

# A Weight on the Throne

Black

## The Weight on the Throne

Kael Varn stepped out of the morning mist, onto the worn cobblestone path that led to the Black Rose Palace. He had walked this road before; its secrets he'd whispered away in favor of balance. The weight on his back, a pack slung over one shoulder, contained the instruments of his trade: thin daggers for silent correction and a pouch of silver dust to mark the dead.

Before him, the palace gates swung open as if drawn by an unseen force. Kael's eyes narrowed; he preferred the element of surprise in these matters. A hooded figure stood at attention within the entrance. As Kael approached, the figure stepped back, revealing Curator Marcellin Veylan, his face a map of worn creases.

"Your work," Kael said, dropping his pack to the ground.

Marcellin nodded curtly. "The sovereign's son has been making rash decisions again. We can't have him—"

"Challenging the Order?" Kael finished for him.

"The balance is shifting, Kael Varn," Marcellin said. "Tensions are rising, and whispers of unrest from across the Ashen Roads."

Kael Varn walked ahead of Marcellin into the palace. The air inside was heavy with incense and the weight of secrets. They moved through dark corridors, the only sound their footsteps echoing off stone walls.

Their destination was the throne room, where Queen Elwira ruled with an iron fist, her son Prince Arin seated beside her. As they entered, the queen's eyes rose to meet Kael's, a flicker of unease dancing in their depths. She motioned for him to approach.

The sovereign's son leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. "Kael Varn. What brings you here?"

"The weight on your shoulders," Kael said, eyes locked on the prince. "Your actions are... unbecoming a Veylan."

Prince Arin bristled, but Marcellin intervened. "Let him speak, Your Highness."

"The balance of power in Everia is shifting," Kael continued. "The people sense it, even if they can't articulate what they feel. The Nightforge grows restless; the Curators whisper of an imbalance brewing within its heart. You would do well to remember your Order oaths, Prince Arin. Your House has borne the weight of power for centuries."

Marcellin stepped forward, a discreet gesture to Kael indicating he should yield. "Your Highness, perhaps—"

"No," Kael said firmly. "He needs to understand, Curator Veylan. The cost of unbalance is not paid in coin or blood, but in the very fabric of our world."

The prince's eyes flashed with anger, but Kael saw something else lurking beneath: a weight, a burden he had been carrying without his parents' knowledge.

With a small gesture, Marcellin called forth a hidden ward. "Let us speak on this later, Your Highness." The queen's expression remained inscrutable as the conversation ended.

As they walked back through the palace corridors, Kael turned to Marcellin. "The weight you spoke of... it's not just your son."

"No," Marcellin said quietly. "It's the Black Rose Order's own weight, bearing down on us all. The cost of balance is never paid in full; only in increments."

Kael Varn nodded; the mist had parted for him, revealing what lay beneath. He knew the cost would be exacted, and soon.

Upon leaving the palace, he stopped before a dark pool, its surface reflecting the night sky above. For a moment, Kael let the shadows claim him, his eyes closed against the weight of what he'd seen, the price yet to come.

The pool's darkness seeped into Kael like a shroud, soothing the rough edges of his thoughts. He stood there long enough for the palace to fade from memory, its stone walls surrendering to the mist. As he breathed in, a faint scent of damp earth rose from the water, transporting him to his earliest memories: the forest, his mother's voice whispering about balance and silence. The sensation was fleeting, but it anchored him.

Kael broke the surface tension with a gentle dip of his fingers. He knelt beside the pool, running his hand over its glassy skin, feeling for any ripples in the water. The darkness within reflected back at him: a shadow that looked like his own face stared up from the depths, eyes sunken and weary. A chill danced along his spine as he remembered the weight Marcellin spoke of – the Black Rose Order's toll.

The image began to shift, taking on a new form. Kael's hand stilled, and the pool's surface reflected the flickering torches in the palace courtyard. He recalled the

conversation with Prince Arin: the unspoken understanding that weighed him down. The water's calm surface broke when he rose, ripples spreading outward like tiny waves of unease.

With a sense of purpose now driving him, Kael continued through the mist-shrouded streets. His destination was the Nightforge's perimeter, a place where whispers turned to shouts and forgotten tales lived on in firelit corners. The city was alive with rumors: people spoke of an imbalance brewing within its very heart. He navigated narrow alleys, careful not to be seen by anyone who might report his presence back to the palace. A weighty obligation pressed against his chest; Kael knew he had to speak with someone outside the Order's influence.

He finally arrived at a small tavern, one of the few places in Everia where rumors and forgotten knowledge lived on. Inside, warm air enveloped him like a blanket. The fire crackled in the hearth as patrons huddled around it, sharing stories of far-off lands and unexplained happenings. Kael slipped onto a stool at the bar, drawing attention from more than just the bard playing softly in the corner.

A hooded figure, sipping ale near the shadows, caught his eye. The familiar face emerged with each passing moment – Thrain Blackwood, a wandering scholar rumored to have seen the darkness within the Nightforge's depths.

The hood's corner of the tavern fell into darkness as Thrain Blackwood shifted, his eyes locking onto Kael. The bard's melody faltered, and for a moment, the room's patrons held their breaths. Kael slid off his stool and navigated the crowded space with an air of calculated ease, sidestepping stools and chairs without touching them.

He claimed the empty stool beside Thrain, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "Kael Varn," he said, voice low enough that only Kael could hear it over the murmurings in the tavern. The barkeep slid a mug of ale down to them without hesitation, as if anticipating this encounter. "You've been asking questions."

"I have," Kael said, his eyes sweeping across the tavern before refocusing on Thrain. "About the Nightforge's heart, about its secrets. What do you know?"

Thrain leaned back in his chair, releasing a measured breath into the air. "The forge is alive, Kael. The imbalance is spreading; it can feel the weight of power shifting in the world." He glanced at the other patrons before focusing on Kael once more. "I've seen things within its depths – creatures born from shadows, and whispers that echo with a hunger for balance."

Kael raised his mug to the firelight, studying Thrain as he took a sip. The scholar's eyes seemed sunken, worn by secrets shared only in darkness. He knew the cost of such knowledge; the toll it exacted on those who carried the weight. "You've spoken with Marcellin," Kael said, testing his words.

Thrain's gaze faltered for an instant, then steadied. "I have. The Order's burden is far heavier than most suspect. There are... threads of connection between the Nightforge and our own existence. Unseen forces manipulate, whispering secrets to those who listen."

A shiver coursed down Kael's spine; he'd long sensed it – an undertow pulling at the fabric of their world. He leaned in, his voice low. "You're not alone in understanding this. There are others... who see the shadows within."

Thrain's eyes widened fractionally before a hint of caution returned to his expression. "Who?" The sound was barely audible over the growing din of patrons seeking more ale and stories.

"Prince Arin," Kael said, watching Thrain for any reaction. It came in a slight tremble of Thrain's hand on the mug. The bard's tune picked up speed, a crescendo that drowned out the whispers between Kael and Thrain. Outside, the mist continued to creep across the city, shrouding its inhabitants from prying eyes.

As the night wore on, Kael's conversation with Thrain delved deeper into the mysteries of the Nightforge. The air inside the tavern thickened, heavy with unspoken secrets and half-remembered tales. Patrons began to disperse, seeking their beds or homes, but the two men remained entwined in a thread of understanding that was both exhilarating and suffocating.

The bard's music slowed to a gentle melody as he noticed Kael and Thrain's intense discussion. He leaned in closer, his fingers dancing across the strings with an air of curiosity. Kael barely registered the movement; his mind reeled from the implications of Thrain's words. The scholar spoke of ancient powers stirring within the Nightforge, manipulating threads of balance to further their own purposes.

"Tell me more," Kael urged, his voice barely above a whisper as he leaned in closer to Thrain. "What secrets have you uncovered?"

Thrain glanced about the tavern one last time before responding, his voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. "In the depths of the forge, I've seen... aspects of our world reflected back at me. The mirrored halls, the crystal caverns – all serve as a prison for powers that were once thought vanquished."

A chill danced along Kael's spine as he processed Thrain's words. He remembered the conversation with Marcellin and Prince Arin, the weight of their unspoken understanding. This was more than just the Order's burden; it was the world's balance hanging in the balance.

Thrain's eyes locked onto his, filled with a deep unease. "Kael, I fear we're running out of time. The threads are unraveling, and if not... If the imbalance grows unchecked, our very reality may be torn apart."

The tavernkeeper cleared his throat, signaling last call, but Kael barely registered it. His mind whirled with the weight of Thrain's words, as if the Nightforge's secrets were seeping into his very being. He pushed back from the bar, his movements fluid and calculated.

Thrain stood alongside him, their movements mirroring each other in a silent understanding. They navigated through the now-emptying tavern, out into the mist-shrouded night. The city seemed to darken around them, as if reflecting the shadows within their own souls.

The streets were quiet, save for the sound of dripping water and distant chiming of church bells. Thrain led Kael through a maze of alleys, dodging sleeping market stalls and vendor carts left unattended for the night. They finally emerged onto a narrow bridge spanning a dark, sluggish river that wound its way through the city's heart.

Water reflected the faint light of a quarter moon overhead, casting an ethereal glow across the cobblestones beneath their feet. Thrain walked at the edge of the bridge, his gaze lost in the darkness below. Kael kept pace with him, feeling the weight of unspoken questions and unresolved fears bearing down on them.

A gust of wind swept through the city, causing the bridge to sway ominously. The sound sent a jolt through Kael's frame; he'd never been fond of being at height. Thrain turned toward him, his eyes piercing in the moonlight. "This isn't the end," he said, voice low and urgent. "Not yet."

As if agreeing with the scholar, a black-clad figure detached itself from the shadows near the bridge's far end. Kael's training kicked in – he positioned himself between Thrain and the newcomer, his hand instinctively resting on the hilt of his dagger. The figure stepped into the moonlight, its hood casting an eerie shadow across the stone.

The figure pushed back its hood, revealing a face both familiar and yet unknown – a blend of features Kael had seen etched into his own memories but never in such context. The stranger's eyes, however, held an uncanny resemblance to his father's, sparking a mixture of unease and curiosity within Kael.

The man's gaze shifted from Kael to Thrain, and for an instant, the air was charged with unspoken understanding. "Kael Varn," he said, voice low and even, as if testing the resonance of the name on his lips. "I see you're still bound by threads of doubt." The stranger's words dripped with a subtle mockery, but Kael detected an undercurrent of genuine concern.

"Who are you?" Thrain asked, his hand resting lightly on the hilt of his own blade, as if anticipating trouble. The stranger smiled, revealing a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Someone who shares your... fears, scholar." He turned back to Kael, his expression serious once more. "Your father's legacy isn't as straightforward as people think. I'm

here to offer you a choice – walk the path of shadows or risk losing everything in the light."

Kael's hand tightened around the hilt of his dagger, an impulse that told him this stranger was trouble but not the kind he'd been trained to fear. He searched Thrain for confirmation, but the scholar's eyes seemed locked on the stranger with a mix of suspicion and intrigue. The night air vibrated with unspoken tensions as the three figures stood poised on the bridge – their fates entwined in a dance of secrets and half-truths.

"I'm not interested," Kael said finally, his words firm but measured. The stranger's smile grew wider, and for an instant, Kael saw a glimmer of something almost like... admiration? The man pushed off the stone railing, moving closer to Kael with a deliberate pace. "Ah, I think you are. You see, Kael Varn, your path is not set in stone – it's etched in the very fabric of our world. And I'm here to show you that."

The stranger's words dripped with a knowing tone that sent a shiver down Kael's spine, but Thrain stepped forward, his face set in a mask of skepticism. "What makes you think we're interested in your... guidance?" he asked, voice heavy with disdain.

The stranger chuckled, the sound low and even, as if he'd anticipated this reaction. "I've watched you, scholar," he said, eyes flicking between Kael and Thrain. "You both walk a tightrope of curiosity and desperation. I'm here to show you that the line between light and darkness is not always so clear-cut." He paused, his gaze settling on Kael with an unnerving intensity. "Your father was a man of conviction, Kael Varn. A man who walked the path of shadows, but at what cost?"

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, a surge of anger and frustration coursing through him. Who was this man to speak about his father? He thought back to the conversations with Marcellin and Prince Arin, the weight of their secrets pressing down upon him like an anvil. The stranger's words stirred something long buried – a spark of resentment toward the world that had taken his family from him.

Thrain's voice cut through Kael's thoughts, firm but measured. "Enough, stranger. We're not here to be lectured by you or anyone else. If you have information, we'll listen. Otherwise, leave us to our own devices." The scholar's eyes narrowed, as if daring the stranger to push his luck.

The stranger's smile returned, a glint in his eye that made Kael's skin crawl. "Ah, but I do have information," he said, pulling back his hood to reveal more of his features. In the moonlight, Kael saw the sharp angles of his face, the sharp jawline and piercing eyes that seemed to bore into his very soul. The man's resemblance to his father was uncanny – a mix of fascination and dread swirling within Kael as he struggled to place him.

"Then speak," Thrain said, his patience wearing thin. The stranger took a deep breath, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. "Your father, Kael Varn, was not who you think he was. His actions were not those of a hero, but of a man consumed by his own ambition."

The stranger's words cut through Kael like a blade, striking at the very foundations of his identity. He felt as though he was drowning in a sea of fragmented memories and half-truths, unable to grasp the truth. Thrain's hand on his arm seemed to steady him, but even the scholar's solid presence couldn't anchor Kael against the turmoil within.

"You're a liar," Kael spat, the words tearing from his throat like a raw wound. The stranger's smile never wavered, but a flicker of something like surprise danced in his eyes. "Ah, I see I've touched a nerve," he said, his voice dripping with amusement. "Your father was indeed a man of complex motivations, Kael Varn. But that's not the truth you're looking for, is it?" The stranger took a step closer, his eyes glinting with an unnerving intensity.

Thrain's grip on Kael's arm tightened, and he shot the scholar a warning glance. "Let him talk," Thrain said, his voice low and even. The stranger nodded, as if pleased that they were listening. "Your father was part of something much larger than you or I could ever imagine. A web of power and deceit that spanned continents." He paused, letting the words sink in before continuing. "And your mother... she was at its center."

Kael's vision blurred for an instant as the stranger's words struck like a physical blow. His mother? Involved with something sinister? The world seemed to tilt on its axis, and he felt himself falling into a darkness that had no bottom. Thrain's grip held him upright, but even the scholar's firm grasp couldn't anchor Kael against the tide of emotions crashing through him.

"Who are you?" Kael demanded again, his voice raw with pain and anger. The stranger chuckled once more, the sound like a cold breeze on a winter night. "I'm someone who knows the truth," he said, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. "And I'm willing to share it with you, for a price."

The stranger's words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt Thrain's grip on his arm tighten as if to restrain him from lashing out. "What kind of price?" Kael spat, his anger and frustration simmering just below the surface.

"Information," the stranger replied, his eyes glinting with a knowing light in the moonlight. "You see, I'm not one to offer knowledge for free. People always want something in return." He paused, his gaze drifting between Kael and Thrain as if weighing their interest. "I can tell you about your mother, but it will cost you."

Thrain's hand on Kael's arm tightened into a warning grasp. "What do you know of our mother?" he asked, his voice low and even.

The stranger smiled, his lips curling upward in a faint, enigmatic smile. "Oh, I know she was more than just a pawn in the grand game, scholar," he said. "She was a player, a queen, and her actions had far-reaching consequences that still echo through our world today."

Kael felt as though he'd been punched in the gut, the air knocked from his lungs by the stranger's words. His mother? A queen? He struggled to keep his voice steady, but it came out in a rasp. "What are you talking about?"

The stranger chuckled once more, the sound sending a shiver down Kael's spine. "Your mother was part of a cabal," he said, his eyes glinting with an unnerving intensity. "A group of powerful individuals who shaped the course of our world's history from the shadows."

Thrain's grip on Kael's arm tightened into a warning grasp, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he felt himself drawn to the stranger, like a moth to flame. "What cabal?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The stranger leaned in, his breath cold against Kael's ear. "The Order of the Black Rose," he whispered.

Tags: The Broken Writ, Tyranny's Cost