

A Debt to Pay

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In the cramped, smoke-filled tavern, Brother Arcturus Blackthorn leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on the figure across from him. Captain Kaelin Vex of House Veylan sat with hands clasped behind her head, a silent assessment of her surroundings etched on her face.

"You were found worthy," she said finally, "to carry a Writ of Balance, Brother Arcturus."

Arcturus's gaze never wavered. "I've served the Order long enough to know the price of privilege, Captain Vex." He sipped his ale, the bitterness washing over him like the sting of a rebuke.

"The balance demanded correction in Thorn Key," Kaelin stated, her voice matter-of-fact. "A merchant's daughter, wronged by a family ally... We cannot show our hand, but your actions must rectify this injustice."

Thorn Key unfolded before them like a puzzle piece: crumbling stone walls, the murmur of merchants, and the stench of stale air and damp earth. Arcturus followed Kaelin through its winding alleys, her steps purposeful, while he trailed close behind, his eyes taking in every detail.

A quiet door slipped open on their left; a lithe woman emerged, dark hair knotted at the nape of her neck. "Captain Vex?" she called softly.

Kaelin turned to Arcturus. "Meet Althaea, local... facilitator. She'll guide us."

Within the dimly lit shop, shelves stacked with dusty jars and strange trinkets pressed in on them like sentinels. Althaea led them through a hidden door into a cramped back room where three women worked—laboring at looms that hummed like wounded birds.

Their task became clear as the women ceased their work: Althaea led Kaelin to a rear corner, where a hooded figure sat amidst scattered papers and broken trinkets. The merchant's daughter, worn and hollow-eyed, looked up as Kaelin approached.

"You'll correct this wrong," Kaelin said, "Brother Arcturus at your side. Remember: balance demands restraint."

In the following days, under a pale moon and heavy skies, Arcturus wove through shadowed alleys with Kaelin, his hand lingering on the hilt of his dagger as they navigated streets slick with rain and intrigue. A midnight meeting at an abandoned windmill outside the city walls turned into a desperate bid to outmaneuver their prey.

Magic coursed through Arcturus then—fleeting, but its cost: a memory dropped from his mind like a fragment of parchment torn loose. The windmill's ancient stones groaned in protest as he cast it, silencing the guards within. The air reeked of rust and old stone.

Hours later, beneath a moon now shrouded by clouds, they slipped back into Thorn Key, leaving their target—now a broken man, his wrongs rectified—exhaling slowly in a hidden courtyard. Kaelin handed Arcturus a small pouch as they stood up to leave.

"For the balance," she said quietly. "You paid it with what's yours to give."

As they vanished into the crowded streets once more, Arcturus felt the worn weight of his memory drop settle heavy on him, its absence an unseen shadow cast by the moon now hidden behind the city's huddled roofs.

The city's shadows swallowed them whole as they navigated the winding alleys, Kaelin's hand still clasped on his arm guiding him through the dense crowds. Arcturus's thoughts lingered on the memory that had been taken from him - a fragment of his childhood, a moment of laughter with siblings now long gone. He couldn't quite grasp what it was, only that its loss left a faint ache in his mind.

Their path eventually led them to a modest guildhalls, the sound of hammering and chiseling echoing through the entrance hall. Kaelin stopped at a doorway, and Arcturus followed her into a narrow corridor lined with candles, their light casting eerie shadows on the walls. A figure emerged from the darkness - an older man with eyes like two stars in the night sky.

"Guildmaster Thorne," Kaelin said, her voice low but respectful. "Brother Arcturus has completed his task."

The Guildmaster's gaze flickered to Arcturus before returning to Kaelin. "I see the balance has been corrected." His words dripped with a measured tone, as if weighing the cost of each word. "But what toll did it exact from him?"

Kaelin's grip on his arm tightened, her voice steady. "A memory, Guildmaster. Something he cannot recall now."

Thorne nodded, his expression a map of lines etched into the creases of his face. "The debt is paid in blood and pain. Some memories are too great to bear." He paused, studying Arcturus as if searching for something hidden beneath the surface. "You may yet find a way to recall what's been taken, Brother Arcturus."

Arcturas felt a shiver run down his spine at the Guildmaster's words – as if the weight of Thorne's gaze was stripping away layers, exposing the scars on his own soul.

The air in the narrow corridor seemed to thicken as Guildmaster Thorne's gaze lingered on Arcturus, his eyes burning with a fire that seemed almost otherworldly. "You've walked a thin line, Brother," he said finally, his voice a low murmur that seemed to carry more weight than its volume suggested. "The balance is maintained, but the cost... You'd do well to remember what you've lost."

Arcturus felt a flicker of annoyance at the Guildmaster's words, a defensiveness that surprised him. He pushed it down, focusing on the present moment. "I'll manage," he said, his tone neutral.

Thorne nodded once, the motion sharp and decisive. "I expect you to report to the Order's chronicler immediately. Your experience will be documented, Brother Arcturus." His gaze flicked to Kaelin, a silent understanding passing between them. "And Captain Vex... You'll ensure our guest is provided for, should he require it."

Kaelin nodded, her eyes never leaving Thorne's face. "I'll make the arrangements, Guildmaster." She tugged on Arcturus's arm, leading him out of the corridor and back into the guildhall's main hall.

As they walked, Arcturus's thoughts turned to the memory he'd lost – the ache in his mind a constant companion now. He tried to grasp at it, but it slipped away like sand between fingers. "Captain," he said, tugging on her arm to slow their pace. "What exactly happened back there? Why did the Guildmaster ask about my debt?"

Kaelin's gaze flicked to him, her expression enigmatic. "Some debts are paid in more than memory, Brother Arcturus. The Order seeks balance – and sometimes that requires sacrifices we can't yet understand."

As they left the guildhall, Kaelin led Arcturus through the crowded streets of Thorn Key, navigating them with a practiced ease that belied her rigid demeanor. They walked in silence, the only sound being the patter of rain on the cobblestones and the distant clang of hammers on metal from the nearby forge.

The moon, now a sliver of silver in the dark sky, cast long shadows across the buildings as they made their way to the Black Rose Order's local chapter. Arcturus's mind continued to dwell on the memory he'd lost, trying to grasp at its edges like a fragment of torn fabric. He couldn't recall what it was, but the ache within him was a constant reminder that something vital had been taken.

Their footsteps echoed in the entrance hall as they entered the Order's chapter house. The warm glow of candles cast a gentle light on the stone walls, and the air was thick with the scent of burning incense. A hooded figure emerged from the shadows, their face obscured by the darkness. "Captain Vex," the figure said, voice low and gravelly.

Kaelin led Arcturus past the hooded figure to a narrow stairway leading up to the chapter's records room. They climbed the stairs in silence, the only sound being the creak of old wood beneath their feet. The air grew thick with dust and parchment as they entered the records room, shelves stretching towards the vaulted ceiling like sentinels guarding ancient secrets.

A single candle flickered on a nearby desk, casting eerie shadows across the walls as Kaelin began to sort through dusty tomes bound in worn leather. Arcturus wandered over to a nearby shelf, running his fingers over the spines of the books, searching for anything that might spark recognition. The ache within him seemed to grow more intense with each passing moment, a physical sensation like a weight settling on his chest.

A faint whisper echoed from Kaelin's corner of the room – the soft rustle of pages turning. "Brother Arcturus?" she called out, her voice low and measured. He turned to see her holding a slim book bound in worn black leather. The cover was blank except for a single symbol etched into the center: the Black Rose emblem.

Arcturus felt a shiver run down his spine as he approached Kaelin. She opened the book, revealing pages filled with fine script and intricate illustrations that seemed to dance across the parchment. "This is your chronicle," she said, her eyes scanning the text. "The Order keeps records of each brother's actions, their debts paid, and the balance maintained."

He reached out a hand, his fingers tracing the symbol on the cover, a sense of trepidation growing within him. The memory he'd lost seemed to be linked to this book, but how?

The pages within the book seemed to whisper secrets in a language he couldn't quite grasp, but Arcturus's fingers lingered on the symbol as if seeking an anchor in the void left by his lost memory. Kaelin's eyes remained fixed on the text, her brow furrowed in concentration. "It appears you've been... altered," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "The debt you paid is listed here, but there's a notation – a correction to your chronicle, notations from the previous chronicler."

Arcturus's gaze fell to the pages, his eyes tracing the fine script as Kaelin spoke. He couldn't quite decipher the meaning behind the words, but the sense of foreboding grew with each passing moment. "What does it say?" he asked, his voice low and cautious. Kaelin's hand covered the page, her finger tracing a line beneath a particular passage. "This notation suggests your memory was taken for a purpose, Brother Arcturus – a debt to be paid in full." Her eyes met his, their depths like two dark pools of water. "You're not who you think you are."

The words hung between them like a challenge, the air thickening with unspoken implications. Arcturus's mind reeled as he tried to grasp the truth behind Kaelin's

statement. He thought back to his training, his memories of joining the Order – every detail etched into his mind like the lines on a well-worn book. Yet, the feeling that something was off lingered, a nagging sense that his recollections were incomplete. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice a little stronger now. Kaelin's gaze didn't waver; instead, it seemed to bore deeper into his soul. "Your chronicle suggests you're not just a brother of the Black Rose Order," she said, her words dripping with an unspoken gravity, "but something more – something tied to the very fabric of our order."

Kaelin's words hung in the air like a challenge, and Arcturus felt the familiar sense of disquiet creeping over him. He pushed his chair back from the desk, the creaking wood echoing through the records room as he rose to his feet. The book still clutched in Kaelin's hand seemed to mock him, its blank cover now a stark reminder of the secret it held.

"More?" he repeated, his voice gruff with skepticism. "What are you talking about, Captain? I know my history – every step I've taken since joining the Order." He forced himself to meet Kaelin's gaze, though his eyes felt heavy, weighed down by the unspoken implications of her words.

Kaelin's expression remained impassive, but Arcturus detected a flicker in her eyes, a shadow that danced across her face like a candle flame. "The notation is... unusual," she said finally, her voice measured. "It speaks to a transaction, one that predates your memories." She paused, her gaze drifting back to the book. "A transaction with the Umbra Collective."

The word was like a blow to the gut, knocking the air from Arcturus's lungs. The Umbra Collective – a name whispered in hushed tones by Order brothers, a mysterious organization rumored to manipulate the shadows themselves. He felt his mind reel as he tried to recall any connection between the Collective and himself, but his memories remained stubbornly dark.

"It can't be," he muttered, shaking his head. "I know nothing of this." Kaelin's eyes met his again, a challenge in their depths. "That's what they want you to think, Brother Arcturus." Her words were laced with a quiet conviction that unnerved him.

He took a step back from Kaelin, his mind racing with questions and doubts. The air in the records room seemed to grow thick with tension as he tried to grasp the truth behind her words. "What do you mean by 'transaction'?" he asked finally, his voice firm despite the turmoil brewing inside him.

Kaelin's gaze didn't waver, but a hint of wariness crept into her eyes. "I'm telling you what your chronicle says, Brother Arcturus. The notation speaks to a debt paid in full – a debt that seems to have cost you something... personal." She paused, her fingers drumming a staccato beat on the book's cover. "The previous chronicler wrote in

code, but the notation is clear: 'Memory extracted for services rendered'."

Arcturus's mind reeled at the phrase, his grip on the arm of the chair tightening until his knuckles turned white. He tried to push the memory of being extracted from his mind, but it lingered, a ghostly presence that seemed to seep into every pore.

"Services rendered," he repeated, the words echoing in his mind like a death knell. "What services?" Kaelin's eyes met his, their depths seeming to hold a thousand unspoken secrets. "The notation doesn't specify, but the context suggests it was tied to your initiation into the Order." She paused, her voice measured. "You may not remember it, Brother Arcturus, but you were brought into this world for a purpose - one that has nothing to do with redemption or protection of the innocent."

Arcturus's eyes felt dry and gritty as he tried to absorb the weight of Kaelin's words. A sense of disorientation washed over him, like being dropped from a great height without warning. He stumbled back, his hand grasping for the shelf behind him to steady himself. The book still clutched in Kaelin's hand seemed to mock him, its blank cover now a symbol of the secrets he'd been kept in the dark. His thoughts were a jumble of confusion and fear as he tried to reconcile the past with the present. The silence between them grew, heavy and oppressive, until Arcturus finally broke it. "What's going on here?" he demanded, his voice low and even. "Why are you telling me this now?"

Kaelin's expression remained impassive, but her eyes betrayed a flicker of something - almost like a mixture of anger and regret. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat as the sound of footsteps echoed from below, heavy and deliberate. The creaking of old wood seemed to vibrate through the room as a figure climbed the stairs, their presence casting a long shadow across the floor. Arcturus's head turned towards the door, his instincts on high alert, even as Kaelin's voice whispered in his ear - "It seems your visitor has arrived, Brother Arcturus."

The footsteps paused at the top of the stairs, and a figure emerged from the shadows, its features illuminated by the faint light filtering through the grimy window. Arcturus's gaze narrowed as he took in the familiar attire - a hooded cloak, clasped with a pin bearing the emblem of the Umbra Collective. The air seemed to thicken as the figure approached, its eyes fixed intently on Arcturus.

"Captain Kaelin," the figure said, its voice low and smooth, like honey poured over gravel. "I see you've shared... enlightening information with our friend." The speaker's gaze flicked to Arcturus, their eyes glinting with a cold intensity in the dim light. "Brother Arcturus, I'm afraid your memories are more tenuous than we initially thought."

Arcturus's hand instinctively tightened around the arm of the chair as the figure drew closer, its presence seeming to fill the room. He recognized the pin on the cloak - the

symbol of the Umbra Collective – and a sense of trepidation washed over him. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice firm despite the growing unease.

The figure inclined its head, the hood dipping in a slow, deliberate movement. "I am Erebus," it said, the name echoing through the room like a whisper from the underworld. "A representative of the Umbra Collective." Kaelin's hand tightened around the book, her eyes flashing with warning as Erebus continued, "We've been... waiting for you, Brother Arcturus."

Arcturus's mind reeled as he tried to process the implications – what did the Umbra Collective want from him? And why had they sent a representative to the Black Rose Order? He took a step forward, his eyes locked on Erebus, but Kaelin's voice stayed him. "Wait," she said, her hand rising like a barrier between them.

Erebus's eyes never wavered from Arcturus as he spoke, his voice dripping with an unsettling familiarity that sent shivers down Arcturus's spine. "I see you're struggling to recall our... arrangement," Erebus said, a hint of amusement dancing in his gaze. "That's not surprising, given the... creative liberties taken by your previous chronicler." Kaelin's grip on the book tightened, her knuckles whitening as she stepped forward, a protective gesture Arcturus recognized but couldn't quite interpret.

Erebus didn't seem to notice, his attention fixed on Arcturus. "You see, Brother Arcturus, I'm here to collect," he said, the words falling like a gauntlet thrown down. Kaelin's eyes flashed with warning, but Erebus continued, undeterred. "A payment is due, one that has been overdue for far too long." The air in the room seemed to thicken as Erebus's gaze locked onto Arcturus, an unspoken weight pressing upon him like a physical force.

"What payment?" Arcturus growled, his hand instinctively dropping to the hilt of his sword, though he knew it would be little use against the enigmatic figure standing before him. Erebus chuckled, the sound low and menacing, sending a shiver coursing through Arcturus's veins. "Ah, but you don't remember, do you?" The representative's eyes glinted with a cold light in the dim room as he continued, "You see, Brother Arcturus, the debt isn't just about money – it's about memories. Memories of what you were before this... life."

Tags: Thorn Key, Redemption, Action