

Ashen Promises

Black

A Life of Ashen Promises

Thalos' carriage rattled over the dusty road, a worn cortege that had carried him more times than he could count. The wooden slats were adorned with Nightforge's silver emblem, a token of the Knights' esteem in this land where even nobility was beholden to the Order. Yet Thalos held no illusions; it was just another reminder of his position – and the weight that came with it.

As we traversed the Ashen Roads, the landscape rolled out before us like a withered shroud. He gazed out at the dry, rust-colored earth, a melancholy creeping up his spine. The Era of Expansion's grandeur had given way to an Age where even the roads seemed worn and tired.

"Master Thalos," the carriage driver called out, reining in the horses as we approached a wayside tavern. "A stop, sir?"

I nodded; it was better to rest for a few hours than face the road at dusk with the fading light of day against us. The interior of the tavern reeked of smoke and sweat, but I spotted a pair of Curators seated by the fire – their black robes blending into the shadows.

"Lord Thalos," one of them acknowledged, voice low as they took in my dusty traveling gear.

We exchanged nods; these men were a reminder that even within the Order's strictures, there was a code of conduct we adhered to. "What business brings you here?" I asked.

"We've heard rumors of a local merchant with ties to Melosdra," the Curator replied. "Rumor has it he's selling...unusual goods. Goods our Order would be interested in acquiring."

My gut cramped at the mention; I recalled my oath – to protect and serve, not to entice the shadows into the light. Still, those 'unusual goods' could be a lead worth pursuing.

"Tell me more," I said finally.

As night gathered outside, the merchant's tale was spun before us, like a silken thread unwinding from a spool. A local vendor, eager for coin and reputation, had taken in a shipment of Melosdra's infamous 'Eternal Night'. The stuff was said to grant visions – ones that could shatter reputations, bring ruin upon unsuspecting families.

"Unconfirmed," the Curator warned, as if any proof would be enough to destroy me.

I knew this path; it'd lead down a slope from which there was no return. Thalos' carriage stood outside, waiting for its master to reemerge. The Ashen Roads stretched out before us like a worn shroud, but I felt the weight of restraint growing heavier with each passing moment.

"Ashen promises," I muttered, recalling a phrase passed down from my Order – one that now seemed hollow in the face of duty's call.

The Curators exchanged a fleeting glance before one stood, his movements economical in the flickering firelight. "We've secured an invitation to meet with the merchant, Thalos. Your... discretion would be appreciated." He handed me a parchment sealed with the Order's silver emblem.

"Of course," I said, taking the parchment, "I wouldn't have it any other way." Outside, the tavern patrons were settling in for the night, their conversations hushed and worried. My gaze drifted to the driver, his features set in a mask of neutral curiosity as he watched us with an air of calculated attention.

The carriage creaked and groaned as I returned to it, the driver handing me up before rejoining the reins. The darkness swallowed the tavern whole as we rolled away from its worn doorstep, but my mind lingered on the Curator's words – the way they'd spoken 'discretion' like a whispered incantation. It was almost an old habit now; one forged in service to the Order, tempered by my own choices.

Hours passed in silence, punctuated only by the steady thud of hooves and the rattle of carriage wheels on stone. The night deepened around us, until it seemed as though the world itself was shrouded in a cold, unforgiving blanket. We traversed roads that had once connected distant lands with promise, but now felt like conduits for shadowy interests.

I leaned back into the worn upholstery, my hand drifting toward the pocket where my athanor – the small, ornate box containing a sliver of Nightforged starlight – lay hidden. The temptation was there; to call upon its power and illuminate the road ahead, but I resisted it, knowing the cost would be paid sooner or later.

The driver spoke finally, his voice low and detached as he said, "We're approaching."

A flicker of light appeared on the horizon – a distant settlement that seemed little more than a scattering of lights in the vast expanse of darkness. As we drew closer, I

spotted it: a sign bearing the image of a crescent moon, set atop a wooden post like a warning.

"Melros," the driver said, a name that sounded strange on his lips.

As we entered the settlement, I noted the atmosphere was alive with an air of furtive whispers and sideways glances. The buildings seemed to lean in, as if sharing a secret, their wooden facades worn by time and weather. We passed through the town's central square, where a lone figure stood atop a stone pedestal – a statue of the Lady Melora, her face serene despite the shadows that danced across its surface like dark fingers.

I recognized the driver's voice when he spoke again, his tone hushed as if he feared being overheard. "Thalos, this is not the place for... your kind." His eyes flicked to the parchment in my hand before returning to the road ahead. "The Curators' words were not what they seemed."

I narrowed my gaze at him, a spark of curiosity kindled within me. "What do you mean?" The driver's hesitation was telling; he didn't speak out of turn often. "If it's not just another meeting for the Order... then what is it?" The wheels of our carriage creaked and groaned in response to his silence, as if echoing the turmoil within him.

He glanced at me again before focusing on the road once more. His voice dropped even further, a whispered confession. "I overheard one of the Curators speaking in hushed tones... They're not interested in the merchant's goods. Not for the Order." A flicker of unease danced across his face as if he'd just revealed too much.

We were approaching the outskirts of Melros, where buildings grew smaller and more ramshackle. The air thickened with an almost palpable sense of anticipation. Our carriage rolled to a stop in front of one such structure – a two-story affair with a crooked sign creaking in the gentle breeze. In flickering script, the sign read 'The Stag's Horn'.

The carriage came to a stop in front of The Stag's Horn, its wooden sign creaking softly in the evening air. I handed down a coin to the driver, my eyes scanning the surrounding buildings – small, weathered structures that seemed to lean in as if sharing a secret. "Wait here," I said, stepping out into the chill evening air.

As I entered The Stag's Horn, a bell above the door let out a tired clang, and the murmur of voices inside was momentarily interrupted. I made my way past the barkeep, a gruff-looking man with a thick beard and a nod of recognition, to where the merchant waited – a tall, slender figure with an air of polish that seemed almost... calculated. The Curators were nowhere to be seen, and for a moment, I wondered if this was some sort of test.

"I trust you're aware of our meeting's purpose," I said, my gaze sweeping across the room as patrons cast curious glances in our direction.

The merchant smiled, its edges pinched and calculated. "Of course, Lord Thalos. Our host has explained that we have... mutual interests."

I took a seat across from him, my eyes locked on his, searching for any sign of deception. The air inside the tavern seemed heavy with the weight of secrets, and I wondered how much of this was a setup - and how much of it was genuine. A serving girl appeared with mugs and a tray bearing small glasses filled with an amber liquid that I recognized as imported. As she departed, the merchant spoke again, his voice low.

"I'm told you're a man of discerning taste, Lord Thalos." He leaned forward, his eyes glinting in the dim light. "The item we have is quite rare. One that requires... particular circumstances to function."

I raised my glass, bringing it up to my lips, and took a sip of the liquor - a smooth blend of grain and spices that was almost as old as I was. As the liquid warmed my throat, I asked, "What kind of circumstances?"

The merchant's smile remained in place, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of unease. "The sort of circumstance where one might... trade favors."

I set my glass down, the amber liquid still swirling within it like a small, golden sun. A faint hum of realization began to build in the back of my mind - that this meeting was not about acquiring some valuable item but about something far more intricate.

"You have something I want," I said slowly, turning the words over in my head as if testing them for weight. "I'm listening."

The merchant leaned back in his chair, a calculated smile still plastered on his face, but I detected a hint of something more beneath - a glimmer of nervous energy that seemed to be held in check by sheer willpower. "Favors, yes," he repeated, his voice smooth as silk. "We have an item that requires... particular consideration." He leaned forward once more, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that made me shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"What is it?" I asked, my tone a mixture of curiosity and wariness, the amber liquid from my glass still warm on my tongue. The merchant's smile faltered for an instant before he regained his composure. "Let us just say it's something of great value to the Order," he said, his voice laced with a hint of reverence. I raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite myself. What could be so valuable that the Curators would send me here, under the guise of a simple meeting? The room had grown quiet, patrons stealing glances at us from behind their mugs and tankards, sensing the tension building between us.

The merchant's eyes flicked to the parchment in my hand, and I followed his gaze. It was then that I noticed something I hadn't seen before – a small, almost imperceptible, symbol etched into the corner of the document. A mark I didn't recognize, yet it seemed to hold a weight that made me feel uneasy. "Tell me," I said, my voice firm but controlled, as I turned back to the merchant, "what is this item, and what exactly do you mean by... particular consideration?" The tavern's atmosphere had shifted; the air was charged with anticipation, and I knew I needed to tread carefully.

The merchant leaned forward once more, his eyes locked on mine. "It's an artifact," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "One with ties to the old Order of the Starseed." The words hung in the air like a challenge, and I felt my mind racing with connections – fragments of history, forgotten lore, and half-remembered stories. An artifact tied to the Starseed? What could this possibly mean? The Curators must have known about it; that was why they'd sent me here, under the guise of a simple meeting... But why?

I leaned back in my chair, my mind racing with the implications of the merchant's words. The Starseed – a legendary order that had predated even the Black Rose by centuries. Its history was shrouded in mystery, its legacy lost to time, but whispers of its power lingered in every ancient text I'd studied. What could this artifact be? And why would the Curators involve themselves in something so... delicate?

The merchant's eyes seemed to dance with a mixture of excitement and trepidation as he spoke again. "It's said that the Starseed was attuned to the celestial bodies, its members able to predict movements and align their magic with the stars. This artifact," he leaned forward once more, his voice dropping to a whisper, "is rumored to hold the key to recreating such abilities."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite myself. "And what makes you think I'm interested in this?" My gaze wandered the room, taking in the patrons, all of whom seemed to be listening in on our conversation. The atmosphere inside had grown electric, and I sensed that one misstep could have far-reaching consequences.

The merchant leaned back in his chair once more, a calculated smile plastered on his face. "Let's just say, Lord Thalos, that we've done our research. We know you're... resourceful. And that the Order has an interest in expanding its reach." He paused, studying me intently before continuing, "We believe this artifact could be the key to achieving exactly that – a means of predicting celestial events and gaining an edge over our adversaries."

I drained the remaining liquid from my glass, feeling the burn of whiskey down my throat as I weighed his words. An item capable of granting such power... The potential implications were staggering. "Tell me," I said finally, my voice measured, "what do

you propose I give in exchange for this... artifact?" My eyes locked on the merchant's, searching for any sign of deception or hidden agendas.

The merchant leaned forward once more, his eyes glinting with a hint of desperation. "We seek... discretion. And perhaps a favor, should our proposal be accepted." He paused, studying me intently before continuing, "You see, Lord Thalos, we have reason to believe that one of your... associates has fallen into the wrong hands."

My mind flashed back to the last few nights - Kael, my most trusted member, missing without a word. And then there was the cryptic message from an unknown sender, hinting at his whereabouts. A shiver ran down my spine as I leaned forward, my voice barely above a whisper. "What do you know about Kael?"

The merchant's eyes flickered with a mixture of fear and calculation, and for an instant, I thought I saw a glimmer of something like guilt. "We... know that he's been seen in the company of one of your enemies," he said finally, his voice measured, though laced with a hint of trepidation. "A man named Ryker, who's been making waves in the undercity."

I felt a cold dread seep into my bones as I leaned back in my chair, trying to keep my expression neutral. Ryker was a player in the city's underworld, known for his ruthlessness and connections to darker powers. If he had Kael... "What do you propose, exactly?" I asked, my voice firm but wary, as I reached for my empty glass.

The merchant nodded to a nearby servant, who refilled my cup with a smooth motion, his face expressionless. "We're willing to share the artifact's location," he said, "in exchange for your assistance in retrieving Kael and putting an end to Ryker's operations." His eyes locked onto mine, a hint of urgency creeping into his voice. "Time is short, Lord Thalos - we've reason to believe Ryker will not hesitate to use Kael as leverage against you, should he discover the artifact's existence."

As I raised my glass, the liquid inside it seemed to burn with a different intensity now, fueling the growing fire of unease within me. "And what exactly do you know about this artifact?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral, though my mind was racing with questions - how did the merchant come to know so much? And why would they involve themselves in such a delicate matter?

The merchant leaned back in his chair, a hint of calculation returning to his eyes. "We've had reason to believe it's hidden within the Ashen Roads," he said finally, his voice low and deliberate. "In an abandoned mine, guarded by those who'll not take kindly to intruders." His gaze flicked towards the tavern door, as if searching for unseen ears. "You see, Lord Thalos - we're willing to share this information with you, in exchange for your... particular consideration."

My mind flashed back to the Ashen Roads, a labyrinthine network of tunnels and hidden paths that crisscrossed beneath the city. An abandoned mine, guarded by who? I couldn't quite place the reference, but something about it stirred a memory, half-remembered and faintly disturbing – the feeling of being lost in the darkness, surrounded by unseen eyes... "What exactly do you mean by 'particular consideration'?" I asked, my voice still measured, though my grip on the glass had tightened.

The merchant's smile seemed to falter for an instant, but he recovered quickly. "We require a favor, Lord Thalos – one that will benefit both our... parties." His eyes locked onto mine, a glint of something like desperation there. "We have reason to believe that there's a growing interest in the artifact among those who would misuse its power. We need someone with your particular skills to... acquire it before they can."

As he spoke, the tavern seemed to grow quieter, patrons beginning to disperse as if sensing the tension building between us. I felt my mind racing with possibilities – the merchant's proposal was either a clever ruse or a genuine offer of alliance. And what did they mean by "particular consideration"? The questions swirled through me like a maelstrom, even as I knew I had to tread carefully, for in this game, one misstep could prove catastrophic.

The air inside the tavern seemed to thicken, as if the very atmosphere was alive with anticipation. I set my glass down, feeling a cold sweat break out on my brow despite the warmth of the room. The merchant's words hung in the air like a challenge, one that I couldn't quite refuse. A favor for a favor – the terms were simple enough, but the potential consequences weighed heavily upon me.

"I see," I said finally, my voice measured and controlled. "And what makes you think I'm the only one capable of retrieving this... artifact?" The merchant's eyes flickered with a hint of uncertainty before he leaned forward once more, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"We've considered the other members of your Order, Lord Thalos," he said, his words barely audible over the murmur of the patrons. "But you – you have a certain... reputation. A willingness to walk the thin line between right and wrong, when necessary." He paused, studying me intently before continuing, "You see, this artifact is not something to be trifled with. Its power is too great, its secrets too well-guarded. We need someone with your particular skills – and your... flexibility."

I felt a shiver run down my spine as I met the merchant's gaze, his words striking a chord deep within me. Flexibility? I thought of all the times I'd walked the fine line between duty and morality, weighed the cost of each decision against the greater good. The memories swirled through me like a maelstrom – the burning tower, the blood-stained streets, the endless negotiations with those who would stop at nothing

to gain power. And in that moment, I knew that I was trapped, caught between the weight of my own promises and the allure of this mysterious artifact.

The tavern's patrons seemed to have dispersed, leaving only a handful of stragglers and a few sullen guards lingering near the fire. The merchant's eyes locked onto mine once more, his voice taking on a note of urgency. "We've arranged for a meeting with one of our... associates," he said finally. "Someone who can guide you to the artifact, should you agree to our proposal." He paused, studying me intently before continuing, "But be warned, Lord Thalos - there are those who will stop at nothing to claim this power for themselves. We must move quickly, before it falls into the wrong hands."

As he spoke, a hooded figure emerged from the shadows near the tavern door, their eyes fixed on me with an unnerving intensity. The merchant nodded towards them, a curt gesture of introduction. "This is Elara," he said finally. "She'll take you to the artifact - but first, we need your answer."

Tags: Ashen Roads, Era of Expansion, Restraint