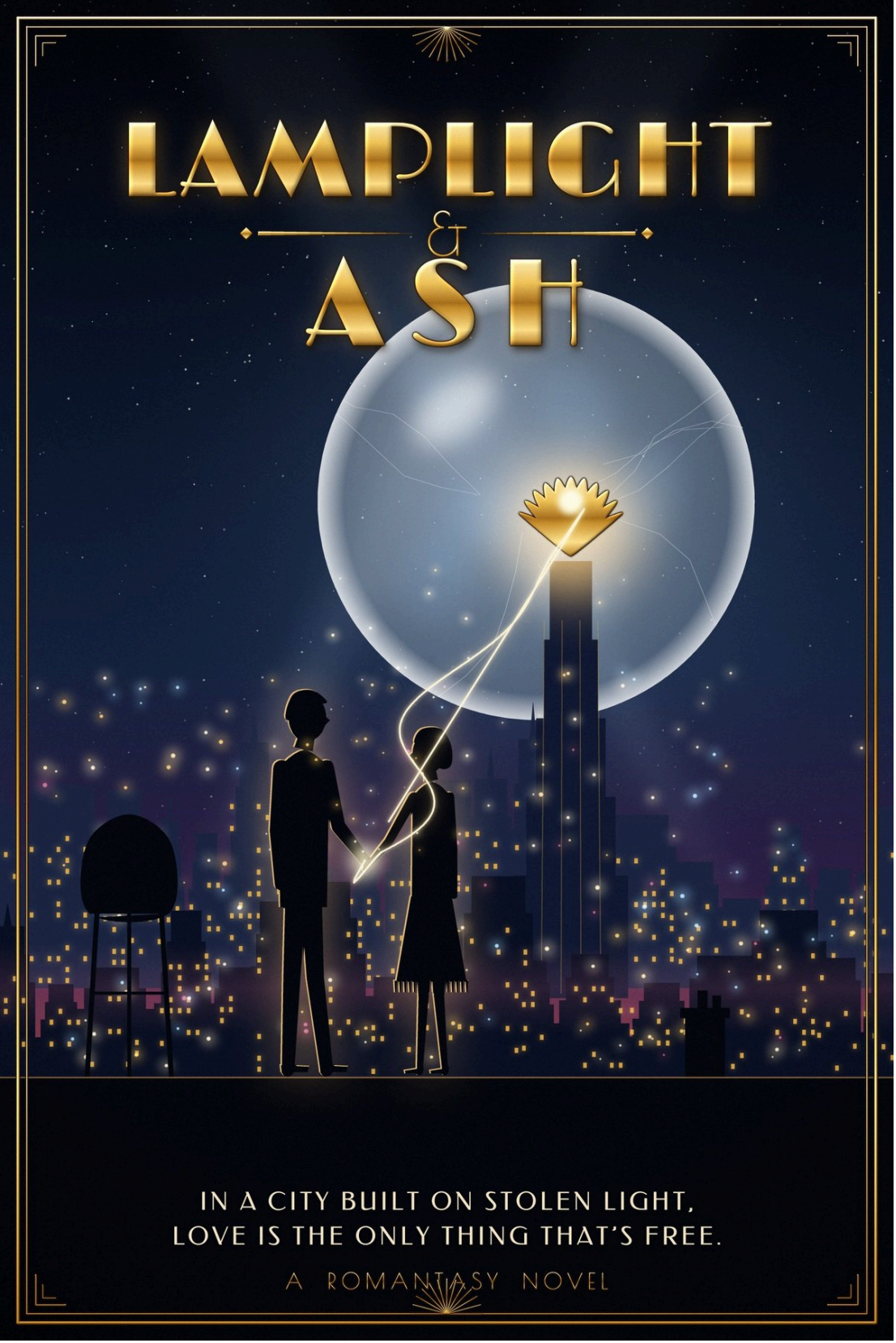

LAMPLIGHT
&
ASH
IN A CITY BUILT ON STOLEN LIGHT,
LOVE IS THE ONLY THING THAT'S FREE.
A ROMANTASY NOVEL

LAMPLIGHT & ASH

A romantasy novel, illustrated

SJ Mohamed

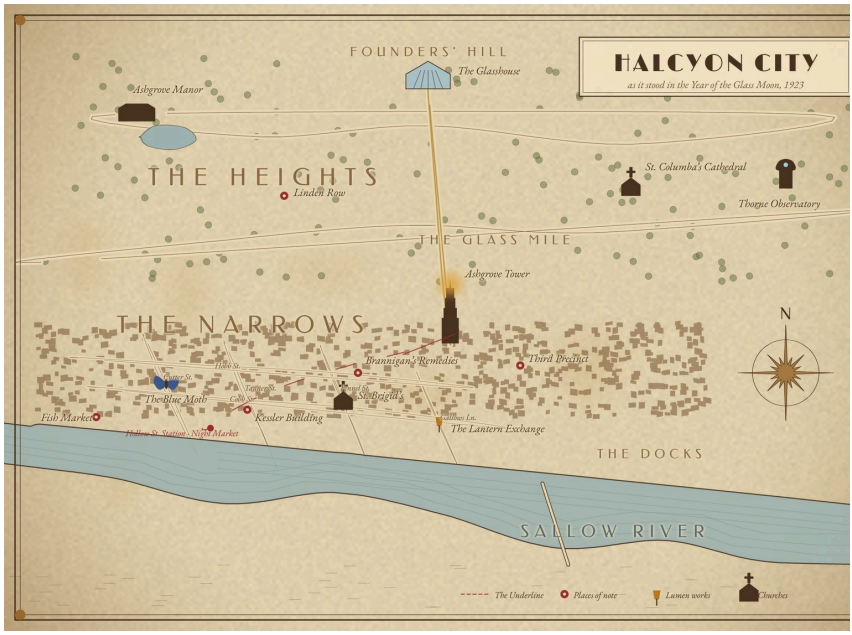
FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTERS 1 TO 3

ABOUT THE BOOK

Halcyon City, 1923. The rich live in a blaze of golden light. The poor live in its shadow. Clementine Doyle sells cigarettes in a Narrows speakeasy and hides a forbidden gift: she can mend anything that's broken. Julian Ashgrove is heir to the family whose lamps light the whole city, and the keeper of a secret that could ruin them. One stolen pocket watch binds them together with a thread of magic neither can break. Then they discover what the city's light is really made of, and that it is being drained from the people of the Narrows. Before the Glass Moon rises on New Year's Eve, a cigarette girl and a millionaire's son must risk everything: their hearts, their lives, and the light of forty thousand souls.

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This free sample holds the first 3 of the novel's 51 chapters.

MAP OF HALCYON CITY



PART ONE

The Theft



CHAPTER 1

The Blue Moth

Clem

The rich always came to the Narrows the same way—like tourists visiting a shipwreck.

They came down Cutter Street in their long coats with the collars turned up, as though a bit of wool could hide the shine on their shoes. They knocked three times on the laundry door, whispered *the moon is low* to Big Sully's eye at the grate, and stepped down into the Blue Moth as if they'd discovered something dangerous. Then they ordered gin they could have bought better in their own cellars, drank glimmer they'd have had arrested on their own streets, and went home before dawn feeling they'd touched the edge of the world.

I didn't mind. The rich tipped in silver.

"Cigarettes, cigars, chewing gum," I sang, sliding between the tables with my tray strapped tight against my hips. "Lucky Strikes for the lucky, Chesterfields for the brave."

Smoke curled blue under the low ceiling. On the little stage, Ruby Fontaine leaned into the microphone like she was telling it a secret, and her voice came out like warm honey poured over a bruise. The band behind her was three tired men and a trumpet that had seen better decades, but when Ruby sang, nobody noticed. Couples crowded the dance floor, shimmying the Charleston in a cloud of beads and laughter. At the bar, Moth Malone polished glasses with a rag older than me and watched everything with the patience of a man who'd survived the war, two raids and a wife.

And in the corner booth, alone, sat the most expensive thing I had ever seen.

He was young—twenty-five, maybe twenty-six—with hair the colour of old gold and a face that looked like it had been carved for a coin. His coat hung open over a dinner jacket that cost more than our whole tenement. A silver flask sat beside his glass, as if the Blue Moth's gin had insulted him. He wasn't dancing. He wasn't laughing. He was watching Ruby sing with the stillness of a man trying very hard not to feel anything.

But it wasn't his face that caught me. It was the chain.

A gold watch chain looped from his waistcoat pocket, heavy and old-fashioned, the kind grandfathers wore. Gold like that didn't just mean money. It meant *medicine*. It meant Dr. Feld's tonic, the good kind, the kind that came in brown bottles from the Heights and actually eased Teddy's chest for a week at a time.

I adjusted my tray and walked over.

"Cigarette, mister?"

He looked up. His eyes were grey-blue, like the river just before a storm, and for one strange second they seemed to look straight through my powder and my painted smile to the girl underneath who'd been awake since five that morning.

"I don't smoke," he said.

"Then you're in the wrong establishment."

The corner of his mouth moved. It wasn't quite a smile. "Is that so?"

"Everybody here has a vice. That's the price of admission." I tapped the tray. "Gum, then. Keeps your breath sweet for the ride home to wherever it is you're pretending not to be from."

That got a real laugh—short, surprised, as though it had escaped without permission. "And where would that be?"

"Uptown. The Heights. Somewhere with a lawn." I nodded at his shoes. "Nobody in the Narrows has shoes that clean. The mud here's got ambition."

"Perhaps I'm a very tidy pauper."

"Perhaps I'm the Queen of Sheba."

He leaned back, studying me with new interest. “All right, Your Majesty. What gave me away? Besides the shoes.”

Your watch, I thought. *Your teeth. The way you look at this room like it’s a painting you can walk out of whenever you like.* Out loud I said, “You’re drinking alone in the best booth and you haven’t noticed that the man at the bar in the brown hat has been staring at you since you walked in.”

His eyes flicked to the bar, quick as a card trick, and back. Something sharpened in his face. “Ah.”

“Friend of yours?”

“My father’s, possibly. He has a lot of friends in brown hats.” He reached into his coat and set a silver dollar on my tray, far too much for a packet of gum. “For the warning.”

I let my fingers brush his as I took it—an old trick, a small distraction. The touch went through me like a struck match. Not the usual flutter a handsome face could give a girl. Something *deeper*, a tug under my ribs, the same feeling I got right before I mended a cracked cup or a split seam: the itch of something broken, asking to be made whole.

I pulled my hand back.

He was looking at his own fingers as though he’d felt it too.

“What’s your name?” he asked quietly.

I should have said something clever. Instead, I said, “Clem.”

“Clem.” He tried it like a new word. “I’m—”

He never finished.

Somewhere above us, out on Cutter Street, a whistle shrieked. Then another. Then the sound every soul in the Narrows knew better than their own mother’s voice: the deep, metallic chime of a brass lantern being struck three times.

Lamplighters.

The music died mid-note. Ruby’s hand froze on the microphone. For half a heartbeat, the whole Blue Moth held its breath—and then everyone moved at once. Chairs scraped. Glasses smashed. Somebody

screamed. Moth Malone vaulted the bar with a speed that didn't fit his size and began swinging the hidden shelf open behind the gin barrels.

"Back way!" he roared. "Move, move, *move*!"

Prohibition agents, you could bribe. Police, you could outrun. But Lamplighters didn't come for the gin. They came for the glimmer—and for anyone in the room with an unlicensed spark of magic in their blood.

Anyone like me.

The laundry door at the top of the stairs burst inward with a crack like a rifle shot. Cold air rushed down, and with it came the light: a hard, unnatural blue that turned everyone's faces into corpses. Men in long black coats poured down the stairs, brass lanterns raised high, their glass panes swirling with something alive.

At their head stood a tall man with a ruined cheek and eyes like nails. Captain Harlan Voss. Every child in the Narrows learned his name before they learned to read.

"Nobody move," Voss said, and he didn't even have to shout. "Bureau of Lumen Enforcement. By authority of the Lumen Act of 1919, every person in this room will submit to inspection."

He lifted his lantern.

The flame inside it turned, slowly, like a compass needle hunting for north. It slid past the dancers, past the band, past Ruby frozen on her stage. It hesitated over the golden stranger in the corner booth.

And then it swung toward me—and blazed so bright that the whole room went white.

CHAPTER 2

The Watch

Clem

For a single, endless second, I was the only thing in the Blue Moth anyone could see.

The seeker lantern roared blue-white, its glass rattling in Voss's fist. Every face turned toward me. I felt my magic curl up inside me like a frightened cat, but it was too late. The lantern had tasted it.

"*There*," Voss breathed.

Then a hand closed around my wrist.

"Is there a back way out, Miss?" the golden stranger said, close to my ear—calm, pleasant, as though asking for directions to the theatre.

I didn't think. I ran.

I dragged him behind the bar just as Moth Malone kicked over a table of glimmer bottles. They shattered across the floor and the cheap magic inside burst up in a shower of glittering smoke, a hundred tiny fireworks that sent the Lamplighters' lanterns spinning wildly, confused by so much loose light. Voss shouted something. A shot cracked into the ceiling.

"In!" Moth shoved us toward the gap behind the gin barrels. "Clem, the tunnel. Go."

"Ruby—"

"I've got Ruby. Go!"

The shelf swung shut behind us and the world went black.

The tunnel beneath the Blue Moth had been dug by rum-runners long before Prohibition made it fashionable. It smelled of wet stone, old whiskey and rats. I knew it by touch—twenty paces straight, duck under the beam, left at the cold patch where the river seeped

through. I kept hold of the stranger's hand and pulled him on. His breathing was quick and rough behind me, and once I heard him stumble and swear in a way that would have shocked his mother.

"Where does this come out?" he whispered.

"Hollis Alley. Behind the fish market."

"Charming."

"You'll love it. Very exclusive."

He laughed under his breath—actually *laughed*, with Lamplighters at our heels—and I didn't know whether that made him brave or a fool. In my experience, rich men were often both.

We came up through a rusted grate into the alley. Rain was falling, thin and cold, turning the cobblestones to oil. Fish guts and wet cardboard. The glow of a single gas lamp at the far end. Freedom, for about four seconds.

Then boots pounded at the mouth of the alley, and a blue light swung across the wall.

They'd guessed the exit. Of course they had.

There was nowhere to go. The alley was a dead end of brick and broken crates. I pressed back against the wall, heart slamming, my magic thrashing inside me so hard I was sure the lanterns would find it through the stone.

"Listen to me," the stranger said quickly. "Do you trust me?"

"I don't even know your *name*."

"Excellent. Then you've nothing to lose." And before I could argue, he pulled off his fine hat, tossed it into the gutter, ruffled his own hair, and took my face in both his hands.

"What are you—"

He kissed me.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It wasn't meant to be. It was a show, a performance for the men at the end of the alley—the sloppy, desperate kiss of a drunk swell and a cheap girl he'd paid for. He pressed me into the bricks and tilted my head so his body hid my face, and I understood the game in a flash and played my part. I slid my

arms around his neck. I laughed against his mouth like a girl who'd had too much gin.

And somewhere under the act, something *real* sparked.

That same tug under my ribs. That same strange pull, as though some broken piece inside him was calling to the thing inside me that fixed things. His hands were shaking very slightly against my jaw. I don't think he knew it.

Blue light washed over us. Footsteps slowed.

"Disgusting," a voice muttered. "Bloody uptown boys."

"Leave 'em. The girl went toward the river."

The light swung away. The boots faded. The rain kept falling.

He pulled back slowly. For a moment neither of us moved. His forehead nearly touched mine, and his eyes in the dark were not amused anymore.

"I apologise," he said, a little hoarsely. "That was—"

"Effective," I said.

"I was going to say *ungentlemanly*."

"In the Narrows, that's a compliment." I stepped around him, smoothing my dress, my cheeks hot despite the cold. "Head east, then north at the market. Take a cab from Bridge Street. Don't come back here, mister. The Narrows is no place for tourists."

"Clem—wait. At least let me—"

But I was already gone, running through the rain with my heart beating in my ears and something cold and heavy pressing against my thigh in the deep pocket of my skirt.

His watch.

I'd lifted it while my arms were round his neck. Old habits. Necessary ones.

• • •

Home was two rooms on the fourth floor of the Kessler Building on Tanner Street, where the stairs groaned like old men and the walls

were thin enough to hear the neighbours dreaming. I climbed them two at a time and let myself in quietly.

Teddy was asleep on the cot by the stove, curled around his sketchbook. He was eleven and small for it, all elbows and freckles, with a cowlick that refused to be tamed by spit, water or prayer. In the dim light his lips looked faintly grey.

As I closed the door, he coughed—a deep, wet, rattling sound that seemed too big for his narrow chest. I froze, waiting. He coughed again, and a fine grey dust misted the air in front of his mouth, glittering faintly before it faded.

Grey lung. The sickness of the Narrows. It had taken our mother two years ago. It took somebody on our street every month. The rich called it a disease of poverty—bad air, bad water, bad habits. Dr. Feld said nobody truly knew what caused it.

I knew only that the tonic from the Heights slowed it, and that the tonic cost four dollars a bottle.

I sat at the table and pulled the watch from my pocket.

It was beautiful. Heavy gold, warm from my body, engraved with a pattern of tiny vines and moons. But when I held it to my ear, it was silent. Broken. The glass over the face was cracked in a starburst, and the hands were frozen at seven minutes to midnight.

I pressed the catch, and the case sprang open.

Inside the lid was a small photograph of a woman with kind, laughing eyes and dark hair piled high in the old fashion. And beneath it, engraved in delicate letters:

For J. — Mend what they break. — Your mother, E.

Mend.

I stared at the word. The rain drummed on the window. Teddy coughed in his sleep.

And as my thumb brushed across the cracked glass, the broken watch pulsed in my palm like a living heart—and my magic rose up to meet it with a hunger I had never, ever felt before.



CHAPTER 3

Hollow

Julian

I woke up in my own bed with no memory of getting there, which was not unusual, and with the taste of a stranger's lipstick still on my mouth, which was.

Morning light came through the tall windows of my room at Ashgrove Manor in long golden bars, falling across the Persian rug and the silver breakfast tray someone had left by the door. Lumen sconces glowed softly on the walls, though it was daylight—my father liked the house lit at all hours, the way other men liked flags flown. The Ashgrove name was written in light. Literally. It was on every lamp in the city.

My head throbbed. I lay still and let the night come back to me in pieces.

The Blue Moth. The singer with the voice like smoke. The girl with the tray and the freckles and the mouth that had told me exactly what I was within ninety seconds of meeting me. Lamplighters. A tunnel. Rain. An alley. Her face in my hands.

Clem.

I sat up too quickly and regretted it.

I had kissed girls before. Rather a lot of them, if the society pages were to be believed, and they mostly were. But I had never kissed one in a fish alley to save her from arrest, and I had never felt anything like the jolt that went through me when I did—a strange deep pull, like a hook catching somewhere behind my breastbone.

Probably the gin. The Narrows gin could strip paint.

I swung my legs out of bed, reached automatically for my waistcoat on the chair, and slid my fingers into the watch pocket.

Empty.

I checked it again. I checked the other pocket, my coat, my trousers, the floor, the bed, the sheets, under the bed, the breakfast tray, and finally the inside of my own skull, in case I'd left it there. Nothing.

My mother's watch was gone.

I sat down hard on the edge of the bed.

It didn't work. It hadn't worked in seven years, not since the night she fell. It had been returned to me in a little velvet bag by a police sergeant who couldn't meet my eyes, its glass cracked and its hands frozen at seven minutes to midnight—the minute she died. Watchmakers all over the city had tried to repair it. Not one of them could even get the back open. *It's sealed, Mr. Ashgrove. Some kind of trick mechanism. I'm sorry.*

I'd carried it anyway. Every day. Through France, through the mud and the gas and the screaming. Through every party since. It was the only thing of hers my father hadn't locked away.

And a cigarette girl in the Narrows had lifted it from my pocket while I was kissing her.

I started to laugh. I couldn't help it. It was either that or put my fist through the window.

"Clever girl," I said to the empty room. "Very clever girl."

• • •

Breakfast with my father was served in the east dining room at eight precisely, because Augustus Ashgrove believed time was money and money was God.

He was already seated when I came down, reading the *Halcyon Herald* behind a fortress of silver coffee pots. Fifty-eight years old and still built like the boxer he'd been at Yale, with a silver moustache trimmed to military precision and eyes that had never once in my

memory looked at me with warmth. Lumen glowed in the chandelier above him and in the rings on his fingers. When he turned the page, the paper rustled like a threat.

"You were in the Narrows last night," he said without looking up.

"Good morning, Father. I slept wonderfully, thank you."

"Hendricks saw you go into a gin joint on Cutter Street. An hour later, it was raided by the Bureau." The paper lowered an inch. "I trust you weren't photographed."

So the man in the brown hat had been his. Of course. "I left before it got exciting."

"See that you continue to leave before it gets exciting." He folded the paper with a crisp snap. "The Season Opening Gala is on Saturday. The Thornes will be there. Cornelius and I have agreed that your engagement to Vivienne will be announced at midnight."

I had known it was coming. Everyone in the Heights had known it was coming for two years. It still landed like a stone in my stomach.

"How romantic," I said. "Will there be a contract to sign, or just a handshake?"

"There will be the House Trials."

The words fell into the silence like ice into a glass.

Every year, at the Season Opening, the heirs of the great Lumen Houses demonstrated their magic for the city's elite. It was tradition. It was theatre. It was proof—proof that the old bloodlines were still bright, that the families who held the lumen licences deserved them. Every heir lit something. Every heir shone.

Every heir except me.

Because I was hollow.

Born without a spark. Not weak—*empty*. The rarest thing in a magical bloodline and the most shameful. My father had discovered it when I was an infant, and for twenty-six years the secret had been kept the way only an Ashgrove could keep a secret: with money, with fear, and with tiny glass vials of refined lumen sewn into my cuffs,

which I cracked between my fingers at the right moment so that the light seemed to come from me.

A trick. A lie. My whole life was a parlour trick.

"I'll have Pell prepare the vials," my father said, rising. "Double strength. The Thornes will be watching closely. Do not embarrass me, Julian." He paused at the door. "And for God's sake, stay out of the Narrows."

• • •

I did not stay out of the Narrows.

I spent the day pretending not to look for her, which meant I spent it looking for her: driving my Packard slowly along Cutter Street, tipping newsboys to ask after a cigarette girl named Clem, sitting in a café opposite the boarded-up laundry where the Blue Moth had been. Nobody knew anything. The Narrows had closed around her like water.

By nightfall, I was back in my room with a bottle and a headache, staring out at the lights of the city.

The clock on the mantel began to strike midnight.

On the twelfth stroke, my right hand began to burn.

Not with pain—with *heat*. I looked down and saw light pouring from my palm. Not the borrowed glow of a cracked vial. Real light, gold and alive, spilling between my fingers like sunlight through water.

I had never made light in my life.

And as I stared at it, something pulled hard behind my breastbone—a thread, invisible and taut, drawing me south across the dark city. Toward the river. Toward the Narrows.

Toward her.

That is the end of the free chapters.

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