

A DARKER SHADE OF MAGIC

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(an excerpt)

Kell wore a very peculiar coat.

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

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

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

Oh, kings, thought Kell as he fastened the buttons on the coat. He was starting to think like Rhy.

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

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

Windsor was not.

Impressive, to be sure. But not pleasant.

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

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

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

George III sat beside it, a robe dwarfing his withered frame and a tea tray untouched before his knees. When Kell came in, the king gripped the edges of his chair.

“Who’s there?” he called out without turning. “Robbers? Ghosts?”

“I don’t believe ghosts would answer, Your Majesty,” said Kell, announcing himself.

The ailing king broke into a rotting grin. “Master Kell,” he said. “You’ve kept me waiting.”

“No more than a month,” he said, stepping forward.

King George squinted his blind eyes. “It’s been longer, I’m sure.”

“I promise, it hasn’t.”

“Maybe not for you,” said the king. “But time isn’t the same for the mad and the blind.”

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

“Maybe it’s the year that has changed,” continued the king, “and not the month.”

“Ah, but the year is the same.”

“And what year is that?”

Kell’s brow furrowed. “Eighteen nineteen,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Roses," he said wistfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The queen did not refer to it as the red throne, or send greetings from Red London (even though the city was in fact quite crimson, thanks to the rich, pervasive light of the river), because she did not think of it that way. To her, and to everyone else who inhabited only one London, there was little need to differentiate among them. When the rulers of one conversed with those of another, they simply called them others, or neighbors, or on occasion (and particularly in regard to White London) less flattering terms.

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

Grey for the magic- less city.

Red, for the healthy empire.

White, for the starving world.

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

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

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

“Is that all it says?” he asked.

Kell hesitated. “No,” he said, folding the letter. “That’s only the beginning.”

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

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

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

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

“I don’t have a letter for her,” he murmured.

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

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

“I understand,” he said. “I’ll give the royal family your regards.”

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

“Wait, wait,” he said. “Come back.”

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

It was a coin.

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

“A coin is a coin, Your Majesty.”

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

Kell sighed. “You’ll get me in trouble.”

“Come, come,” said the king. “Our little secret.”

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

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

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

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

“Take care,” said Kell as he turned to go.

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

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

Kell’s blood, when paired with the token, allowed him to move between the worlds. He needn’t specify a place because wherever he was, that’s where he’d be.

But to make a door within a world, both sides had to be marked by the same exact symbol. Close wasn't close enough. Kell had learned that the hard way.

The symbol on the wall was still clear from his last visit, the edges only slightly smeared, but it didn't matter. It had to be redone.

He rolled up his sleeve and freed the knife he kept strapped to the inside of his forearm. It was a lovely thing, that knife, a work of art, silver from tip to hilt and monogrammed with the letters K and L.

The only relic from another life.

A life he didn't know. Or at least, didn't remember.

Kell brought the blade to the back of his forearm. He'd already carved one line today, for the door that brought him this far. Now he carved a second. His blood, a rich ruby red, welled up and over, and he returned the knife to its sheath and touched his fingers to the cut and then to the wall, redrawing the circle and the line that ran through it. Kell guided his sleeve down over the wound—he'd treat all the cuts once he was home—and cast a last glance back at the babbling king before pressing his palm flat to the mark on the wall.

It hummed with magic.

"As Tascen," he said. Transfer.

The patterned paper rippled and softened and gave way under his touch, and Kell stepped forward and through.

CHAPTER II

Between one stride and the next, dreary Windsor became elegant St. James. The stuffy cell of a room gave way to bright tapestries and polished silver, and the mad king's mumblings were replaced by a heavy quiet and a man sitting at the head of an ornate table, gripping a goblet of wine and looking thoroughly put out.

"You're late," observed the Prince Regent.

"Apologies," said Kell with a too-short bow. "I had an errand."

The Prince Regent set down his cup. "I thought I was your errand, Master Kell."

Kell straightened. "My orders, Your Highness, are to see to the king first."

“I wish you wouldn’t indulge him,” said the Prince Regent, whose name was also George (Kell found the Grey London habit of sons taking father’s names both redundant and confusing) with a dismissive wave of his hand. “It gets his spirits up.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Kell.

“For him, yes. He’ll be in a frenzy later. Dancing on the tables talking of magic and other Londons. What trick did you do for him this time? Convince him he could fly?”

Kell had only made that mistake once. He learned on his next visit that the King of England had nearly walked out a window. On the third floor. “I assure you I gave no demonstrations.”

Prince George pinched the bridge of his nose. “He cannot hold his tongue the way he used to. It’s why he is confined to quarters.”

“Imprisoned, then?”

Prince George ran his hand along the table’s gilded edge. “Windsor is a perfectly respectable place to be kept.”

A respectable prison is still a prison, thought Kell, withdrawing a second letter from his coat pocket. “Your correspondence.”

The prince forced him to stand there as he read the note (he never commented on the way it smelled of flowers), and then as he withdrew a half-finished reply from the inside pocket of his coat and completed it. He was clearly taking his time in an effort to spite Kell, but Kell didn’t mind. He occupied himself by drumming his fingers on the edge of the gilded table. Each time he made it from pinky to forefinger, one of the room’s many candles went out.

“Must be a draft,” he said absently while the Prince Regent’s grip tightened on his quill. By the time he finished the note, he’d broken two and was in a bad mood, while Kell found his own disposition greatly improved.

He held out his hand for the letter, but the Prince Regent did not give it to him. Instead, he pushed up from his table. “I’m stiff from sitting. Walk with me.”

Kell wasn't a fan of the idea, but since he couldn't very well leave empty-handed, he was forced to oblige. But not before pocketing the prince's latest unbroken quill from the table.

"Will you go straight back?" asked the prince as he led Kell down a hall to a discreet door half concealed by a curtain.

"Soon," said Kell, trailing by a stride. Two members of the royal guard had joined them in the hall and now slunk behind like shadows. Kell could feel their eyes on him, and he wondered how much they'd been told about their guest. The royals were always expected to know, but the understanding of those in their service was left to their discretion.

"I thought your only business was with me," said the prince.

"I'm a fan of your city," responded Kell lightly. "And what I do is draining. I'll go for a walk and get some air, then make my way back."

The prince's mouth was a thin grim line. "I fear the air is not as replenishing here in the city as in the countryside. What is it you call us... Grey London? These days that is far too apt a name. Stay for dinner." The prince ended nearly every sentence with a period. Even the questions. Rhy was the same way, and Kell thought it must simply be a by-product of never being told no.

"You'll fare better here," pressed the prince. "Let me revive you with wine and company."

It seemed a kind enough offer, but the Prince Regent didn't do things out of kindness.

"I cannot stay," said Kell.

"I insist. The table is set."

And who is coming? wondered Kell. What did the prince want? To put him on display? Kell often suspected that he would like to do as much, if for no other reason than that the younger George found secrets cumbersome, preferring spectacle. But for all his faults, the prince wasn't a fool, and only a fool would give someone like Kell a chance to stand out. Grey London had forgotten magic long ago. Kell wouldn't be the one to remind them of it.

“A lavish kindness, your highness, but I am better left a specter than made a show.” Kell tipped his head so that his copper hair tumbled out of his eyes, revealing not only the crisp blue of the left one but the solid black of the right. A black that ran edge to edge, filling white and iris both. There was nothing human about that eye. It was pure magic. The mark of a blood magician. Of an Antari.

Kell relished what he saw in the Prince Regent’s eyes when they tried to hold Kell’s gaze. Caution, discomfort... and fear.

“Do you know why our worlds are kept separate, Your Highness?” He didn’t wait for the prince to answer. “It is to keep yours safe. You see, there was a time, ages ago, when they were not so separate. When doors ran between your world and mine, and others, and anyone with a bit of power could pass through. Magic itself could pass through. But the thing about magic,” added Kell, “is that it preys on the strong-minded and the weakwilled, and one of the worlds couldn’t stop itself. The people fed on the magic and the magic fed on them until it ate their bodies and their minds and then their souls.”

“Black London,” whispered the Prince Regent.

Kell nodded. He hadn’t given that city its color mark. Everyone—at least everyone in Red London and White, and those few in Grey who knew anything at all—knew the legend of Black London. It was a bedtime story. A fairy tale. A warning. Of the city—and the world—that wasn’t, anymore.

“Do you know what Black London and yours have in common, Your Highness?” The Prince Regent’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t interrupt. “Both lack temperance,” said Kell. “Both hunger for power. The only reason your London still exists is because it was cut off. It learned to forget. You do not want it to remember.” What Kell didn’t say was that Black London had a wealth of magic in its veins, and Grey London hardly any; he wanted to make a point. And by the looks of it, he had. This time, when he held out his hand for the letter, the prince didn’t refuse, or even resist. Kell tucked the parchment into his pocket along with the stolen quill.

“Thank you, as ever, for your hospitality,” he said, offering an exaggerated bow.

The Prince Regent summoned a guard with a single snap of his fingers. “See that Master Kell gets where he is going.” And then, without another word, he turned and strode away.

The royal guards left Kell at the edge of the park. St. James Palace loomed behind him. Grey London lay ahead. He took a deep breath and tasted smoke on the air. As eager as he was to get back home, he had some business to attend to, and after dealing with the king's ailments and the prince's attitude, Kell could use a drink. He brushed off his sleeves, straightened his collar, and set out toward the heart of the city.

His feet carried him through St. James Park, down an ambling dirt path that ran beside the river. The sun was setting, and the air was crisp if not clean, a fall breeze fluttering the edges of his black coat. He came upon a wooden footbridge that spanned the stream, and his boots sounded softly as he crossed it. Kell paused at the arc of the bridge, Buckingham House lantern-lit behind him and the Thames ahead. Water sloshed gently under the wooden slats, and he rested his elbows on the rail and stared down at it. When he flexed his fingers absently, the current stopped, the water stilling, smooth as glass, beneath him.

He considered his reflection.

"You're not that handsome," Rhy would say whenever he caught Kell gazing into a mirror.

"I can't get enough of myself," Kell would answer, even though he was never looking at himself—not all of himself anyway—only his eye. His right one. Even in Red London, where magic flourished, the eye set him apart. Marked him always as other.

A tinkling laugh sounded off to Kell's right, followed by a grunt, and a few other, less distinct noises, and the tension went out of his hand, the stream surging back into motion beneath him. He continued on until the park gave way to the streets of London, and then the looming form of Westminster. Kell had a fondness for the abbey, and he nodded to it, as if to an old friend. Despite the city's soot and dirt, its clutter and its poor, it had something Red London lacked: a resistance to change. An appreciation for the enduring, and the effort it took to make something so.

How many years had it taken to construct the abbey? How many more would it stand? In Red London, tastes turned as often as seasons, and with them, buildings went up and came down and went up again in different forms. Magic made things simple. Sometimes, thought Kell, it made things too simple.

There had been nights back home when he felt like he went to bed in one place and woke up in another.

But here, Westminster Abbey always stood, waiting to greet him.

He made his way past the towering stone structure, through the streets, crowded with carriages, and down a narrow road that hugged the dean's yard, walled by mossy stone. The narrow road grew narrower still before it finally stopped in front of a tavern.

And here Kell stopped, too, and shrugged out of his coat. He turned it once more from right to left, exchanging the black affair with silver buttons for a more modest, street-worn look: a brown high-collared jacket with fraying hems and scuffed elbows. He patted the pockets and, satisfied that he was ready, went inside.

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