

Ash and Ember

Black

A Silent Measure

The carriage rattled along the Ashen Roads, its wooden frame creaking with each jolt. Ash, a member of the Black Rose Order, rode in silence beside Ember, his face illuminated only by the flickering torches outside. The city was just beyond the treeline now – Kael Varn's domain, where the whispers of the city spoke secrets to those willing to listen.

Ember gazed out at the dark shapes of homes and buildings receding into the gloom. 'What's your measure for this night, Ash?' His voice cut through the stillness like a thin blade.

The wind carried the distant murmur of the city: gossip, commerce, and the murmurs of the Thalos – a place where whispers were currency. The creaking wheel of the carriage settled into its bearing, and Ash's gaze drifted back to Ember.

'House Veylan's envoy arrived two days past,' he said finally. 'They've come seeking a reckoning for their sovereign.'

Ember's eyes snapped back to his. 'Reckoning?' He repeated it in a tone that hinted at calculation. Ash's response was a nod, subtle as a sigh.

The carriage drew into the city gates and turned toward the Nightforge, its iron bellows pumping steam into the chill night air. They passed through crowded streets, where figures in dark robes shifted out of sight like shadows on walls. The air reeked of coal smoke, sweat, and the faint tang of the sea.

At the Nightforge's gatehouse, a figure waited – an Order Knight. 'Ash, what news from Kael Varn?' His voice was a low rumble, worn smooth by years of service.

'House Veylan's request is... complicated.' Ash's words hung in the air like a challenge. 'They seek justice for their king's murder.'

The Knight's gaze flicked to Ember and back to Ash. 'Kael Varn doesn't do public justice, Ash. We both know that.'

Ash inclined his head. 'This time is different. The envoy claims... unusual circumstances. They speak of a Thalos vision – one of great import.'

Their conversation was cut short by the approach of the Nightforge's curator, a frail woman in worn finery. She approached them with an air of quiet authority, her eyes flicking to Ember before returning to Ash.

'I'm afraid I have some information about your... guests,' she said. 'They're not what they seem.'

Ash and Ember exchanged a glance – understanding spoken without words. 'Bring the envoy to me,' Ash said finally, his voice low as a promise.

In a quiet room deep within the Nightforge, the Veylan envoy presented their case. They spoke of a Thalos vision that foretold great calamity for House Veylan if justice wasn't served quickly – and served discreetly. The vision included Ember, his presence woven like a thread through dark events yet to come.

Ash listened intently, weighing the costs and benefits. Ember's gaze remained fixed on him, as though searching for answers in the shadows of his eyes.

As the meeting concluded, Ash stood, his movements economical. 'I will see what can be done,' he said finally.

Outside, under stars dimmed by haze, Ash turned to Ember. 'The Thalos sees a great debt owed.'

Ember nodded once – a small acceptance.

Their footsteps echoed through the Nightforge's corridors as they made their way toward the city gates. 'Kael Varn will be... interesting,' he said finally.

Ash didn't respond; his gaze locked onto some point in the distance, lost to sight in the shadows.

In silence, they stepped into the waiting carriage and merged with the Ashen Roads once more – bound for Kael Varn's domain, where balance would be measured in whispered promises.

As they rode, Ember's eyes remained fixed on Ash's face, his expression unreadable behind a mask of calm. The carriage jostled and swayed with each step, but he kept his gaze steady, unflinching. Outside, the city lights blurred into a kaleidoscope of colors and sounds – laughter, music, and haggling merchants vying for attention in the shadows.

Ash broke the silence finally, his voice low as a purr, 'The Nightforge's curator spoke out of turn, it seems.' His eyes snapped back to Ember, their gaze piercing the darkness. 'You're a part of this, more than you think.' The wind carried a hint of smoke and ash, and for an instant, Ember's eyes flashed with something like recognition – but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Their carriage turned onto the Veylan estate's winding drive, a forest of stone lanterns rising up to greet them. In their soft light, Ash's face seemed chiseled from shadows, his eyes gleaming with a calculated intensity that sent a shiver down Ember's spine. They rode in silence for another quarter-mile before slowing to a stop at the estate entrance, where an expectant figure awaited – Kael Varn himself.

He stood beneath a canopy of stone and vines, its colors muted by the moon's silver glow. His features – angular, stern – blended with the night itself, as if carved from dark marble. A hint of a smile played on his lips when he saw Ash dismount from the carriage, but vanished upon seeing Ember. 'Ashriel,' Kael Varn said finally, his voice firm and cold as stone. 'You're later than expected.'

Kael Varn's gaze lingered on Ember, a weight that drew the air from his lungs. Ash stepped forward, a fluid movement, and bowed his head slightly in greeting. 'My apologies for the delay, Lord Kael.' The night seemed to fold in around him like a cloak as he straightened, his eyes locked onto Kael Varn's.

'House Veylan has suffered greatly,' Kael Varn said finally, his voice an instrument played with deliberate care. 'Our people are restless, our coffers bare from the tribute demanded by your... employers.' His eyes narrowed on Ash. 'I'm told you've agreed to hear their plea.'

The words hung in the air like smoke, awaiting a spark to ignite them into flame. Ember shifted in his seat, a movement that brought him marginally closer to Ash, as if seeking shelter from Kael Varn's gaze. The Black Rose Knight didn't flinch, his eyes steady on the lord of House Veylan. 'I've agreed to listen,' he said, his voice measured.

Kael Varn nodded curtly, and with a gesture that summoned the waiting guards, led them through the estate's winding corridors into a great hall lit by candles that seemed to tremble in the draft from the open window. The night outside was alive with insects and the distant hum of unknown creatures; inside, the air reeked of old stone, dust, and the scent of baking spices wafting from the kitchen.

The envoy stood at the far end of the hall, their faces illuminated by a candle's warm light. As they approached, Ember felt the weight of expectation settle upon him like the slow creep of night itself. The Thalos vision replayed in his mind – its darkness, the hint of ash and fire, and Kael Varn's warning that justice must be served swiftly.

At the table, a steaming cup sat, awaiting Ash's hand. He accepted it with a quiet nod, the steam curling upward like mist as he raised it to his lips. In the brief pause, Ember found himself studying the faces of the envoy – their eyes red-rimmed from fatigue, their shoulders slumped under the weight of what they'd witnessed.

Kael Varn took his seat at the head of the table, a master conductor surveying his orchestra before the performance began. 'Let us not waste time on empty words,' he said finally, his voice slicing through the hushed anticipation like a blade through silk. 'House Veylan's claim is... unusual. A Thalos vision, a murder, and your involvement, Ember, weaves a tapestry complex as any I've seen.'

As Kael Varn spoke, his words dripped with a weight that made Ember's skin crawl. He felt the weight of the Thalos vision settle upon him once more - the darkness, the ash, the fire. It was as if he'd been handed a mirror, and the reflection staring back at him was one of desperation and blood.

The Black Rose Knight set his cup down, his movements economical as always. 'Tell me, Lord Kael,' he said, his voice low, 'how do you propose we proceed?' His eyes never left the lord's face, as if daring him to falter.

Kael Varn leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers together like a spider spinning a web. 'We require your... particular expertise,' he said finally, his gaze flicking to Ember and then back to Ash. 'The Thalos vision spoke of a murder - one that will bring great calamity upon House Veylan if not addressed quickly.'

Ash's eyes narrowed, his expression unreadable. 'And what makes you think I'm the right man for this task?' The question hung in the air like an accusation, but Ember knew it was a facade - Ash's mind was already racing with possibilities.

Kael Varn leaned forward, his elbows on the table, and his voice dropped to a whisper. 'Because, Ashriel, you're one of the few who can navigate the shadows without being consumed by them.' His eyes locked onto Ember, a cold, hard glint in their depths. 'And your... involvement suggests a connection we'd rather not discuss just yet.'

Ember felt the air leave his lungs as if he'd been punched, but Ash's expression didn't change - it was a mask of stone that refused to crack under the pressure. He inclined his head, his eyes never leaving Kael Varn's face. 'I see,' he said finally. 'And what is the nature of this... connection?' The word hung in the air like a challenge, but Ember knew Ash's question was not for him.

The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with unspoken secrets and expectations. It was broken by the envoy leader, a man who looked as though he'd been drained of all life. 'We believe,' he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper, 'the murder is linked to an artifact - one that's hidden within the Thorn Key.'

Ash's head snapped up, his eyes locking onto the envoy like a predator sensing prey. 'The Thorn Key?' His voice was a growl, low and menacing.

As Kael Varn nodded, a hint of a smile playing on his lips, the air in the great hall seemed to thicken with anticipation. 'Yes,' he said finally. 'The artifact - an amulet of considerable power - is rumored to be hidden within the Thorn Key, a fortress built

into the very rock face of the Blackstone Mountains.' His eyes narrowed on Ash, as if daring him to question further.

The envoy leader took a deep breath, his eyes darting nervously between Ash and Kael Varn. 'We've had... reports,' he said finally, his voice shaking slightly. 'Reports that suggest the Thorn Key is no longer the simple ruin it once was.' His words trailed off as he glanced at Ember, who felt a shiver run down his spine at the implied warning.

Ash's expression was inscrutable, but Ember sensed a growing tension emanating from him – like the quiet before a storm. 'What do you propose I do?' he asked, his voice level, but with an undercurrent of curiosity that couldn't be missed.

Kael Varn leaned forward once more, his eyes locked onto Ash's face. 'You'll find the artifact,' he said, his voice firm and unyielding. 'You'll bring it back to us, and in return... we'll consider your debt repaid.' The words hung in the air like a promise or a threat – Ember couldn't quite tell which.

Ash set his jaw, a look of calculation etched on his face. 'What's the nature of this artifact?' he asked finally, his voice dripping with caution. The question seemed to hang between them like a challenge, but before anyone could respond, a soft rustling from the corner of the room caught their attention.

A hooded figure stood at the far end of the great hall, their face obscured by the shadows cast by the candles. They shifted forward, their movement fluid as they glided across the floor – an unnerving quietness to it that sent a shiver down Ember's spine. The air seemed to thicken once more, heavy with anticipation and secrets.

Kael Varn leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Ash's face. 'Ah,' he said finally, his voice low and measured. 'I believe you'll find your questions answered soon enough.' He inclined his head toward the hooded figure, who stepped forward into the candlelight – revealing a woman with skin like alabaster, her features sharp as a blade. Her eyes locked onto Ember, and for an instant, he felt a jolt of recognition – but it was gone in the next heartbeat.

She spoke in a voice that sent shivers down Ember's spine – husky and melodious at once. 'Ashriel,' she said, her eyes never leaving his face. 'I've been searching for you.'

The woman's words hung in the air like a challenge, but Ash didn't flinch. He regarded her with an unreadable expression, his eyes narrowing slightly as if sizing her up. 'Who are you?' he asked finally, his voice low and cautious.

The woman smiled, her lips curling upward in a movement that was almost, but not quite, cruel. 'I am Lyra,' she said, her voice husky with an undercurrent of something else – a hint of warning, perhaps, or a promise. Her eyes never left Ash's face as she continued, 'I've been searching for you, Ashriel, because I believe you're the only one

who can help me find what I seek.' Her gaze flicked to Ember, and for an instant, he thought he saw something there – a flicker of recognition, perhaps, or a spark of surprise. But when their eyes met again, it was gone.

Kael Varn leaned forward once more, his elbows on the table. 'Lyra is from House Riven,' he said, his voice matter-of-fact. 'A family... connected to the Thorn Key.' He glanced at Ash, his expression unreadable. 'It seems she's been sent to assist you in your task.'

Ash's eyes never left Lyra's face as he asked, 'What is it that you seek?' His voice was even, but Ember sensed a tension emanating from him – a coiled spring waiting to be released.

Lyra's smile widened, her eyes glinting with an unspoken challenge. 'I'm searching for the artifact,' she said, her voice dripping with confidence. 'The one hidden within the Thorn Key.' Her gaze flicked to Kael Varn, and Ember saw a hint of deference there – or perhaps something more. 'But I believe it's not just any artifact we seek. Is it, Lord Kael?'

Kael Varn's expression remained impassive, but his voice was firm when he said, 'We require your particular... talents, Ashriel. Lyra will accompany you into the Thorn Key and assist in retrieving the artifact.'

Ash's eyes narrowed as he regarded Lyra, a look of calculation etched on his face. Ember sensed a growing unease emanating from him – like the air before a storm breaks. 'What do you know about the Thorn Key?' Ash asked finally, his voice low and measured.

Lyra stepped forward, her movements fluid as she glided across the floor. 'I've studied its secrets,' she said, her eyes locked onto Ash's face. 'The fortress is treacherous – a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers that shift and change like living darkness.' Her gaze flicked to Ember, and for an instant, he thought he saw something there – a glimmer of connection, perhaps, or a hint of understanding. But when their eyes met again, it was gone.

The air in the great hall seemed to thicken with anticipation as Ash regarded Lyra, his mind racing with possibilities. Ember felt a growing sense of unease himself – like walking through a minefield without knowing where the trigger lay. 'What makes you think we can navigate this,' he asked finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

Lyra's smile returned, her eyes glinting with an unspoken challenge. 'Because, Lord Ember,' she said, 'I believe I can guide us through its depths – and uncover secrets that have lain hidden for centuries.'

The great hall's air was heavy with tension as Ash and Lyra locked gazes, their faces inches apart. Ember felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched, sensing the

weight of unspoken words hanging between them like a challenge.

Kael Varn leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Ash's face as he spoke, 'You have your task.' His voice was firm, without inflection, but Ember sensed a hidden current beneath the surface – a hint of uncertainty, perhaps, or a thread of doubt.

Ash's expression remained inscrutable, but his eyes narrowed ever so slightly as he regarded Lyra. 'And what makes you think I'll trust you?' he asked finally, his voice low and even, with an undercurrent of suspicion that was almost palpable.

Lyra's smile faltered for an instant before she recovered, her eyes flashing with a hint of warning or perhaps something more – a glimmer of excitement? 'Because,' she said, her voice husky and confident, 'I have knowledge you don't. I can show you the path to the artifact.' Her gaze flicked to Ember, and for an instant, he thought he saw a spark of recognition, but it was gone before he could grasp its meaning.

The great hall's silence seemed to stretch out like a rope pulled taut between them – Ash, Lyra, and Kael Varn – as the implications hung in the air. Ember felt a growing sense of unease, like walking through a storm-lashed forest without knowing which path would lead him home.

Ash's expression remained guarded, but his eyes never left Lyra's face as he asked, 'What do you know about the artifact?' His voice was even, but with an undercurrent of calculation that sent shivers down Ember's spine.

Lyra stepped forward, her movements fluid as she glided across the floor. 'It's an amulet,' she said, her eyes locked onto Ash's face. 'One of great power – and great danger.' Her gaze flicked to Kael Varn, and for an instant, Ember thought he saw a flicker of something between them – a connection, perhaps, or a hint of understanding.

Ashriel's eyes narrowed as he regarded Lyra, his mind racing with possibilities. Kael Varn's words echoed in his thoughts – what did they really want from him? Was this a rescue mission or a trap? He leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Lyra's face.

Lyra's smile remained fixed on her lips, but Ember sensed a flicker of tension beneath the surface. Her eyes seemed to bore into Ash's very soul, as if searching for something hidden deep within. 'The amulet,' she repeated, her voice husky and melodious. 'It's said to grant immense power – the ability to wield the very fabric of reality.' Her gaze flicked to Kael Varn, who remained impassive, but Ember thought he saw a hint of interest in his eyes.

Ash's expression remained inscrutable, but his mind whirled with questions. What kind of power could this amulet possibly grant? And what did it have to do with the Thorn Key? He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, and regarded Lyra with a calculating

gaze. 'Go on,' he said finally, his voice low and even.

Lyra's eyes flashed with an unspoken challenge as she began to speak, her words spilling out like a tide. 'It's hidden within the heart of the Thorn Key - a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers that shift and change like living darkness.' Her gaze flicked to Ember, and for an instant, he thought he saw something there - a spark of recognition, perhaps, or a glimmer of understanding. But when their eyes met again, it was gone.

Kael Varn leaned forward, his elbows on the table, as Lyra continued to speak. 'The amulet is guarded by... unsavory creatures,' she said, her voice dripping with distaste. 'Creatures born from the very darkness itself - twisted and corrupted beyond recognition.' Her eyes locked onto Ash's face, a hint of warning in their depths.

Ashriel's mind whirled with possibilities as he listened to Lyra's words. He thought back to his own experiences within the Thorn Key - the shifting tunnels and chambers, the dark creatures that lurked in every shadow. He leaned forward, his eyes never leaving Lyra's face, as he asked, 'And what makes you think we can navigate this labyrinth?'

Tags: Thorn Key, Requiem for a King