contrast to the warmth and balance of his home, Red London. The city is cold and lifeless, its magic drained and controlled through force rather than reverence. Unlike Red London’s belief in balanced power, White London’s inhabitants view magic as something to dominate, leading to its gradual disappearance. The city’s pallid, ashen appearance reflects this struggle, with magic resisting its captors and leaching color and vitality from the world.

White London’s desperate citizens cling to whatever remnants of magic they can grasp, often mutilating themselves with brands and scars to bind power. The city is a place of extremes, where survival hinges on strength and ruthlessness. Kell, aware of the dangers, projects his magic to deter threats while navigating the streets toward the castle. The people watch him hungrily, their faded appearances marked by their futile attempts to harness the dwindling magic.

The city’s rulers, Astrid and Athos Dane, maintain control through fear and brutality, symbolized by the fortress-like castle and its macabre Stone Forest of petrified victims. The guards, stripped of free will, serve as chilling reminders of the twins’ power. Kell moves cautiously, knowing the city’s veneer of order masks its underlying violence. The Danes’ rule is tenuous, sustained only by the belief—or delusion—that they can restore magic to the dying world.

Despite the decay, the people of White London remain, tethered by the faint magic of the half-frozen Sijlt River. They endure, either hoping for a savior or biding their time until the next uprising. Kell, navigating this treacherous landscape, braces himself for the encounter ahead, aware that even within the castle’s walls, danger lurks. The chapter paints a grim portrait of a world where power corrupts, and survival comes at the cost of humanity.

# Chapter 12: White Throne III

The chapter opens with a brutal scene in which Athos, the ruthless king of White London, whips a defiant sixteen-year-old boy named Beloc, who refused to bow during a public procession. Beloc is bound to a metal frame, his body bloodied but his spirit unbroken. Athos and his sister Astrid revel in the fear of their subjects, but Beloc’s quiet resistance sparks a dangerous defiance in the crowd. Athos, recognizing the threat of rebellion, decides to make an example of the boy, offering his mother a mocking compensation before having him violently abducted and brought to the palace.

Beloc is dragged before Athos’s throne, where the king taunts him before subjecting him to a torturous binding ritual. Athos uses a knife and enchanted ink to carve a spell into Beloc’s skin, stripping him of bodily autonomy while leaving his mind intact—a cruel punishment designed to force obedience while preserving his awareness. Beloc’s hatred burns as his body betrays him, compelled to obey Athos’s commands. The king takes perverse pleasure in the boy’s suffering, admiring his handiwork as Beloc struggles against the spell’s control.

The scene shifts when Holland, an Antari with a complex relationship to Athos, arrives. Though Holland feigns indifference, Athos sees through his facade, recognizing the anger and pain he tries to conceal. Their exchange is charged with tension, as Athos deliberately provokes Holland, reminding him of his own past suffering. Holland delivers news of an arriving guest, prompting Athos to leave Beloc temporarily, but not before asserting his dominance over both the boy and Holland.

The chapter concludes with Athos and Holland preparing to meet the mysterious guest, whom Astrid has already intercepted. Athos’s parting words to Holland reveal his manipulative nature, as he takes pleasure in the Antari’s hidden emotions. The chapter underscores Athos’s tyranny, his obsession with control, and the psychological

games he plays with those around him, leaving Beloc’s fate—and the identity of the new arrival—unresolved.

# Chapter 13: White Throne IV

In this tense chapter, Kell delivers a letter from King Maxim to Queen Astrid in the throne room. Astrid manipulates the encounter, seizing Kell's wrist and subjecting him to painful electric magic, testing his restraint. Despite the agony, Kell refuses to retaliate, recognizing her desire to provoke him. Astrid's dominance is clear as she forces him to kneel, then muses aloud about keeping him, revealing her distrust of anything not under her control. Their exchange underscores her cruel, possessive nature and the psychological games she plays with those around her.

The dynamic shifts as King Athos enters with Holland, his Antari servant, in tow. Athos mirrors his sister's malice, pressuring Kell to stay for a drink despite his reluctance. The siblings' predatory behavior makes Kell feel trapped, likening himself to prey surrounded by predators. Astrid openly expresses her wish to keep Kell, while Athos feigns politeness, masking his cruelty beneath a veneer of hospitality. The scene highlights the Danes' shared penchant for control and their enjoyment of others' discomfort.

Athos escalates the cruelty by commanding Holland to cut his own arm, filling a goblet with his blood for the Danes to drink. Kell's attempt to intervene is dismissed, and Holland obeys, revealing scars that hint at repeated abuse. The act is both a display of power and a perverse ritual, emphasizing the Danes' exploitation of Holland's magic and their disregard for his suffering. Kell's horror is palpable as he watches, forced to participate in the macabre scene while grappling with his own fear and revulsion.

The chapter closes with Kell drinking under duress, his nerves frayed as the Danes savor Holland's blood. Athos's faux generosity contrasts starkly with his earlier brutality, while Astrid's laughter underscores their shared sadism. Kell's sarcastic remark about their pristine white robes hints at his defiance, but he remains outmatched. The encounter leaves a chilling impression of the Danes' tyranny, their

reliance on blood magic, and the precariousness of Kell’s position in their presence.

# Chapter 14: White Throne V

Kell, intoxicated and unsettled, wanders the streets of White London, haunted by the memory of Holland’s blood and the fragility of their shared Antari identity. The alcohol clouds his judgment, but the cold air fails to sober him as he reflects on his reckless tendencies and the dangers he courts. His thoughts spiral between self-reproach and resignation, leaving him emotionally raw and physically unsteady. The city’s eerie whispers—voices calling him "pretty bones" and "pretty blood"—heighten his unease, yet he remains drawn to the perilous allure of the Scorched Bone tavern.

As Kell grapples with his inner turmoil, he resolves to abandon his habit of smuggling trinkets between worlds, recognizing the futility and risk of his actions. Just as he prepares to return home, a mysterious woman in a faded blue cloak intercepts him, pleading for him to deliver a letter to her dying relative in another London. She reveals that Holland, the other Antari, had previously facilitated such a exchange, a fact Kell finds improbable given Holland’s ruthless reputation. The woman’s desperation and the cryptic nature of her payment pique his curiosity, but his muddled mind struggles to process the situation.

The woman insists the letter is her final connection to family, invoking Kell’s sympathy despite his skepticism. She presses the letter and a small, wrapped parcel into his hands, warning him not to examine the payment in the dangerous alley. Before Kell can refuse or question her further, she vanishes, leaving him bewildered and burdened with another deal he had vowed to avoid. The encounter leaves him uneasy, as the pieces of her story—Holland’s involvement, the urgency of her request—don’t fully align with what he knows of White London’s harsh realities.

Ultimately, Kell’s dread outweighs his curiosity, and he decides to flee the unsettling encounter. As distant screams echo through the city, he cuts his arm to open a portal home, desperate to escape the creeping danger of White London. Yet, the letter and

its mysterious payment remain in his pocket, a lingering reminder of the unresolved tension between his better judgment and the pull of the unknown. The chapter closes with Kell’s blood mingling with his fear, symbolizing the inescapable consequences of his choices.

# Chapter 15: Black Stone I

Lila, a skilled pickpocket with dreams of becoming a pirate, moves through the city with a swagger, her pockets jingling with stolen coins. Despite the risks of daytime thievery, she continues her work to save for a ship and escape her wretched life. Her disguise requires low light, but the promise of wealth drives her forward. She revels in the weight of coins, a tangible reminder of her ambitions, and mentally catalogues the gear she'll need—boots, a sword, and a flashier hat—to transform into a proper privateer.

As Lila walks toward the Stone's Throw tavern, her thoughts are interrupted by a ragged boy begging on the street. On impulse, she drops a few coppers into his hands without acknowledgment. The act surprises even her, hinting at a hidden compassion beneath her hardened exterior. When Barron, the tavern owner, teases her about having a heart, she deflects with bravado, showcasing her weapons instead. Their exchange reveals a fond, if grudging, mutual respect.

The scene shifts when Lila witnesses three street thugs rob the boy of the coins she just gave him. Despite Barron's warnings, her fists clench in anger. Though she typically targets the rich, the injustice of the situation ignites her defiance. Barron cautions her against picking a fight, but Lila dismisses his concerns, emphasizing the principle of the matter. She dons her disguise, ready to confront the bullies, while Barron reluctantly tends to the boy.

Lila's determination to intervene highlights her complex morality—she may be a thief, but she draws the line at outright cruelty. Her actions underscore her rebellious spirit and unwillingness to stand by when others are victimized. Barron's resigned sigh and her playful retort about being missed reveal their bond, even as she charges into danger. The chapter ends with Lila setting off, leaving readers to wonder how her confrontation will unfold.

# Chapter 16: Black Stone II

Kell, having sobered up, decides to deliver the mysterious letter to its destination at 7 Naresk Vas to quickly resolve the odd task and avoid involving Rhy. He plans to discard the accompanying trinket in his private room at the Ruby Fields before returning to the palace empty-handed. However, as he approaches the address, he senses something amiss, pausing to assess the situation. The quiet street feels unnaturally empty, and Kell's magical intuition alerts him to an unseen presence lurking nearby.

Despite the apparent emptiness of Naresk Vas, Kell perceives the subtle pulse of magic, stronger in living beings, and detects movement across the street. A hooded figure emerges between the buildings, armed and watchful. Kell initially wonders if it's Olivar, the dying man who sent the letter, but dismisses the idea—Olivar couldn't have known Kell would come. The realization dawns that this is a trap, and the figure's presence signals danger. Kell's instincts scream at him to retreat as the tension escalates.

Suspecting deception, Kell examines the letter and discovers it's blank—a ruse to lure him into the open. His focus shifts to the trinket in his pocket, which emits an unsettling energy, hinting at its true significance. The hooded figure notices Kell's movement and charges toward him, confirming his fears. Panicked, Kell turns and flees, realizing he's been manipulated into carrying something far more dangerous than he anticipated.

The chapter climaxes with Kell's frantic escape, his mind racing to understand the trap he's fallen into. The blank letter and mysterious trinket suggest a larger scheme, leaving him vulnerable and hunted. The encounter underscores the pervasive dangers of magic and deception in his world, setting the stage for further conflict. Kell's trust in his own judgment is shaken as he confronts the consequences of his actions.

# Chapter 17: Black Stone III

Lila stealthily follows a group of thieves through London’s labyrinthine streets, biding her time until they separate. She targets the thin one who had stolen coins from a vulnerable person earlier. Moving silently, she tracks him into a secluded alley, where she swiftly ambushes him, pressing a knife to his throat and demanding he empty his pockets. The thief resists, taunting her, but Lila remains focused, unaware that his companions are closing in on her.

As Lila confronts the skinny thief, she senses movement behind her and dodges an attack from the short one, who wields a metal bar. Moments later, the fat one arrives, recognizing Lila from a wanted poster as the notorious "Shadow Thief." The trio encircles her, their confidence growing as they realize her identity. Lila assesses the odds—she could handle one or two, but three is a gamble. The thieves toy with her, debating whether their bounty requires her dead or alive, their threats escalating.

The confrontation turns physical as the skinny thief lunges, forcing Lila into the fat one’s grasp. She slashes at him, drawing blood, but the short one grabs her, discovering her secret—she’s not the man they assumed. Seizing the moment, Lila stomps on his foot, breaking free. Realizing the dire situation, she makes a split-second decision to flee, despite her aversion to running. The chapter ends with her sprinting away, outnumbered and outmaneuvered.

This chapter highlights Lila’s resourcefulness and the dangers of her life as a thief. Though skilled, she faces overwhelming odds, forcing her to retreat. The encounter underscores the brutality of her world, where trust is scarce, and survival often means knowing when to fight and when to flee. The thieves’ mocking cruelty and Lila’s quick thinking create a tense, action-packed sequence that drives the narrative forward.

# Chapter 18: Black Stone IV

Kell, pursued by unknown assailants, flees through alleys until he reaches the Ruby Fields, a safe haven marked by hidden charms. Inside his concealed room, he examines a stolen black stone that resonates with his magic, its surface bearing a glowing rune. The stone’s power unsettles him, evoking tales of Black London, a lost city where magic was once a universal language. The rune, "Vitari," symbolizes magic itself, a relic thought eradicated during the purge of Black London’s influence, making its existence both thrilling and alarming.

The stone’s origins hint at a deliberate setup, as Kell discovers a tracing spell on the fabric it was wrapped in. Before he can unravel the mystery, intruders breach his warded room, forcing him to escape through the window. A hooded pursuer wields a royal guard’s enchanted sword, its magic-dampening properties posing a grave threat. Kell recognizes the weapon’s significance, realizing its presence implies either a fallen guard or a betrayal within the royal ranks.

A fight ensues, revealing the attacker’s unnatural composure and resistance to pain, suggesting forbidden magic at play. Kell, wounded and outmatched, struggles to defend himself as the assailant demands the stone. The stone’s hum in his pocket reinforces its connection to him, making surrender unthinkable. The confrontation escalates when a second attacker appears, but Kell uses his magic to block one while fending off the other, though his powers falter under the sword’s enchantment.

The chapter climaxes with Kell cornered, his dagger ineffective against the relentless cutthroat. The stone’s significance deepens as the attacker demands it specifically, hinting at a larger conspiracy tied to Black London’s forbidden legacy. Kell’s refusal to yield underscores the stone’s importance, leaving the conflict unresolved but setting the stage for a deeper exploration of magic’s hidden history and the forces manipulating Kell’s fate.

# Chapter 19: Black Stone V

Kell, severely wounded and bleeding, flees through the labyrinthine streets of Red London, desperately clutching a mysterious black stone in his pocket. He regrets not disposing of it in the river, realizing its presence now poses a dire threat. As his pursuers close in, he attempts to escape using a pendant to transport himself to Grey London, but his magic is initially blocked by the royal blade's spellwork. After a frantic struggle, the wall finally yields, and he collapses into the grim, smoke-filled alleyways of Grey London, barely conscious.

Exhausted and disoriented, Kell stumbles into a masked figure—a girl disguised as a man—who notices his injuries. Despite his precarious state, he tries to downplay his condition, but his legs nearly give way. The girl, sharp-eyed and defiant, offers him a kerchief to clean his bloodied face before swiftly departing. Kell, too drained to process the encounter fully, briefly considers the oddity of her appearance and demeanor, sensing a fleeting connection under different circumstances.

As the adrenaline fades, Kell slumps against the alley wall, gazing at the starless Grey London sky. He reaches for the black stone, only to discover it's missing. Panicked, he searches his pockets, realizing the girl must have stolen it during their brief interaction. The revelation leaves him breathless and furious, compounding his physical agony and the weight of his failure. The talisman's disappearance threatens to unravel everything, leaving him vulnerable and powerless.

The chapter ends with Kell grappling with the consequences of his choices—his refusal to discard the stone, his near-fatal injury, and now its theft. The girl's theft adds another layer of danger, as the stone's power could fall into the wrong hands. Kell's desperation and exhaustion underscore the high stakes, setting the stage for a perilous pursuit to reclaim what he's lost. The encounter with the masked girl hints at future conflict or alliance, leaving readers intrigued by her identity and motives.

# Chapter 20: Thieves Meet I

The chapter opens with the distant tolling of London’s bells at eight o’clock, their sound echoing across the city until it reaches a frozen figure in the Ruby Fields. The man, marked with an X on his hand and clutching a stolen royal sword, is encased in a strange shell of ice or stone. As the bells fade, cracks begin to form across the casing, signaling the beginning of its dissolution. The shell, created by an Antari’s magic, had trapped the man after he ignored a command to stop, setting the stage for his eerie transformation.

The shell breaks apart in an unnatural manner, not crumbling away but instead seeping into the man’s body. The magic absorbs into his skin and veins, leaving his eyes fully black and his veins darkened like ink. The man’s resistance had been stripped by a prior compulsion spell, allowing the dark magic to take hold of his entire being. As he regains movement, the sword slips from his grasp, and his empty, black-eyed gaze surveys the alley, revealing the corpse of another cutthroat nearby, lifeless and beyond salvage.

The man—now a vessel for something darker—awakens with a shudder, his body animated by the invading magic. His movements are initially unsteady, as if unfamiliar with his own form, but he quickly gains confidence. The chapter emphasizes the transformation’s grotesque nature, as the magic consumes the remnants of his life force, leaving only a dark, burning core. His black eyes gleam as he takes in his surroundings, drawn toward the lights and laughter of a nearby building, hinting at his sinister intentions.

The chapter concludes with the transformed man striding purposefully toward the illuminated building, his posture now assured and his face twisted into a smile. The contrast between the cheerful sounds of laughter and the man’s malevolent presence creates an unsettling tension. The scene suggests an impending threat, as the

possessed man, now a puppet of dark magic, moves toward an unsuspecting target, leaving the reader to anticipate the consequences of his awakening.

# Chapter 21: Thieves Meet II

Lila Bard returns to the Stone’s Throw tavern after a night of petty theft, reflecting on her failed attempt to rob a trio of street rats and her subsequent escape. She dismisses the encounter, focusing instead on the small trinket she stole from a drunk man in an alley—a seemingly worthless black stone. Disappointed by its lack of value, she dismisses a faint tingling sensation it emits and heads back to the tavern, where Barron, the owner, greets her with unspoken concern. Lila brushes off his worry, refusing to admit her struggles or accept his help, determined to maintain her independence.

Back in her room, Lila reflects on her strained relationship with Barron, recalling a past argument where she stormed out after refusing his offer of honest work at the tavern. She resents the idea of settling for a meager existence and vows to secure larger scores to escape her current life. Despite her hunger and exhaustion, she refuses to ask Barron for food, clinging to her pride as a thief who won’t stoop to begging. Her thoughts reveal her desperation to leave the city and repay Barron, even as she grudgingly returns to the room she once abandoned.

As Lila settles in, she examines the stolen rock again, only to be interrupted by the sudden appearance of the drunk man from the alley. Bloodied and disoriented, he demands the stone back, collapsing before he can retrieve it. Lila, shocked by his unexplained arrival, checks his pulse and discovers he’s alive but severely injured. Up close, she notices his youthful features and a striking, unnatural black eye, which unsettles her. The encounter leaves her wary but intrigued, hinting at the stone’s hidden significance.

The chapter closes with Lila caught between curiosity and caution, staring at the unconscious stranger and the mysterious stone. His desperate pursuit of the object suggests it holds more value than she initially assumed, potentially upending her

plans. The scene sets the stage for a deeper conflict, blending Lila’s stubborn independence with the looming mystery of the stone and the wounded man’s true intentions. Her resolve to carve out a better life is now intertwined with forces she doesn’t yet understand.

# Chapter 22: Thieves Meet III

Kell awakens tied to a bed, restrained by ropes, and assesses his injuries while noting the return of his magical abilities. He discovers the thief, a sharp-featured young woman named Lila, watching him with a mix of caution and curiosity. Their exchange is tense yet laced with wit, as Kell attempts to negotiate for his freedom and the return of a stolen stone. Lila remains unflinching, probing Kell about his identity and the nature of his power, while he deflects with sarcasm and half-truths.

Kell reveals his name and origin, claiming to be from "another London" and explaining his ability to use magic to travel between worlds. He demonstrates his power by burning the ropes binding him, startling Lila but not breaking her composure. As he recounts how he tracked her using a handkerchief she'd left behind, Lila remains skeptical yet intrigued. Her ability to see the residual magic marks on the wall hints at a deeper connection to the supernatural, though she dismisses Kell's claims with dry humor.

The conversation shifts to the stolen stone, which Kell describes as dangerous and unnatural. He warns Lila that possessing it puts her life at risk, but she remains unfazed, more interested in its value and potential. When Kell lunges for a chest where he suspects the stone is hidden, Lila stops him with a knife to his throat, showcasing her skill and unpredictability. She then produces the stone seemingly from nowhere, taunting Kell with her sleight of hand and pressing him for answers about its true nature.

Lila's fascination with the stone grows as she theorizes about its purpose, guessing it may be a source of magical power. Kell, torn between fear and desire for the artifact, pleads with her to relinquish it, but she refuses until he reveals the symbol on the stone means "magic." Their standoff continues, with Lila testing Kell's honesty and Kell struggling to reclaim the stone without provoking her further. The chapter ends with

tension unresolved, leaving their next moves uncertain.

# Chapter 23: Thieves Meet IV

Lila frees herself from confinement after an exhausting struggle, leaving her knife ruined and her patience frayed. Frustrated and in pain, she retrieves her second dagger and revolver, lamenting that she could have killed Kell if armed earlier. Her attention shifts to the summoned sword, which she admires but distrusts due to its unnatural allure. Despite her desire to keep it, she recognizes its dangerous magic and throws it out the window, resolving to seek solace in alcohol instead of dwelling on unanswered questions about Kell’s disappearance.

Meanwhile, Booth, a drunken patron of the Stone’s Throw, stumbles into an alley to relieve himself and accidentally discovers the discarded sword. Intoxicated but greedy, he marvels at its rare, dark beauty and imagines the profit it could bring. However, his excitement turns to horror when he realizes the sword has fused to his hand, its magic seizing control of his body. Despite his drunken struggles, he cannot release the weapon, which begins to infect him with its sinister power.

The sword’s magic overwhelms Booth, forcing him to impale himself as it dissolves into his body. His veins turn black as the foreign energy takes hold, transforming him into a vessel for the dark power. After a moment of eerie stillness, he rises, his eyes now pitch-black, and examines his new form with unsettling calm. The once-human Booth is no longer in control, his body and mind usurped by the sword’s malevolent force.

The chapter juxtaposes Lila’s rejection of the sword’s temptation with Booth’s tragic succumbance to its curse. Lila’s intuition and self-preservation contrast sharply with Booth’s greed and vulnerability, highlighting the sword’s deceptive danger. The encounter underscores the theme that magic, when cleverly disguised, is far more perilous than overtly evil forces. The chapter ends ominously, leaving the reader to ponder the consequences of the sword’s new host and Lila’s unresolved pursuit of answers.

# Chapter 24: The Follower I

Lila, grappling with the aftermath of her encounter with magic and Kell, seeks solace in the Barren Tide, a rough pub where she can blend in. The night air and the pub's anonymity offer a temporary escape from her swirling questions about other Londons, magical doors, and the stone that awakened a hunger in her—a hunger she now recognizes as a longing for magic. Despite her usual confidence, she feels hollow and unsettled, her mind racing with possibilities she can't ignore. The Barren Tide, with its indifferent patrons and shadowy corners, provides a fleeting refuge from her turmoil.

As Lila drinks, lost in thought, a mysterious stranger named Holland sits beside her. His unnatural presence—pale, faded, and eerily precise—unnerves her. When she notices his mismatched eyes, one pitch-black like Kell's, she realizes he, too, is touched by magic. Unlike Kell, however, Holland exudes a cold, menacing energy that sends a primal warning through her. Their conversation is tense, with Holland's questions hinting at his knowledge of Kell and his suspicion of Lila's connection to him. She tries to deflect, but his grip on her wrist reveals his strength and intent.

Holland's interrogation escalates as he drags Lila outside, ignoring her protests. The pub's patrons, true to their nature, offer no help. Once in the street, Lila attempts to fight back, but Holland's supernatural speed and control render her efforts futile. He disarms her with terrifying ease, pressing her own gun to her temple as he demands she surrender her weapons. Lila, though defiant, recognizes the futility of resistance against someone so powerful and calculated. Holland's calm dominance suggests he's no ordinary threat but a force far beyond her experience.

The chapter climaxes with Lila at Holland's mercy, her fate uncertain. His pursuit of Kell and his ruthless efficiency mark him as a formidable adversary, one whose motives remain unclear. Lila's earlier fascination with magic is now tempered by fear as she confronts its darker manifestations. The encounter leaves her vulnerable,

highlighting the perilous path she’s stumbled upon—one where magic is as dangerous as it is alluring. The chapter sets the stage for a high-stakes conflict, with Lila caught between two powerful figures and her own burgeoning connection to the supernatural.

# Chapter 25: The Follower II

Kell, standing on a bridge in Grey London, senses a powerful magical signature—Holland's—and realizes he's been lured into a trap. Despite knowing it's a setup, he follows the magic, driven by urgency when he hears Lila's scream. He reflects on his earlier confidence that no one could follow him between worlds, yet Holland, another Antari, has done exactly that. Kell understands Holland is after the magical stone in his possession, and Lila, marked by residual magic, has become a target. Though he blames her recklessness, Kell rushes toward the danger.

Arriving at the scene, Kell finds Holland holding Lila at gunpoint, demanding the stone. Holland's calm demeanor masks his ruthlessness, and Kell's attempts to negotiate fail. Lila, though defiant, is powerless against Holland's magic. Kell reluctantly reveals the stone, bargaining for her release. As Lila escapes, Holland dismisses her, focusing solely on Kell. The tension escalates as Holland taunts Kell, emphasizing their unequal strength and experience, revealing his disdain for Kell's perceived naivety.

Kell, though wounded and outmatched, refuses to surrender. He attempts to use the stone's power to summon a cage, but Holland acts faster, pinning him to a door with metal spikes. Holland retrieves the stone, examining it with curiosity while Kell struggles to break free. The chapter highlights the stark contrast between the two Antari: Holland's ruthless efficiency versus Kell's desperate defiance. Kell's internal conflict—weighing his loyalty to Lila against the stone's dangerous power—adds depth to the confrontation.

The chapter ends on a cliffhanger as Holland closes his fist around the stone, unleashing an ominous surge of dark magic. Kell's fate remains uncertain, and the power dynamics between the two Antari are laid bare. Holland's mission to "clean up a mess" suggests broader consequences, while Kell's vulnerability underscores the stakes of their conflict. The scene sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the stone's

origins and the true motives behind Holland’s pursuit.

# Chapter 26: The Follower III

Lila struggles to drag a weakened Kell through a sudden downpour, her arms aching and her patience thinning. Despite her usual instinct to avoid trouble, she had returned to help him after he inexplicably came back for her. Covered in blood and barely conscious, Kell’s condition puzzles her, and she questions his motives while fighting to keep him alive. The scent of magic—flowers, earth, and ash—clings to him, a reminder of the supernatural forces at play, and Lila worries whether the rain will mask their trail from Holland, the dangerous figure pursuing them.

With Barron’s help, Lila manages to get Kell to her room, where they tend to his injuries. Barron, though silent and wary, assists without pressing for immediate explanations. Lila searches Kell’s belongings for anything magical that might aid his recovery and hides the black stone she stole, hoping to obscure its scent with burning herbs. The tension between her gratitude for Barron’s help and her guilt over involving him is palpable, as she grapples with the consequences of her actions and the debt she feels she can never repay.

Barron finally breaks his silence, questioning Lila’s involvement with Kell. She admits to stealing from him and describes Holland, another magic-wielder who attacked her. Barron’s familiarity with the supernatural surprises her, hinting at his own hidden knowledge. As Lila recounts the night’s events, she struggles to understand why Kell saved her life, a selfless act that contradicts her cynical worldview. Barron’s concern is practical—he wants to protect the tavern from further danger—but his kindness leaves Lila feeling both grateful and unsettled.

Exhausted and shivering, Lila accepts Barron’s offerings of food and dry clothes, adding to the unpayable debt she feels she owes him. As the storm continues outside, she watches over Kell, whose vulnerability contrasts sharply with his earlier guarded demeanor. The chapter closes with Lila reflecting on the night’s strangeness, the

weight of unanswered questions, and the uneasy alliance forming between her and the mysterious magician in her bed.

# Chapter 27: An Arrangement I

Kell wakes up in Lila’s bed, disoriented and in pain, recalling the events of the previous night—Holland’s attack in the alley and Lila’s intervention. He longs for home, imagining his brother Rhy’s playful insistence on joining royal duties, but the reality of his situation sets in. Despite his severe injuries, he notices they’ve healed unusually fast, thanks to a royal salve Lila found in his coat. Their exchange reveals her reckless yet effective methods, as she admits testing the salve on herself first, leaving Kell both exasperated and grudgingly grateful.

Lila confronts Kell about his return to her, hinting at unspoken motives, but he deflects with vague answers. Their conversation shifts to Holland, the Antari who attacked him. Kell explains their shared ability to travel between worlds, though he emphasizes their differences. Lila probes further, questioning why Holland didn’t kill Kell outright, sparking Kell’s own doubts about Holland’s intentions. The tension between them underscores the gravity of the threat Holland poses and the mystery surrounding his actions.

The focus turns to the stone, a dangerous artifact Kell is desperate to reclaim. Lila, however, refuses to hand it over without answers, demanding Kell explain its origins and power. Reluctantly, he begins to reveal its connection to Black London, a place of dark magic. Their dynamic shifts as Kell acknowledges Lila’s resilience and cunning, realizing she’s more capable than he initially assumed. Her insistence on understanding the stone’s significance hints at her growing role in the unfolding conflict.

The chapter closes with Kell and Lila at an impasse, their trust in each other tentative but necessary. Kell’s physical pain mirrors his emotional turmoil, while Lila’s sharp wit and determination keep him grounded. Their partnership, forged in danger, begins to take shape as they prepare to face the larger threats ahead—Holland, the stone’s

power, and the secrets of Black London. The unresolved tension between them sets the stage for further collaboration and conflict.

# Chapter 28: An Arrangement II

The chapter opens with Kell and Lila navigating the damp, awakening streets of London at dawn. Despite the October chill, the city stirs to life with merchants preparing for the day. Their brisk walk is punctuated by tense banter, as Lila confidently asserts her possession of a mysterious stone and warns Kell against trying to reclaim it. Their dynamic is playful yet edged with underlying tension, setting the tone for their journey toward Whitbury Street, where Kell plans to cross into another world.

As they approach Whitbury Street, Kell explains his cautious strategy of arriving slightly off-target to avoid potential danger. He reveals his intention to use an inn in Red London as a gateway to White London, though his thoughts linger on past violence. Lila, meanwhile, questions the existence of alternate versions of herself in other worlds, sparking a brief but revealing exchange about her uniqueness. Her humor and boldness contrast with Kell’s guarded demeanor, highlighting their differing perspectives.

Upon reaching their destination—a nondescript spot between a dentist and a barber—Kell prepares to open a portal. The moment is charged with anticipation as Lila, though visibly excited, hides her fear beneath bravado. Kell lends her his coat in a symbolic gesture, while she reciprocates with her kerchief, creating a tangible link between them. The ritual begins as Kell cuts his palm to mark the wall, and Lila produces the black stone, its power palpable. Their hands clasp around it, the stone humming with energy, as Kell hesitates, questioning whether the magic will work for Lila.

In a final moment of vulnerability, Lila kisses Kell for luck, masking her uncertainty with boldness. The chapter closes with the pair stepping through the portal, their fates intertwined as they cross into the unknown. The scene captures their complex

relationship—a blend of trust, rivalry, and mutual curiosity—as they embark on a journey fraught with danger and possibility.

# Chapter 29: An Arrangement III

Barron, the owner of the Stone’s Throw tavern, wakes to an unfamiliar noise in the otherwise predictable soundscape of his establishment. Accustomed to the quirks of his aging building and the occasional strange occurrences that drift into his world, he senses something amiss. The noise, footsteps in Lila’s room above his, feels wrong—unnatural and dangerous. Knowing Lila and Kell have already left, Barron’s instincts warn him of an intruder. He grabs his seldom-used shotgun and heads upstairs, his unease growing with each creaking step.

Upon reaching Lila’s room, Barron hesitates, briefly doubting his senses, but the sound of coins confirms his fears. He bursts in to find Holland, a mysterious man with one green eye and one black, calmly examining Lila’s belongings. Barron immediately fires his shotgun, but the pellets freeze mid-air before harmlessly falling to the ground. Holland, unfazed, uses magic to disarm Barron and immobilizes him with an invisible force. The tavern owner realizes he’s powerless against the intruder’s supernatural abilities.

Holland demands to know where Lila and Kell have gone, his voice cold and detached. Barron, defiant but trapped, admits he doesn’t know. Holland’s demeanor shifts, revealing a deeper malice beneath his calm exterior. He presses a knife to Barron’s throat, the blade’s cold sharpness contrasting with the warmth of the tavern keeper’s defiance. Despite the threat, Barron refuses to yield, his loyalty to Lila outweighing his fear.

The chapter ends abruptly as Holland slits Barron’s throat, leaving his fate uncertain. The confrontation underscores the stark contrast between Barron’s grounded, human resilience and Holland’s ruthless, magical prowess. The scene also highlights Barron’s role as a protector, even in the face of certain doom, while setting the stage for the looming threat Holland poses to Lila and Kell. The tension between the ordinary and

the supernatural reaches a chilling climax.

# Chapter 30: Festival & Fire I

The chapter opens with Kell returning to Red London, a city seemingly untouched by the chaos he left behind. The vibrant streets, filled with the scents of spice and the sounds of celebration, contrast sharply with his inner turmoil. Despite the city's apparent calm, Kell is acutely aware of the danger he brings—a powerful black stone capable of destruction. His anxiety heightens when he realizes Lila, his companion, is missing, along with the stone. Desperate, he uses a bloodstained kerchief she gave him to trace her through magic, hoping to reunite with her and recover the artifact.

Meanwhile, Lila awakens in Red London, disoriented by the city's literal red hue and the overwhelming floral scent in the air. She marvels at the stone's power, which transported her to this new world, though separated from Kell. Determined to explore, she pockets the stone and dons Kell's coat, which fits her perfectly—a small but puzzling detail. Drawn by the energy of the city, she follows the sounds of a crowd, her curiosity outweighing any caution. The streets, though reminiscent of her London, are more elegant and vibrant, filled with an almost magical vitality.

Lila reaches a bustling avenue where a procession captivates the crowd. The people's fine attire and the river's radiant glow astonish her, but it's the fleet of ships on the red river that truly captures her imagination. The banners and emblems on the vessels stir her longing for adventure, overshadowing even the spectacle of fire-wielding performers in the parade. Lila's fascination with the ships reflects her desire for freedom and escape, a recurring theme in her character.

The chapter juxtaposes Kell's urgency and guilt with Lila's wonder and recklessness. While Kell grapples with the consequences of his actions and searches for Lila, she embraces the novelty of Red London, oblivious to the dangers they both carry. The contrast highlights their differing perspectives—Kell's burdened responsibility versus Lila's thirst for adventure—setting the stage for further conflict and discovery in the

story.

# Chapter 31: Festival & Fire II

Aldus Fletcher is a disreputable pawnshop owner in Red London, known for dealing in illicit goods. His shop, nestled in a shady alley by the docks, caters to both sailors and locals seeking to trade forbidden items. While he maintains a facade of legitimacy with ordinary wares, his true business thrives on rare and risky transactions. A scrying board in his shop displays announcements, including the prince’s birthday celebrations, adding a layer of contrast between the city’s festivities and Fletcher’s underworld dealings.

A nervous boy enters Fletcher’s shop, seemingly unsure of his purpose. Fletcher, accustomed to clients with clear intentions, grows suspicious but allows the boy to linger. The youth’s attention is drawn to Fletcher’s scarred arms, particularly the broken magical limiters around his wrists—a punishment for violating the golden rule of magic. Fletcher reveals his past defiance and the lengths he went to break his binds, though he maintains a low profile to avoid royal scrutiny. The boy, intimidated, flees without making a purchase.

Fletcher reflects on his grudge against Kell, an Antari who once bested him in a high-stakes game of Sanct. The game, blending strategy and deception, ended with Kell using an enchanted card to claim victory, leaving Fletcher humiliated. As a token of the debt, Fletcher keeps a white rook chess piece from Kell’s set, a reminder of the unresolved rivalry. The memory fuels Fletcher’s resentment, highlighting his cunning and thirst for retribution.

The chapter closes with another customer entering the shop, shifting Fletcher’s focus back to business. His exchange with the newcomer mirrors the opening scene, reinforcing the cyclical nature of his trade. The rook in his pocket symbolizes unfinished business, while the shop remains a hub for shadowy dealings, blending personal vendettas with the allure of forbidden goods. Fletcher’s world is one of

calculated risk, where power and deception intertwine.

# Chapter 32: Festival & Fire III

Kell and Lila navigate the bustling streets of Red London during Prince Rhy's celebrations, with Kell acutely aware of the dangerous black stone in Lila's pocket. The talisman's pull unsettles him, but he suppresses the urge to take it, knowing its existence threatens everything. As they move toward the Ruby Fields, Kell grapples with guilt for abandoning Rhy's procession, though he consoles himself with the belief that his brother will eventually understand his absence. Despite keeping a low profile, Kell senses scrutiny—both from Lila and unseen observers—heightening the tension of their clandestine journey.

Lila confronts Kell about his evasiveness, pressing him to explain why he hides from royal guards despite being treated like nobility. Their exchange reveals Kell's complicated relationship with the royal family: he is not a prince but a possession, valued yet not truly belonging. His bitter admission exposes his inner conflict—though raised with privilege, he feels like a tool rather than family. Lila, unimpressed, dismisses his self-pity, arguing that his security and care far outweigh the struggles of her own harsh life. This confrontation forces Kell to see her as a survivor, hardened by desperation.

The argument culminates in Kell acknowledging Lila's perspective, admitting his ingratitude. He yearns for the comfort of the palace and Rhy's camaraderie but accepts his duty to rectify a mistake that endangers them all. Lila, however, rejects his sympathy, reclaiming her tough demeanor with a drawn knife. Their dynamic shifts subtly as Kell, resigned to her defiance, refocuses on their mission. The approaching storm mirrors the brewing turmoil, both external and internal, as they near their destination.

As they approach the Ruby Fields, Kell reveals their goal: a token to access White London. He withholds the truth that this marks the end of Lila's journey, hinting at the

innkeeper Fauna’s abrasive personality. The chapter ends abruptly as they round a corner, leaving their discovery—and the fate of their alliance—unresolved. The tension between duty, survival, and unspoken bonds lingers, setting the stage for the next confrontation.

# Chapter 33: Festival & Fire IV

The chapter opens with Kell and Lila surveying the ruins of an inn destroyed by an unnatural fire. Unlike ordinary flames, this fire consumed metal and wood while remaining contained within a binding circle, suggesting deliberate spellwork. The blaze left no survivors, reducing everything—and likely everyone—inside to ash. Kell grapples with guilt over the loss of life and the destruction of his personal collection of magical tokens, realizing the fire was a calculated move to isolate him by cutting off his means of travel between worlds.

Kell deduces the attack was orchestrated by Holland, his rival Antari, who had previously stripped him of his London coins. With no tokens left in the ruins, Kell recalls a short list of people in Red London who might possess one, including Fletcher, a criminal from his past. Despite his reluctance to involve Fletcher, Kell resolves to seek him out, knowing the dockside shopkeeper holds a White London trinket. Lila’s sarcastic remark about Fletcher’s shop potentially being burned down underscores the urgency of their situation.

As they prepare to leave, Kell senses Holland’s approach and uses a concealment stone to hide himself and Lila. The stone envelops them in a shadowy veil, rendering them invisible but still able to see their surroundings. Holland arrives, visibly agitated, and reveals he can sense the stone’s presence. He taunts them, recounting the victims’ screams in the fire and accusing Lila of cowardice for fleeing, which provokes her. Kell restrains her, recognizing Holland’s manipulation as a trap.

Holland escalates his threats, scattering ash to reveal their hiding spot, but the veil proves more effective than expected, allowing the ash to pass through without exposing them. Frustrated, Holland’s failure to locate them hints at the stone’s power. The chapter ends with tension unresolved, as Kell and Lila remain hidden but acutely aware of Holland’s relentless pursuit and the danger he poses.

# Chapter 34: One White Rook I

The chapter opens with Booth, a malevolent entity inhabiting a deteriorating human body, struggling to survive in a bleak, lifeless London. The magic within him consumes his hosts rapidly, leaving behind only husks, but the city's inhabitants provide little sustenance, their vitality too meager to sustain him. His current vessel, a drunkard stabbed in a tavern alley, is crumbling, its skin flaking away as he shuffles through the streets. Desperate, Booth is drawn back to the Stone's Throw, a tavern that radiates warmth and magic, hoping to find a stronger host—only to step into the path of an oncoming carriage unnoticed.

Meanwhile, Edward Archibald Tuttle (Ned) waits outside the Stone's Throw, frustrated by its unopened doors. A self-proclaimed seeker of magic, Ned clings to the hope of reuniting with Kell, a renowned magician he once met, who promised him a bag of earth. Ned's vivid imagination fuels elaborate fantasies of mentorship and recognition, though doubts linger about his own magical potential. As he prepares to leave, a commotion erupts nearby: a carriage driver claims to have hit someone, but only a strange, person-shaped soot stain remains. Ned investigates, sensing a fleeting warmth in the ash, but finds nothing conclusive.

The collision scene is eerie, with the driver insistent he struck a man, yet no body is found. Ned examines the soot, half-expecting it to react magically, but it crumbles to nothing. The driver, unsettled, reloads his cart while Ned ponders the oddity, wiping the ash away with a mix of curiosity and disappointment. The incident leaves Ned with a lingering sense of foreboding, though he dismisses it and continues on his way, his mind still fixated on his pursuit of Kell and the elusive promise of magic.

The chapter intertwines Booth's desperate search for sustenance with Ned's yearning for magical validation, both converging at the Stone's Throw. Booth's fate remains ambiguous, his form dissipated into ash, while Ned's encounter with the soot hints at a

deeper, unseen connection between the two. The tavern serves as a symbolic beacon of hope and power, drawing them together in a city otherwise devoid of life and magic. The tension between reality and imagination underscores the chapter, leaving the reader questioning what is truly supernatural and what is merely the product of desperate minds.

# Chapter 35: One White Rook II

Kell and Lila move invisibly and intangibly through the streets of London, shielded by powerful magic from the stone Kell carries. The energy from the stone revitalizes him, masking his earlier weakness, though a part of him senses its danger. Lila remains unusually quiet, her grip tight on Kell and a timepiece, until she opens up about her past. She reveals her traumatic childhood, including her father’s betrayal and her first kill at fifteen, which she describes with a mix of bitterness and pride. Kell challenges her perspective, emphasizing that killing should never feel easy or empowering.

Their conversation shifts to Kell’s own experiences with killing, which he frames as acts of necessity rather than desire. Lila’s curiosity about whether magic feels like the rush of power she experienced during violence prompts Kell to reflect on the corrupt nature of power in White London. Before he can fully explain, their attention is drawn to the city’s scrying boards, which suddenly display a missing persons alert featuring Kell’s image and a reward for his capture. The entire city is now searching for him, complicating their already precarious situation.

Realizing they cannot remain hidden indefinitely, Kell leads Lila to Fletcher’s shop, where they phase through the locked door using the stone’s magic. Once inside, Kell releases the veil, but Lila notices the alarming spread of dark veins up his arm—a sign of the stone’s corrupting influence. Despite the stone’s soothing whispers assuring him of safety, Kell struggles to let go, his body resisting the command. Only when Lila throws a knife near his head does he snap out of the trance and force himself to drop the talisman.

As the stone falls, Kell collapses, his energy drained. The brief high of the stone’s power gives way to exhaustion and cold, leaving him vulnerable. Even as he recognizes the stone’s toxicity, part of him still craves its strength. Lila watches warily, her blades ready, as Kell grapples with the consequences of wielding such dangerous

magic. The chapter ends on a tense note, underscoring the stone’s seductive yet destructive hold over him.

# Chapter 36: One White Rook III

The chapter opens with Kell, the protagonist, unaware that one of the cutthroats he left for dead in an alley has mysteriously disappeared. The missing assailant, now a grotesque figure with blackened, decaying skin, strolls through the city, enjoying the sunlight and distant festivities. His body, though deteriorating, is in better condition than a previous host—a drunkard from another London—who had perished quickly. The cutthroat reflects on his recent activities, hinting at a dark and supernatural presence within him that thrives on destruction and consumption.

The narrative shifts to the previous night, where the cutthroat, drawn by the allure of a pleasure house, encounters a fiery-haired woman who invites him inside. She leads him down a dimly lit hallway, oblivious to the darkness in his eyes as she focuses on his physicality. Despite his unfamiliarity with his new body, he kisses her, transferring a sinister energy—a "pure black flame"—into her. The woman, intoxicated by the magic, willingly embraces the darkness, unaware of the danger. The cutthroat revels in the power exchange, noting how a willing host lasts longer than one taken by force.

As their encounter intensifies, the cutthroat whispers Arnesian commands—"Take," "Give," "Grow"—while the darkness spreads through the woman. Their union becomes a merging of minds and bodies, culminating in her transformation. When she opens her eyes, they mirror his glossy black ones, and she smiles crookedly, now possessed by the same entity. Together, they leave the pleasure house, their shared consciousness spreading through the city like a contagion. The cutthroat reflects on his busy night, satisfied with his progress.

The chapter concludes with the cutthroat approaching a "red river," symbolizing the lifeblood of the city, which he envisions as a feast of magic and vitality. The entity within him thrives on consumption, and its influence grows as it infiltrates more hosts. The chapter underscores themes of corruption, power, and the seductive nature of

darkness, leaving a sense of impending doom as the entity's reach expands unchecked.

# Chapter 37: One White Rook IV

Kell and Lila search Fletcher’s cluttered, maze-like shop for a white rook, a token from another world. The shop is warded against magic and theft, complicating their efforts. Lila, ever the opportunist, pockets trinkets despite Kell’s warnings, while Kell reflects on his strained history with Fletcher. Their past involves a high-stakes card game where Kell outmaneuvered Fletcher, leaving him with only the rook. The tension between them lingers, hinting at unresolved animosity and missed opportunities for partnership.

As they search, Lila notices a map that reveals the absence of familiar European countries like France and England. Kell explains the geopolitical differences of their world, where London is the capital of Arnes, a vast empire. Lila’s fascination with the map underscores her thirst for adventure and discovery. Meanwhile, Kell grows increasingly frustrated as their search yields no results, and Lila’s distraction with a unique knife highlights her penchant for weapons and defiance of Kell’s authority.

Their conversation shifts to Kell’s smuggling activities, which Lila quickly deduces. She challenges his motives, questioning why someone aligned with royalty would risk illegal trade. Kell deflects, but Lila’s sharp analysis suggests he seeks control or defiance. Their banter reveals their contrasting perspectives: Lila steals for freedom, while Kell’s actions stem from deeper, unspoken desires. The discussion underscores their complex dynamic, blending mutual distrust with reluctant camaraderie.

The chapter climaxes as Fletcher unexpectedly returns, catching them in the act. Lila attempts to ambush him but is magically immobilized, showcasing Fletcher’s power. The confrontation leaves Kell scrambling to explain their presence, while Lila’s frozen form hints at impending conflict. The scene sets the stage for a tense resolution, blending danger, deception, and the unresolved history between Kell and Fletcher.

# Chapter 38: One White Rook V

Kell finds himself confronted by royal guards after his unexplained absence, forcing him to mask his panic with composed arrogance. Though Lila vanishes using a magical stone, Kell remains, feigning innocence while internally fearing repercussions for his secret transgressions. The guards are visibly confused by his calm demeanor, torn between deference and suspicion. Kell attempts to deflect their questions with vague explanations, but their leader, Ellis, remains persistent, ultimately escorting him away under the guise of returning him to the palace.

Lila, hidden by the stone’s magic, observes the confrontation unnoticed. She senses Kell’s silent warning to stay put and watches as most of the guards depart with him. However, one guard lingers, and in a sudden, brutal act, slits the shopkeeper Fletcher’s throat. The murder is executed with chilling precision, leaving Lila stunned but still concealed. The guard’s eyes hint at unnatural power, suggesting he may be more than an ordinary soldier. His departure leaves Fletcher dead and Lila alone in the shop, grappling with the violence she just witnessed.

Kell is led to a royal carriage, his thoughts racing as he contemplates how to deceive the king and queen about his actions. He hopes to retrieve a token from White London, all while worrying about Lila’s unpredictable nature. The carriage’s unusual seating arrangement and Ellis’s apologetic tone foreshadow betrayal. Before Kell can react, he is drugged and rendered unconscious, his trust in the guards shattered as darkness overtakes him.

Lila, still invisible, processes Fletcher’s murder and the guard’s eerie detachment. The guard’s shimmering eyes and swift exit suggest he is under magical influence or not human. As the shop falls silent, Lila remains hidden, her next move uncertain. The chapter ends with tension unresolved, leaving both Kell and Lila in peril—Kell unconscious and captive, while Lila must decide whether to intervene or flee. The

stakes escalate as hidden forces manipulate events from the shadows.

# Chapter 39: One White Rook VI

Parrish and Gen, members of Prince Rhy’s private guard, enjoy a brief respite at a lively festival celebrating the prince. Despite being off duty, they remain vigilant, blending into the festivities while keeping an eye out for trouble. The festival, marked by music, magic, and merriment, culminates in an extravagant masquerade at the palace. Though the guards plan to rejoin the prince soon, they take advantage of the temporary freedom, with Parrish growing increasingly uneasy about an unexplained energy in the air.

As the celebration unfolds, Parrish notices a woman with unsettling black eyes, reminiscent of a supernatural anomaly. Before he can investigate further, she vanishes, leaving him unsettled. Meanwhile, Gen observes a girl dressed in men’s clothing moving suspiciously toward the palace. Their attention shifts when they witness a man aggressively embracing a woman, who collapses unnaturally after the encounter. Suspicious, the guards pursue the man, who flees toward the riverbank.

Confronting the stranger, Parrish and Gen discover his horrifying transformation: his eyes and veins are blackened, his fingers charred like bone. The creature attacks Gen, piercing his chest with a lethal touch before Parrish retaliates with an enchanted sword. The blade severs the creature’s magic, reducing him to ash. The encounter leaves Parrish shaken, realizing the threat is far more sinister than typical festival chaos.

The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, hinting at darker forces at play during the masquerade. Parrish’s unease proves justified as the guards face an otherworldly adversary, foreshadowing greater dangers ahead. The festive atmosphere contrasts sharply with the lurking supernatural menace, setting the stage for further conflict. The encounter underscores the guards’ dedication to protecting the prince, even when off duty, while introducing a mysterious and deadly new threat.

# Chapter 40: Masquerade I

Lila approaches the grand palace, illuminated by the setting sun, as the bustling market around her transforms into a lively festival. Determined to infiltrate the palace without relying on the magical stone in her pocket, she searches for an alternative entrance. Her opportunity arises when she notices a masquerade ball underway, with guests in elaborate disguises ascending the palace steps. Realizing the anonymity a mask provides, Lila grins at the prospect of blending in—though she still lacks an invitation. Her luck turns when she spots three young girls, whom she recognizes from earlier, and deftly pickpockets one of their invitations.

Despite securing an invitation, Lila hesitates to join the procession of lavishly dressed guests, acutely aware of her shabby attire. She retreats to a nearby market stall selling masks and fineries, drawn to a striking black horned mask. The merchant, a woman named Calla, recognizes Lila from an earlier encounter with Kell, a royal figure. Though Lila attempts to barter with a bloodstained watch, Calla refuses payment, offering the mask and attire as a gesture of goodwill, hinting at a future debt to be repaid in an unconventional manner.

Calla assists Lila in selecting an outfit, though Lila surprises her by choosing a men’s coat over traditional gowns. The merchant, though puzzled, respects her preference and helps her find suitable boots. Lila’s determination to disguise herself as a male guest reflects her desire for control and anonymity, as well as her rejection of societal expectations. The interaction highlights the cultural nuances of Arnesian transactions, where debts are not always settled with coin but through unspoken obligations.

As palace bells ring, signaling the ball’s commencement, Lila accepts Calla’s generosity, though it unsettles her to owe a favor. The chapter underscores Lila’s resourcefulness and adaptability, as well as her internal conflict between self-reliance and the necessity of relying on others. The masquerade serves as both a literal and

metaphorical veil, allowing her to navigate a world where appearances and alliances are fluid, and where her connection to Kell opens unexpected doors.

# Chapter 41: Masquerade II

Kell awakens disoriented in Rhy’s royal bedroom, recognizing the dawn-like draperies that distinguish it from other chambers. The sounds of Rhy’s birthday ball echo outside as he realizes his hands are bound with magic-dampening cuffs. Rhy, dressed in black and gold with a gaudy mask, sits across from him, sipping tea with an air of annoyance. Their tense exchange reveals Rhy’s frustration over Kell’s secretive behavior, hinting at a deeper conflict between the brothers.

The confrontation escalates when Rhy accuses Kell of possessing a dangerous artifact from Black London. Kell denies it at first but grows alarmed when Rhy reveals knowledge only a select few should have. The prince’s demeanor shifts unnaturally, and Kell notices a pendant beneath his collar—a possession charm linked to Astrid Dane, their enemy. Realizing Rhy is being controlled, Kell tries to resist, but the guards, also compelled, restrain him.

Astrid, speaking through Rhy’s body, taunts Kell, revealing her plan to infiltrate the palace from within. She explains how possessing the prince grants her unchecked access to the kingdom, making her undetectable until it’s too late. Kell’s attempts to reason or fight back are futile, as harming Astrid would mean harming Rhy. The chapter underscores the vulnerability of the royal family to magical subterfuge and Kell’s desperation to protect his brother.

The chapter ends with a chilling standoff as Astrid, still masquerading as Rhy, demands the location of the Black London stone. Kell refuses, and Astrid’s gleeful response—twisting Rhy’s rings inward—suggests impending violence. The scene leaves readers on edge, anticipating the physical and emotional toll of Astrid’s manipulation and Kell’s struggle to reclaim control.

# Chapter 42: Masquerade III

Lila arrives at a grand palace masquerade, disguising herself as the affluent Captain Bard to blend in with the elite. Despite her stolen invitation and borrowed mannerisms, she navigates the opulent foyer, overwhelmed by the extravagant floral displays and intoxicating fragrances. Her tension eases when a servant accepts her alias, allowing her entry into the dazzling ballroom. The space is alive with magic, a sensory overload that feels both foreign and strangely familiar, making her London upbringing seem dull in comparison.

Inside the ballroom, Lila is mesmerized by the vibrant magic and wealth surrounding her, resisting the urge to steal. She descends to greet the king and queen, who seem unnaturally composed, their hollow words and glazed eyes hinting at enchantment. Suspicious, Lila probes about Kell’s whereabouts, but the royals’ robotic responses deepen her unease. Realizing they’re under a spell, she slips away to search for Kell, noting the crowd’s anticipation for the prince’s arrival.

Leaving the ballroom, Lila explores the palace’s labyrinthine corridors, using her street-smart instincts to navigate. The stone in her pocket hums, signaling Kell’s proximity. She discovers a guarded door at the end of a hall, flanked by three armed men, and prepares for confrontation. Before acting, she notices an ajar door leading to a luxurious bedroom, offering a potential alternate route.

The chapter captures Lila’s audacious infiltration, her sharp observations, and the growing mystery of the enchanted royals. Her determination to find Kell drives her through the palace’s hidden passages, blending danger with curiosity. The vivid descriptions of magic and opulence contrast with the underlying tension of deception and control, setting the stage for further intrigue.

# Chapter 43: Masquerade IV

Kell is captured and interrogated by Astrid, who has possessed Prince Rhy's body, demanding the location of a powerful magical stone. She reveals her plan to merge their dying London with Kell's thriving world, seeking retribution for her city's suffering. Astrid explains that the stone is broken into two halves, each retaining its power, and hints at their connection across worlds. Kell realizes the danger of reuniting the halves, as it could tear reality apart, but Astrid remains determined to overthrow his world's throne with her brother, Athos.

Astrid taunts Kell, revealing she orchestrated his involvement to frame him if the plan failed or control him if it succeeded. She dismisses his defiance, knowing possession magic doesn't work on Antari like him, but threatens compulsion instead. As Rhy's body holds Kell at knifepoint, Lila suddenly intervenes from the balcony, aiming a pistol at Rhy. Astrid retaliates with magic, striking Lila and sending her falling into the darkness, prompting Kell to break free from his restraints using his blood magic.

Kell overpowers the guards and turns on Rhy, but Astrid mocks his reluctance to harm his brother's body. Lila reappears, shooting Rhy in the leg, demonstrating her resilience. The confrontation escalates as Kell and Lila unite against Astrid's manipulation, though the chapter ends mid-action, leaving their next move unresolved. The tension highlights the stakes of Astrid's plan and the personal bonds complicating the conflict.

The chapter underscores themes of power, betrayal, and sacrifice, as Astrid's ruthless ambition clashes with Kell's loyalty to his world and brother. The magical stone's duality symbolizes the fragile balance between worlds, while Lila's return injects hope into the dire situation. The interplay of possession, compulsion, and blood magic adds layers of intrigue, setting the stage for a larger confrontation over the fate of both Londons.

# Chapter 44: Masquerade V

The chapter opens with a chaotic and violent confrontation as Rhy stabs himself with a knife, shocking Kell, who desperately tries to intervene. The magical pendant, a key object in the scene, is knocked away and picked up by a guard, while Kell rushes to Rhy’s side, pulling the blade free. As Kell attempts to heal his brother with magic, a guard attacks him, leading to a brutal struggle. The guard, possessed by Astrid, is flung over a balcony, and the pendant falls into the hands of a bystander, who is instantly possessed, adding to the escalating danger.

Amid the chaos, Lila fights off another guard and tends to Rhy, who is severely wounded and bleeding profusely. Kell, overwhelmed by fear and guilt, repeatedly attempts to heal Rhy with his magic, but the prince’s condition remains critical. The courtyard below erupts into panic as the possessed woman flees into the palace, and locked doors spellwork trap them inside. Lila urges Kell to escape, but he refuses to abandon Rhy, insisting on taking him along despite the risk. The group’s desperation is palpable as they navigate the dire situation.

Kell, Lila, and Rhy retreat through a hidden passage, a private corridor marked by memories of their shared past. Rhy’s weakening state and Kell’s frantic efforts to keep him conscious heighten the tension. Behind them, guards break into Rhy’s room, forcing Kell to seal the door with magic. Lila presses for a full escape from the palace, recognizing the futility of hiding in isolated rooms. Kell leads them to a study with magical doorways, hoping to find a safe route out, though he is uncertain if the portal can sustain all three of them.

In the final moments, Kell prepares to activate a magical door, drawing blood to power the spell. Holding Rhy and Lila close, he hopes the portal will transport them to safety, despite the risks. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, emphasizing the group’s precarious situation and Kell’s determination to save Rhy at all costs. The blend of

action, emotional turmoil, and magical stakes creates a gripping narrative that underscores the bonds between the characters and the looming threats they face.

# Chapter 45: Sanctuary & Sacrifice I

The chapter opens with a description of the London Sanctuary, a revered place where magic is both studied and worshipped. Scholars and masters, including Kell’s tutor Master Tieren, dedicate their lives to understanding the essence of magic. Kell, though no longer a permanent resident due to Prince Rhy’s insistence on his presence at the palace, retains a room marked by a symbolic circle of blood. The sanctuary’s austere design reflects its focus on discipline, with Kell’s room featuring only essential furnishings like a desk, cot, and an infinite candle.

Kell and Lila arrive at the sanctuary with a gravely wounded Rhy, dragging him into Kell’s sparse stone chamber. Despite Kell’s repeated attempts to heal Rhy using magical incantations, his brother’s condition deteriorates, slipping into silence and shallow breathing. Panic sets in as Kell realizes his magic isn’t working, and he fears Astrid’s weapon may have blocked his abilities. Lila suggests it’s too late to save Rhy, but Kell refuses to accept defeat, his desperation mounting as Rhy’s heartbeat fades.

In a final, reckless act, Kell demands the magical stone from Lila, ignoring her warnings about its dangers. He places the stone on Rhy’s chest and channels his magic, binding their lives together. The ritual unleashes immense pain as dark smoke coils around them, tying their fates. Kell endures excruciating agony, his heart skipping beats to restart Rhy’s. Lila tries to intervene, but the magic violently repels her, leaving her crumpled against the wall. Kell’s resolve wavers briefly, but the pain overwhelms him as the spell reaches its climax.

The chapter ends with Rhy gasping back to life, but Kell’s heart stops in response. The sacrifice leaves the outcome uncertain, highlighting the dire consequences of Kell’s choice. The scene underscores themes of loyalty, desperation, and the perilous nature of magic, setting the stage for the emotional and physical fallout of Kell’s decision.

# Chapter 46: Sanctuary & Sacrifice II

The chapter opens with a tense scene as Kell collapses after performing a mysterious ritual to save Prince Rhy’s life. Lila, recovering from her own injuries, watches in shock as Kell and Rhy simultaneously draw breath, revealing identical black marks branded over their hearts. Kell explains he has bound Rhy’s life to his own using a "soul seal," a forbidden and permanent form of magic. Lila expresses concern over the consequences, especially when Kell reveals he cannot release the dark stone talisman, which has now fused to his hand, its sinister energy spreading through his body.

Kell’s calm demeanor worries Lila further as he admits the stone’s corruption is irreversible and that he must return it to Black London—a journey from which he expects no return. Lila angrily challenges his resignation, pointing out the irony of tethering Rhy’s survival to his own if he plans to sacrifice himself. Their heated argument is interrupted by the arrival of Master Tieren, the head priest of the London Sanctuary, who assesses the situation with a mix of wisdom and alarm. Tieren’s presence introduces a momentary respite as he assures Kell that Rhy will be safe within the sanctuary’s warded walls.

Tieren’s scrutiny shifts to Lila, recognizing her as an outsider, and he introduces himself as both a priest and a healer. As he examines Rhy’s injuries, Kell reveals he shares the prince’s pain due to their magical bond. Tieren’s concern deepens when he notices the black mark on Kell’s chest and the corruption spreading from the stone. Despite Kell’s insistence that his actions were necessary, Tieren’s reaction suggests the gravity of the situation, hinting at unseen dangers and the toll of Kell’s choices.

The chapter closes with Kell blaming himself for the events, though his sentence is left unfinished, underscoring his guilt and the weight of his decisions. The interactions between Kell, Lila, and Tieren highlight themes of sacrifice, loyalty, and the consequences of wielding dangerous magic. The tension remains unresolved, setting

the stage for further conflict as the group grapples with the immediate threat to Rhy and the looming peril of Kell’s connection to the stone.

# Chapter 47: Sanctuary & Sacrifice III

The chapter opens with chaos erupting in the palace as rumors of violence and treason spread among the panicked guests. A guard is reportedly murdered, and a woman in a green gown is seen stealing a necklace before collapsing. The king and queen’s calm demeanor contrasts with the growing frenzy, culminating in the king accusing Kell of stabbing the prince and demanding his arrest. Amid the turmoil, a mysterious figure named Gen, drawn by the scent of powerful magic, infiltrates the palace. Disguised in a guard’s helmet after killing one, he moves toward the source of the blood and magic, his hunger for power evident.

Meanwhile, Kell grapples with the effects of the black stone bound to his hand, which alternates between soothing him and filling him with dread. The stone’s influence blurs his awareness, making him oscillate between wanting to rid himself of it and clinging to its strength. With Lila by his side, he navigates the deserted streets of Red London, avoiding bridges and scrying boards that now brand him as a wanted criminal. Kell reassures himself by feeling Rhy’s heartbeat through their bond and focuses on his plan to cross into White London to confront Athos and retrieve the second half of the stone.

As Kell prepares to open a portal to White London, Lila’s unwavering confidence bolsters his resolve. However, their attempt is abruptly interrupted when Holland, the Antari from White London, appears and forcibly pulls Kell back into Red London. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger as Holland frowns down at Kell, questioning his premature departure, leaving their fate uncertain and the tension unresolved.

The chapter masterfully intertwines the palace’s chaos with Kell’s internal struggle and the looming threat of Holland. Themes of power, sacrifice, and trust are explored as characters navigate a world teetering on the edge of upheaval. The vivid descriptions of magic, violence, and emotional turmoil create a gripping narrative that propels the

story forward.

# Chapter 48: Sanctuary & Sacrifice IV

Lila arrives abruptly on a pale, unfamiliar street, disoriented but quickly steadying herself. She expects Kell to follow, but he is nowhere in sight. The eerie setting—a half-frozen river, pale blue lanterns, and the distant White Castle—casts a colorless, unsettling glow. Spotting Kell’s white rook on the ground, she pockets it, though his absence unnerves her. The atmosphere grows more ominous as she notices a starved dog and unseen eyes watching from shadows, prompting her to grip her knife tightly.

Alone in this strange world, Lila recalls Kell’s warnings about its dangers but initially dismisses them, believing her street-smart upbringing makes her more resilient. However, the oppressive silence, the scent of death, and the bone-deep sense of wrongness make her reconsider. For the first time, she feels underprepared, wishing for more than her knives and pistol. The desolate environment and unseen threats amplify her fear, leaving her vulnerable and acutely aware of her isolation.

Her tension escalates when two tattooed men approach, speaking an unfamiliar, guttural language. Their hostile tone and drawn weapons force Lila to act. She shoots one dead, but the gunshot echoes loudly, shattering the silence and drawing more shadowy figures from nearby buildings. The surviving man snarls at her, his blade crackling with dark energy as others emerge, gaunt and menacing. Lila’s bravado wavers as she realizes the gravity of her situation, surrounded by enemies in a world far more dangerous than she anticipated.

As the threat closes in, Lila raises her gun again, desperately hoping Kell will appear. The chapter highlights her resilience but also her vulnerability in this hostile realm. The encounter underscores the stark contrast between her confidence and the reality of the world’s horrors, leaving her in a precarious standoff with unknown adversaries. The tension builds as readers are left wondering whether Kell will arrive in time or if Lila must face the danger alone.

# Chapter 49: Sanctuary & Sacrifice V

This chapter, 'XII. Sanctuary & Sacrifice V', is rich in content and well worth a careful read.

# Chapter 50: Sanctuary & Sacrifice VI

Kell arrives in White London to find Lila surrounded by hostile locals, her knives bloodied from fighting off attackers. The crowd, drawn by the scent of magic, taunts her with violent intent. Kell intervenes, commanding them to back away with a display of power, though some remain defiant. Lila, visibly shaken, chastises him for his tardiness and questions his drenched appearance, to which he cryptically replies, "I hit a snag," referencing Holland's unconscious body. The tension escalates as the crowd eyes Holland with predatory interest, forcing Kell and Lila into a defensive stance.

As the mob closes in, Kell and Lila retreat onto a bridge, with Kell creating a stone barricade to delay their pursuers. Lila flees first, and Kell follows, carrying Holland's body while harnessing black magic. The crowd breaks through the barrier, chasing them until Kell collapses the bridge, sending their attackers plummeting into the river below. Exhausted, Kell confirms Holland is near death, while Lila expresses her disdain for the Antari. The pair presses onward, aware of the watchful eyes from the shadows as they approach the ominous castle, its presence looming over them.

Upon nearing the castle, Kell senses the pull of a magical artifact, realizing it resonates with another piece nearby. Lila surprises him by revealing a stolen royal half-sword from Red London, a weapon capable of nullifying magic. Kell requests the blade, and Lila reluctantly hands it over, reloading her pistol in preparation for the confrontation ahead. When Kell admits he isn't ready, Lila responds with a sharp grin, remarking that overconfidence leads to death. Her pragmatic outlook underscores their fraught alliance as they brace for the unknown.

The chapter culminates with Kell and Lila stepping into the darkness of the castle, their trust in each other tested by the dangers ahead. Kell's gratitude toward Lila goes unspoken, leaving their bond ambiguous yet pivotal. The looming citadel, with its gaping archway and eerie statues, symbolizes the peril they face, setting the stage for

a high-stakes confrontation. The blend of action, tension, and character dynamics highlights their resilience amidst the grim reality of White London's brutality.

# Chapter 51: The Waiting King I

King Athos Dane sits in his throne room, observing the movements of Kell and his companion through a scrying stone. The stone, linked to its missing half, provides a clear view of their approach to his castle. Athos reflects on the events that unfolded across different Londons—Kell’s escape, the girl’s cleverness, and the failures of his own servants. His emotions oscillate between amusement, annoyance, and a dark excitement at the prospect of killing Kell, though he bristles at the loss of his servant, Holland.

Beside Athos sits the motionless body of his sister, Astrid, kept under a spell. He chastises her for her failure to handle Kell, noting that her inaction has led to chaos. Though Astrid is capable of wreaking havoc elsewhere, here she remains silent and lifeless. Athos considers waking her but decides against it, believing she would only complicate matters. He resolves to take matters into his own hands, confident in his ability to control the situation.

Athos revels in the power at his disposal, restraining the magic that thrums within him. He is a strict master, feeding the magic only what it needs to serve his purposes. As the image of Kell dissipates, Athos prepares to confront his guests, smoothing his appearance and adjusting his white cloak. His demeanor is calm yet calculated, underscoring his ruthless control over both magic and people.

The chapter concludes with Athos leaving the throne room to greet Kell and his companion, promising to rectify the chaos Astrid failed to contain. His tone is dismissive yet menacing, highlighting his arrogance and determination to assert dominance. The scene sets the stage for a confrontation, with Athos poised as a formidable and unyielding antagonist.

# Chapter 52: The Waiting King II

Kell approaches the White London fortress, carrying Holland’s body and armed with a royal blade and a dangerous Black London talisman. Despite Holland’s taunts, Kell resists using the talisman, aware of its corrupting influence as dark threads creep up his arm. The absence of guards and the unnervingly open path to Athos Dane’s throne room heighten his tension, signaling the king’s arrogance. When Kell enters, the torches ignite, revealing motionless guards, and Athos emerges, taunting him with the promise of a slow, personal execution.

Athos, wielding the other half of the black stone, dismisses Kell’s defiance, relishing the confrontation as a game. He attacks with smoke magic, forging chains that bind Kell to the walls. Despite Kell’s attempts to counter with spells and the stolen sword, Athos overpowers him, preparing to torture him with a silver whip. Kell barely dodges the first strike, using blood magic to free himself and retaliate with sharp stone shards, but Athos effortlessly blocks the attack, confident in his superiority.

Meanwhile, Lila navigates a statue-filled courtyard to infiltrate the fortress from the south, wary of traps. The doors yield easily, and lanterns flare to life, revealing guards whose empty eyes track her movements. Recognizing their magical enslavement, she realizes their obedience is limited to strict commands, allowing her to pass unchallenged. Smirking at their indifference, she moves toward the throne room, pondering how many secretly wish for Athos and Astrid’s downfall.

The chapter builds tension through parallel confrontations: Kell’s desperate struggle against Athos’s cruel dominance and Lila’s stealthy advance toward an unseen threat. Athos’s sadistic enjoyment of the battle contrasts with Kell’s grim determination, while Lila’s calculated risk-taking highlights her adaptability. The stage is set for a climactic clash, with both protagonists navigating a fortress as treacherous as its rulers.

# Chapter 53: The Waiting King III

The chapter opens with a brutal confrontation between Kell and Athos in a shattered hall, where the two engage in a fierce magical duel. Athos, seemingly unaffected by the dark stone's corruption, taunts Kell as he unleashes bolts of dark energy, overpowering him and sending him crashing through the castle doors. Kell, battered and bleeding, struggles to defend himself, questioning whether balance between light and dark magic is even possible. As Athos presses his advantage, Kell's bound hand suddenly reacts instinctively, summoning a protective shadow that deflects the attack and wounds Athos, momentarily shifting the tide of the battle.

Meanwhile, Lila infiltrates the throne room, where she finds Queen Astrid Dane motionless, under the influence of a possession charm. The room, designed to amplify sound, remains eerily silent as Lila approaches the defenseless queen. She attempts to kill Astrid with a gunshot, but the bullet ricochets off an invisible magical barrier, wounding Lila instead. Undeterred, she discovers the spell's source—symbols etched into the floor—and disrupts them with her knife, breaking the enchantment. Just as she prepares to deliver the final blow, Astrid awakens, gripping Lila's wrist with a chilling smile.

The chapter highlights the stark contrast between the two battles: Kell's desperate struggle against Athos's overwhelming power and Lila's calculated but thwarted assassination attempt. Both protagonists face moments of vulnerability—Kell physically and emotionally, as he grapples with the dark magic's allure, and Lila as her plan unravels when Astrid unexpectedly regains consciousness. The tension escalates as their enemies prove far more formidable than anticipated, leaving their fates uncertain.

Themes of power, control, and the blurred line between victory and defeat permeate the chapter. Athos's mocking dominance and Astrid's sudden awakening underscore

the unpredictability of their adversaries. Kell’s internal conflict and Lila’s near-success emphasize the high stakes, while the dark magic’s seductive pull hints at deeper moral dilemmas. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with both protagonists in peril, setting the stage for a dramatic escalation in the conflict.

# Chapter 54: The Waiting King IV

The chapter opens with Lila Bard brutally beaten and bloodied in a fierce battle against Astrid Dane in the throne room. Despite her injuries and the overwhelming odds, Lila refuses to surrender, driven by a determination to buy time for Kell. She reflects on how her past self—a self-serving thief—would never have sacrificed herself for others, yet she feels no regret for her choices. Astrid, amused by Lila's defiance, toys with her, showcasing her terrifying power and mocking Lila's efforts. The fight is one-sided, with Lila realizing she is outmatched but resolved to make her stand count.

Astrid's dominance becomes even more apparent as she effortlessly counters Lila's attacks, including catching a thrown dagger mid-air. The queen then unleashes a spell that causes the floor to erupt, trapping Lila under rubble mixed with bone fragments. Astrid pins her down, taunting her before revealing her true intent: to delay Lila's death until after dealing with Kell. In a chilling twist, Astrid uses magic to transform into Lila's exact likeness, planning to deceive Kell. Lila, horrified and helpless, is knocked unconscious as Astrid leaves to confront Kell in her guise.

Meanwhile, Kell stands exhausted in a ruined courtyard, surrounded by destruction and holding half of a powerful black stone. Despite his injuries, he resists the urge to give in to the stone's seductive pull. When he retrieves the missing fragment, the stone reunites, unleashing an overwhelming surge of energy that fills him with a sense of wholeness and tranquility. A voice in his mind urges him to surrender to the darkness, and as his eyes close, he teeters on the edge of succumbing to the stone's influence.

The chapter highlights the parallel struggles of Lila and Kell, both pushed to their limits by their adversaries. Lila's physical battle against Astrid contrasts with Kell's internal conflict against the stone's allure. Their resilience is tested, with Lila's defiance and Kell's resistance underscoring their growth from self-interested individuals to willing

sacrifices for a greater cause. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, leaving their fates uncertain as Astrid’s deception and the stone’s power loom over them.

# Chapter 55: The Waiting King V

The chapter opens with Kell and Lila reuniting after a violent confrontation, both battered but alive. Lila questions how Kell discerned the queen’s impostor, to which he cryptically replies, "Because she said please." Their banter masks their exhaustion and injuries, but the tension escalates as Kell insists on facing his next challenge alone. Lila reluctantly agrees to stay behind, hinting at her own plans, while Kell’s physical state deteriorates rapidly. A sudden wave of pain overwhelms him, signaling the encroaching darkness he’s been fighting.

Kell’s struggle intensifies as he is dragged into a mental battle with Vitari, a malevolent magical entity seeking to possess him. The darkness manifests as a shadowy doppelgänger, revealing its intent to consume Kell’s body and soul. Vitari taunts Kell, asserting control over his heart and mind, while Kell resists, desperate to protect his brother Rhy, whose life is magically tied to his own. The confrontation is visceral, with Vitari’s hand literally gripping Kell’s heart, symbolizing the irreversible stakes of their struggle.

Meanwhile, Lila remains by Kell’s unconscious body, frantically trying to rouse him as his veins blacken and his condition worsens. She threatens drastic measures, like cutting off his hand to free him from the cursed stone, but her desperation underscores her loyalty. Her shouts reach Kell in his mental prison, reminding him of his bond with Rhy and reigniting his will to fight. This external connection becomes a lifeline, pulling Kell back from the brink of surrender.

In the final struggle, Kell recalls a magical command, "As Anasae," which could dispel Vitari. Though initially ineffective, Lila’s distant voice urges him to speak the words aloud. With immense effort, Kell fights to vocalize the command, even as Vitari’s grip tightens. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with Kell on the verge of either reclaiming his body or succumbing entirely to the darkness, leaving his fate—and Rhy’s—hanging

in the balance.

# Chapter 56: The Waiting King VI

The chapter depicts a catastrophic event in Red London as a dark magical force abruptly dissipates, leaving devastation in its wake. Across the city, individuals who had been touched by this magic—whether willingly or forcibly—collapse as the black flame within them extinguishes. The aftermath is gruesome, with some victims disintegrating into ash, others reduced to hollow shells, and a fortunate few surviving but left severely weakened. The magic's sudden disappearance creates a trail of death and suffering, highlighting its destructive power and the fragility of those who harbored it.

In the streets, the chaos is palpable as people stagger and fall, their bodies unable to withstand the magic's departure. The varying fates of the victims—ranging from complete annihilation to mere survival—underscore the unpredictable and merciless nature of the dark force. The imagery of crumbling ash and empty husks paints a vivid picture of the magic's consuming power, while the lucky few who survive are left gasping, their lives forever altered by the ordeal. This scene emphasizes the indiscriminate toll of the magic, affecting all who came into contact with it, regardless of their circumstances.

The palace is not spared, as the magic disguised as Gen meets its end just as it reaches the royal chambers. With his hand blackening on the door, the darkness within him dies, dragging him into oblivion. This moment signifies the abrupt cessation of the magic's influence, even at the highest levels of power. The suddenness of his demise suggests that no one, not even those closest to the throne, is immune to the magic's collapse, reinforcing the chapter's theme of inescapable consequences.

Far from the palace, in a secluded sanctuary, the prince of Red London lies motionless on a cot, his fate hanging in the balance. The candlelit room contrasts with the darkness that has just ravaged the city, yet his stillness hints at a possible connection

to the events unfolding elsewhere. This closing scene leaves the prince’s condition ambiguous, suggesting that the repercussions of the magic’s disappearance may extend beyond the immediate carnage, setting the stage for further developments in the story. The chapter ends on a somber note, leaving readers to ponder the broader implications of the tragedy.

# Chapter 57: The Final Door I

Kell awakens in a courtyard, disoriented and relieved to find the magical bond between himself and his brother Rhy still intact, despite the dissipation of the stone's power. The once-powerful talisman is now inert, and Kell's emotions swing from despair to relief as he confirms his survival. The aftermath of the battle surrounds him—corpses, shattered remnants of magic, and Lila, whose brief embrace hints at unspoken care. Their exchange is tinged with exhaustion and dark humor as they assess the situation, with Kell acknowledging that magic cannot be destroyed, only dispersed.

The focus shifts to Holland, the dying Antari, whom Kell attempts to save by using the remnants of the stone's magic to send him away. Despite Holland's near-lifeless state, Kell performs a ritual, invoking a portal that consumes both the Antari and the stone. The act is somber, a farewell to a broken adversary, and Kell is left grappling with disbelief at his own survival. His physical pain resurfaces, compounded by Rhy's shared wounds, forcing him to confront the urgency of escaping the now leaderless city before chaos erupts.

Kell and Lila face an uncertain future as they prepare to leave. The absence of the stone raises doubts about Lila's ability to cross worlds safely, and their conversation oscillates between practicality and fear. Lila, ever resilient, insists on attempting the journey despite the risks, showcasing her trademark defiance. Kell's concern for her safety is palpable, but he respects her determination, even as he braces for the possibility of failure. Their bond deepens in this moment of vulnerability, underscored by a fleeting kiss that Kell dismisses as "luck."

The chapter closes with Kell and Lila standing before a portal, their fate hanging in the balance. Kell's thoughts turn to home as he activates the magic, clinging to Lila in a protective embrace. The scene is charged with tension and hope, leaving their ultimate success uncertain. The narrative emphasizes themes of survival, sacrifice,

and the fragile trust between two flawed yet fiercely loyal companions as they step into the unknown.

# Chapter 58: The Final Door II

Kell returns to Red London, overwhelmed by relief at being home but devastated to find Lila missing. His despair turns to shock when she suddenly appears, alive and unharmed. Their reunion is brief but heartfelt, with Lila deflecting Kell’s amazement at her survival with her trademark stubbornness. The moment is cut short as they are ambushed by royal guards, forcing Kell to surrender despite Lila’s resistance, and they are taken to face the king and queen.

Bound and kneeling before King Maxim and Queen Emira, Kell confesses the truth about Astrid’s possession charm, the Dane twins’ plot, and the dangerous stone he sought to destroy. The rulers react with horror as Kell reveals he killed the Danes—with Lila’s help—and that the stone’s magic is now gone. Lila boldly asserts her role in saving the city, provoking the king’s suspicion about her origins, but Kell intervenes to obscure her true background.

Tensions rise as the queen desperately asks about their son, Rhy. Kell assures them Rhy is alive, hinting at a deeper connection between their lives. The king demands answers, and Kell explains he shared his life force to save Rhy, revealing a scar as proof. The queen gasps in realization, while the king’s anger gives way to cautious hope. Kell insists on their release, promising to bring Rhy home if they comply.

The chapter culminates in a fragile truce, with Kell and Lila’s fate hanging in the balance. Their bond is tested as they navigate the royal family’s grief and suspicion, while the stakes of their actions come to light. The emotional weight of Kell’s sacrifice and Lila’s defiance underscores the chapter’s tension, leaving their next steps uncertain as the confrontation reaches its climax.

# Chapter 59: The Final Door III

Kell visits his brother Rhy, who is recovering from a near-fatal injury in his meticulously restored room. Though the physical traces of the attack have been erased, Rhy's slow healing hints at the gravity of his condition—he had briefly died. The prince is irritable, mourning the loss of his trusted guards and chafing under the watchful eyes of his attendants. When Kell arrives, the room's occupants regard him with newfound wariness, reflecting the lingering tension after recent events.

Rhy dismisses his attendants, demanding privacy to confront Kell about the mysterious scar over his heart. Kell reveals he magically bound their lives together to save Rhy, ensuring they now share pain and survival. Horrified, Rhy initially reacts with anger but soon shifts to concern for the burden Kell has taken on. Their banter masks deeper emotions, and the conversation turns somber as Rhy confesses his guilt for trusting Holland and accepting a cursed necklace, driven by his insecurity about lacking magical prowess.

The brothers grapple with the consequences of their actions, acknowledging their mistakes could have doomed their kingdom. Rhy's vulnerability surfaces as he tearfully admits his fear of failing as a future king. Kell reassures him, emphasizing that strength lies in leadership, not magic. Their shared scars—physical and emotional—symbolize their unbreakable bond and the weight of their responsibilities. The mood lightens briefly as they jest about their recklessness, but the underlying tension remains.

The chapter concludes with Lila Bard's abrupt entrance, injecting energy into the scene. Her sharp wit and fearless demeanor charm Rhy, sparking playful flirtation despite his weakened state. Kell ushers her out, but not before Rhy expresses interest in seeing her again. The exchange provides momentary levity, though Kell's awareness of the lingering distrust in the palace hints at unresolved challenges ahead.

The chapter balances emotional depth with character dynamics, setting the stage for future conflicts.

# Chapter 60: The Final Door IV

Kell and Lila walk along the river, discussing her future as the sun sets. Kell offers to return her to her original London, but Lila refuses, stating there's nothing left for her there. Despite Kell's insistence that she doesn't belong in his world either, Lila remains determined to forge her own path. Their conversation reveals a mutual uncertainty about their futures, underscored by Lila's defiant question to Kell about whether he will find his way, to which he responds with tentative hope.

Kell gives Lila a small puzzle board as a gift, explaining it will help her practice magic, as Tieren believes she has potential. Their interaction is playful yet poignant, with Lila reluctantly thanking him. As they linger, Kell reflects on Lila's unpredictable nature—she is both a thief and a valiant partner, a fixed point in his ever-shifting world. The moment is charged with unspoken emotions, and Kell's final admonition for her to stay out of trouble is met with a smile that suggests she has no intention of doing so.

After parting ways, Lila embraces her newfound freedom, reveling in the possibilities ahead. She recalls the map she left behind in London, symbolizing her readiness to explore uncharted territories. Tieren's words about her untapped magic resonate with her, fueling her ambition to discover her abilities, whatever form they may take. Lila's determination is palpable as she declares the worlds hers for the taking, embodying a fierce independence and hunger for adventure.

Her attention turns to the ships docked along the river, each representing a potential journey. Among them, a striking dark ship with silver banners and night-colored sails catches her eye. With a smile, Lila decides it's the one she'll choose, symbolizing her readiness to seize the next chapter of her life. The chapter closes with Lila's unwavering confidence and Kell's lingering gaze as she walks away, never looking back, embodying her unshakable resolve to carve her own destiny.