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*A Gathering of Shadows*, round 18  
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Dear Victoria,

Thank you for allowing me to work on *A Gathering of Shadows*. I'm very impressed with how far it's come; you and my colleague clearly put a lot of work into this manuscript. She's briefed me on the general direction of the edits thus far, and I'm pleased to say that I have a few ideas of how to fully realize the book's potential.

Overall, *Gathering* feels like a true sequel to *A Darker Shade of Magic*. Lila, Kell, and Rhy are well-characterized and have interesting arcs that build upon their experiences in *Darker Shade*. The larger world of Arnes no longer feels like a formless frontier. I appreciate the time devoted to explaining the magic system; *Darker Shade* lacked a thorough explanation, but the system is well detailed in *Gathering*. I was pleased to see a few background characters from *Darker Shade* develop into more significant (though still minor) characters, including the king and queen of Arnes. There's great worldbuilding in *Gathering*, and it sets the stage for book three quite well.

My comments below concern the pace of the story, dialogue, and verisimilitude of characters. I've written a summary of the novel so you know how I view the A-plot. With these suggestions, the story will feel smoother to the reader—and the impact on the reader will be that much greater.

## Structure

### *Pacing*

My biggest issue with the manuscript is its pace. The opening section contains a good amount of exposition and backstory, but Lila's impulsiveness and quick-thinking carry the exposition, and the reader barely notices it. The second section—devoted to Kell—contains fewer flashbacks but moves more slowly due to Kell's contemplative and conflicted personality. (That's not an issue, but an observation.) After those two sections, however, the story sags. Section three in particular could use some cutting to keep the reader's attention. The black market scenes illuminate the relationship between Lila and Emery, but are ultimately irrelevant to the plot. Similarly, Kell's visit to Grey London takes too long; the scene with George IV gives context for Kell's restlessness, but George IV is unimportant to the larger story.

Section three is the second-longest section in the book, but it doesn't need to be. I suggest trimming it by 2,500 words. Section seven also drags on; a full 16,000 words of the manuscript are devoted to what happens the day before the tournament. Nothing specific jumps out at me as taking too long, so here, I would suggest trimming another 2,500 words throughout the section.

### *Changing a Point-of-View Character*

Much like *Darker Shade*, *Gathering* is a story that benefits from multiple point-of-view characters. Lila shines in her POV chapters, and I expect readers will be pleased to spend more time with her. Similarly, readers will enjoy the chapters from Rhy’s point of view, as we didn’t get any chapters from his perspective in *Darker Shade*. His POV adds dimension to Kell’s otherwise straightforward arc. Between the three of them, the Red London storyline feels rounded and complete (if at times overworked).

The White London “storyline,” on the other hand, is sparse; of the ten sections into which *Gathering* is divided, only two-thirds have chapters occurring in White London. And those few are divided further between two equally interesting characters, Holland and Ojka. Readers will be less invested in the White London story if it’s split between two points of view. While Ojka allows for a slow reveal of Holland’s status as new king of White London, her chapters feel just that: slow. Changing all of the White London chapters into Holland-based chapters would keep the reader rooted when jumping between worlds. It would also give us a chance to delve into his character, which we couldn’t do in *Darker Shade*.

### *Lila’s Flashbacks with Emery*

During the tournament arc, Lila has vivid flashbacks of her training sessions with Emery. Two of these flashbacks occur during her matches—the other one happens when she’s kidnapped—and all three are set off from the rest of the text with italics. There are two problems with this: the use of italics pulls the reader out from the narrative, and the placement of the flashbacks slows down what would otherwise be fast-paced action scenes.

I understand the logic behind the placement: The flashback scenes occur when Lila is trying her hardest to focus. In doing so, she recalls memories of Emery’s lessons. Those memories “unlock” her magic and force her to act. That said, there are other ways to create stillness in a narrative without pulling the reader out of the present. In fact, when Lila is kidnapped in 9-IV, she approaches such a stillness in the present:

Panic. More panic. Clawing panic.

She closed her eyes, and swallowed, and tried again.

And again.

And again.

The clipped sentences followed by a complex sentence and the repeated “and again” mimic Lila’s slowing heart, and lull the reader while at once conveying Lila’s struggle. But then the narrative dips into the past and yanks the reader out of this pivotal moment. Thus far, Lila has used brute force to get what she wants (more on that in the “Narrative” section). If the flashback with Emery were recalled by Lila in a few laborious lines without jumping into the past, this scene would become one of the most memorable in the book—and it would also give Lila some much-needed character growth.

The other two flashbacks, as I mentioned above, occur during tournament matches. It doesn't make sense for Lila to recall these flashbacks during moments of such high tension. To maintain the high-speed, high-stakes pace of the fight scenes, these flashbacks should be converted into moments of stillness happening in the present day rather than intact memories. The first flashback, in 8-V, could be summed up thusly: "Emery had said magic was like the ocean, and that magicians let the waves pass through them. 'Magic is in everything,' he said; 'it's like a conversation. Question and answer, call and response.' Lila took a steadying breath..." and we're again in the present.

## Language

### *Rhy vs. Emery in Dialogue*

Though Rhy and Emery are quite different characters, their dialogue sounds very similar. Both are slightly sarcastic, exasperated, and playful. Take a look at the following lines of dialogue from different parts of the book:

"My excursions were fairly innocuous compared to yours."

"We both know you're the prettiest boy at the ball."

"Who knows, maybe someone will even beat you fairly."

"It's a nickname. Surely they have those, wherever you're from."

Which lines are Rhy's? Emery's? A casual reader interacting with those lines would probably have no way of knowing who spoke which line. (Rhy spoke the middle two; Emery, the outer two.) Both Emery and Rhy have a dry wit, and they're both quick to use it regardless of the situation. They grew up in similar social spheres, but Emery has been out of the royal circle for years, and would likely go to great lengths to conceal whatever trace of royal dialect he has. Perhaps he "dumbs down" his language, but slips back into the royal dialect when he's angry? Or maybe Rhy has been taught more political intrigue than Emery has, and his language reflects that? Maybe one relies on sarcasm when he's upset, while the other one becomes crass. Regardless, they should each have a distinct voice—of course they can sound similar, but they shouldn't sound identical.

### *The Arnesian Language*

We didn't get to see much of the Arnesian language in *Darker Shade*, and I'm pleased at the inclusion of more words and phrases in *Gathering*. I do wonder, though, why Arnesian follows the same structure as English. When Lila and Emery first meet, Emery says, "*Ta vasar mas eran gast*," which translates directly to "You killed my best thief." On the one hand, the parallel structure makes creating Arnesian words easy for you, the writer. But on the other hand, it could leave perceptive readers wondering how the two languages developed such similar grammar.

Additionally, I found some possible inconsistencies with the language. At different points in the story, the words “*ta*,” “*tan*,” and “*tav*” are translated to “you.” I suspect *ta* is the subject-you, while *tan* is the object-you, but what does *tav* mean? Readers go crazy with language: avid *Game of Thrones* fans discovered a few inconsistencies in the foreign languages. Readers will surely pick up on these discrepancies in Arnesian—provided they’re discrepancies in the first place. If they are, please fix them.

Side note: Can we have a dictionary to Arnesian in the back of the book? You do a good job introducing singular Arnesian words followed by phrases further in the story, but adding a dictionary would allow you more room to explore the interplay between the languages. And readers would love it.

## Narrative

### *Summary*

Four months after Delilah and Kell part ways in Red London, Lila finds herself in the employ of Alucard Emery, a privateer and one of the most infamous magicians in Arnes. In exchange for aiding and conducting complicated heists, Emery teaches Lila how to use magic. Meanwhile, Kell and Prince Rhy plan an international magical tournament, called the *Essen Tasch*, to demonstrate the unhindered vitality of Red London and forge stronger alliances with its neighboring countries.

Kell is restless; after the Black Night, the king and queen take great pains to protect him and the prince. Rhy convinces Kell to masquerade as a powerful newcomer in the *Essen Tasch*. Emery also joins the tournament, and at the last minute, Lila assumes a fake identity and enters as well. Kell grows to depend on the *Essen Tasch* matches to relieve his stress and agitation, while Lila displays her newfound aptitude for magic. Emery wins the tournament after four rounds.

At the end of *Gathering*, a powerful and mysterious magician appears in Red London and convinces Kell to return with her to White London, a parallel—and until recently, a dying—world. Kell accepts. *Gathering* ends with Lila attempting to traverse between worlds, an act that she, as a novice mage, should be incapable of performing.

### *Consequences for Characters*

Lila, who very much played second-fiddle to Kell in *Darker Shade*, demands the reader’s attention in *Gathering* and is at the forefront of the story. As a character, she’s sharp, funny, and vivid; but her arc feels incomplete. She sets herself on an upward trajectory, developing her magical abilities, taking greater and greater risks—but she never faces the consequences of her actions. As a result, she doesn’t mature.

In 10-IV, Kell says, “Why am I the only one in this fucking world to be held accountable for my actions?” When Kell makes a mistake, he’s immediately punished. Lila faces no such repercussions. Emery—and once he finds out about her plan, Kell—repeatedly tells Lila that she’s going to be caught and punished for pretending to be a tournament participant. But she’s never punished, and the person who does “catch” her chooses not to take her to the authorities.

Even when she’s kidnapped, she quite literally murders her way back to safety: After killing her three kidnappers on their boat, she somehow manages to leave their below-deck quarters in

full daylight and walk from the docks to the tournament arena. Someone—probably a crew member who knew she was their prisoner—would bother to question her. If someone did stop her, she'd be late to her tournament match against Kell, which would cascade into dire consequences for most of the Red London characters.

But, this would alter the plot too much this late in the process. Instead, Emery could vocally oust her from his crew and refuse to help her when he learns of her plan; this would rid Lila of her support system and put more pressure on her. Or, Lila could be seriously wounded in the tournament, which would put her secret at risk when whoever treats her injuries realizes she's not who she says she is. The goal here is to hold Lila accountable for her actions and force her to mature, like Kell has.

### *Prison Scene in Section Ten*

Speaking of Kell, he's come a long way since *Darker Shade*. He's learned that he can't think only of himself anymore; Rhy will quite literally die if Kell makes enough mistakes. You did a great job slowly revealing Kell's self-loathing and guilt, which influence his decision to go to White London. For the most part, Kell reads as a well-formed, realistic character. However, there was one scene that seemed out of place: the prison scene in section ten.

In 10-VI, King Maxim arrests Kell for disobeying him and leaving Red London. The scenes from Kell's point of view in the prison account for about 1,100 words—not very much at all—and while the scene allows King Maxim and Queen Emira to develop some character depth, nothing plot-related happens. It's the wrong time for their development; with only 2,500 words between the prison scene and the end of the book, the reader's attention is on how the plot will wrap up, not on how Queen Emira is secretly an unforgiving and judgmental woman.

One possible solution is to move the character development that occurs in the prison scene to an earlier chapter. The basis of the prison scene feels off; sure, King Maxim doesn't like Kell, but I doubt he'd actually arrest his adopted son. Perhaps it would be more true-to-form for Maxim and Emira to challenge Kell inside the castle? A study or a bedroom can *feel* like a prison if set up properly. And as Kell points out, the king has no power to detain him; Kell can move through worlds at will. A mere prison cell is as easy to escape from as any other room.

A second possible solution is presented below.

### *The Ending*

As previously mentioned, after the prison scene, there are only 2,500 words for the ending. If the final 2,500 words were stretched out to maybe 3,500 or 4,000, the prison scene wouldn't feel so misplaced. When Kell decides to go with Ojka to White London, he doesn't hesitate—even though when he thought of leaving Red London before, his thoughts turned to Rhy. It's out of character for Kell to completely ignore his adoptive brother when making this monumental decision.

Perhaps Kell thinks of Rhy, but pulls back from the thought and forces himself to ignore them. Or maybe he *does* think of Rhy, but decides he can't be his brother's chaperone forever. Kell needs to acknowledge (perhaps subconsciously) that leaving Red London will have huge consequences, not just for him but for the whole royal family. Acknowledging this and choosing to leave Red London anyway would be a higher-impact ending than leaving without any such acknowledgment.

## Characters

### *Main Characters*

*Lila*—becomes a pirate thief and discovers her ability to use magic. Enters the *Essen Tasch* under a false name. Loses in the third round. When Kell is captured, attempts to rescue him (the results of which will be seen in book 3).

*Kell*—self-proclaimed protector and adoptive brother of Prince Rhy. In *Darker Shade*, saved Rhy from death by linking their life forces; when one brother feels pain, the other does, too. Enters the *Essen Tasch* under a false name. Loses in the third round. Is convinced by Ojka to aid Holland in returning magic to White London.

*Rhy*—the heir to the Arnesian throne and magister of the *Essen Tasch*. Arranges for Kell to compete in the tournament.

### *Minor Characters*

*Holland*—new king of White London. Made a deal with an ancient entity of magic, Osaron, to restore White London to its former glory.

*Ojka*—a child magically altered by Holland to be a powerful magician.

*Tieren*—head priest of the Red London sanctuary and Kell’s mentor. Tieren discovers Lila’s plan to compete in the *Essen Tasch* but does not act on this knowledge.

*King Maxim and Queen Emira*—Rhy’s parents and Kell’s adoptive parents. Protective of Rhy and judgmental of Kell.

I rather like the major and minor characters. Aside from a bit of tweaking, they’re mostly done. I’d like to point out, though, two groups of characters that fell flat for me:

*The four palace guards*. They blended together and looked indistinguishable in my mind. The only name I remember is Hastra, the young guard who wants to be a priest. The guards need to be immediately distinguishable when they’re introduced in 2-IV. Their personalities can come out later in the story—it makes sense for them to be stone-faced and silent when protecting Rhy and Kell—but their appearances could be more distinct.

*Emery’s crew*. In 1-II, we get to see Emery’s crew. Six new names are introduced in the span of one hundred words, and the only physical description is “handsome,” attributed to one member. I’ll be completely honest with you: after finishing the book, I couldn’t remember a single one of their names. Something must be done to differentiate the men. Perhaps they could be introduced further apart, or given some physical descriptors early on. Doing so would make later group scenes in taverns more interesting, as well.

## Editing Roadmap & Final Thoughts

If you’re wondering where to start, I suggest cutting first. Sections three, seven, and ten could all use some trimming. There are doubtless many other spots throughout the book that could benefit

from some cuts. Aim for at least 10,000 words cut from the manuscript. The more, the better, of course.

Once you've hit that goal, you can start fleshing out other aspects of the book. Change the White London scenes from Ojka's point of view to Holland's. Then, write a new chapter in White London for the middle of the book—section five would be perfect.

Once you've placed this new chapter, pick where you want to give Lila a maturity moment. It doesn't matter where you put this scene, only that it forces Lila to face actual consequences for her headstrong attitude and risky plans. While you're in Lila's headspace, pick a few points from each of her flashbacks and work them into the present-day narrative. The story should not slack; it can slow, but it should never pull the reader out of these action-packed scenes. The end result should be perfectly readable scenes in which the reader can see and feel Lila's struggle to focus, to be still. It should be a struggle for the reader, too.

Next, decide what to do about Kell's prison scene. Place it earlier in the narrative? Rewrite the scene to occur in a less dramatic location than a prison cell? Extend the ending to 4,000 words? Maybe some combination? This is a great place to take advantage of the room created by cutting those 10,000 words. Add, reshape, refine. We'll get there.

Finally, it's time to add small details, such as adding clearer physical description to the palace guards or Emery's crew. The scenes surrounding Lila's return to Red London could also use some physical description. Focus on scent (you mention the Night Market smells of "flowers, but also of burning wood, and cinnamon, and fruit"—but what about the first bar she visits in Red London?) and tactile or texture-based details. This is a sort of homecoming for Lila; the readers want to experience every detail with her.

This is, of course, just one of many paths you could take. It hits on the biggest changes I suggest; you might find other alterations are needed to suit these changes. It's important, though, that we keep the majority of the plot lines intact. It's too late to make major modifications.

I hope these suggestions help *A Gathering of Shadows* become the book you've always wanted it to be. Don't get me wrong: it's already a wonderful read, with a fascinating plot and likeable characters. Once the characters are rounded out, the ending will land better with readers, and the story will feel more even-keeled.

Should you have questions about anything in this note, please contact me. I'd be happy to discuss anything and everything in this note, as well as additional concerns you may have. Once we patch up your characters, we'll take another look at the plot to make sure everything checks out before moving on to line edits. We're so close!

Warmest wishes,  
Michele