

Beyond the Broken Gates

Black

The Unseen Gates

Varenos, a seasoned Knight of the Black Rose Order, walked the cracked pavement of Thorn Key's forgotten streets. He navigated alleys as narrow as his gaze was sharp. His eyes had seen it all – the underbelly of this forgotten corner of the world: vice dens, black markets, and the occasional lost soul stumbling into its grasp.

At dusk, Varenos reached the Broken Writ, a dilapidated guildhall that once served the forgotten art of cartomancy. Thalos, the city's eccentric curator, claimed to have received an invitation from the enigmatic figure known only as Melosdra – a message etched into a single playing card.

Varenos knocked twice on the door. The worn wood creaked open by itself; he slipped inside. Flickering candles danced across the walls like restless spirits. A hooded figure, shrouded in shadows, beckoned him toward the inner sanctum. Melosdra's presence felt both familiar and unnerving.

"Your specialty is balance, Knight Varenos," Melosdra said without looking up from the ornate wooden box before her. "This involves subtlety, a whispered correction rather than an open verdict."

Varenos nodded, intrigued despite the unease that had grown since he entered. He drew his blade and held it at ease by his side, more for comfort than need.

"Inside the city's oldest quarter lies a merchant who deals in secrets," Melosdra continued, her voice as smooth as silk. "He has knowledge of our Order. His name is Jourdain; you're to retrieve this knowledge."

"I don't understand why this requires my involvement." Varenos kept his tone neutral.

"Your presence, Knight, is not only required but also the only plausible explanation for what's about to unfold," Melosdra said with an edge, her eyes gleaming in the dim light. "There's a debt to collect."

Varenos hesitated. He was a mediator, not a mercenary. The terms of his Order were clear: to maintain balance, uphold justice without spectacle, and never seek personal gain.

Outside, a faint whisper started to build around him – an echo from past battles, from the countless silences he had kept. It urged him on, reminding him that every decision carried weight, every action rippled through time. This path, like so many others, led back to his Order's mantra: "Redemption measured by action, not intention."

He tucked his blade into its scabbard and made for the city gates. The streets seemed to grow darker as he walked, their shadows deepening like an unspoken promise of what lay ahead. He navigated alleys once more familiar but this time they led him deeper into Thalos' labyrinthine heart. Night began to fall, casting the world in a cold blue hue.

The merchant Jourdain lived in a cramped alley, his sign creaking in the wind – a painting of two crossed swords above a faded symbol for 'Paths Unseen'. Varenos had heard whispers that Jourdain possessed knowledge on how to walk unseen through Thorn Key's shadowy networks. Varenos found himself at the merchant's doorstep.

"I'm not looking for trouble," the merchant said, glancing nervously over his shoulder before opening his door.

"You're not," Varenos replied evenly. "Though you have knowledge that belongs to my Order."

Jourdain ushered him in quickly, leading him to a hidden room deep within his shop. Papers littered the small space – scrolls with arcane markings and maps of Thorn Key's sewer systems, all bearing symbols Varenos recognized from ancient texts.

"This is the Path of Ashen Roads," Jourdain explained, pointing out various markings on one map. "To walk unseen requires a balance of intent, physical prowess, and knowledge of these paths. The price is not paid in gold but in memory."

Varenos watched closely as Jourdain spoke of places Varenos knew intimately, of secrets he had kept and shadows he had walked through the night. This was knowledge that weighed heavily on his conscience, a reminder that balance came with its own cost.

"I need this knowledge," Melosdra's whisper echoed in his mind, "to correct an imbalance."

The merchant handed him the map, and as their hands touched, Varenos felt the weight of Thalos' night settle upon him. It weighed heavier than before – an unspoken promise of further entanglements, of paths unseen but walked.

"You'll come back for more," the merchant whispered when Varenos left.

Varenos returned to Melosdra, his steps guided by a purpose he didn't fully understand. But in the flickering candles, he saw a figure standing behind her, unseen until now – a Knight in shadowed armor. Together, they made an unspoken promise:

that this path would not lead to light but deeper into the heart of balance and shadows.

He turned back, his steps echoing through the Broken Writ's corridors as he left Melosdra, the map folded against his chest, weighing him down.

As he navigated back through the winding streets, the city's shadows seemed to close in around him, each alleyway a potential trap, every flickering torch a promise of unseen dangers. He'd walked these paths countless times before, yet tonight they felt different, weighed down by the map and his growing unease. The silence between him and Melosdra now felt like an unspoken contract - what he had agreed to do, and why.

He turned into a narrower street, its buildings leaning in as if sharing secrets, their walls adorned with symbols etched into the stonework. Varenos had seen such markings before; they were warnings, left by those who knew of the Path of Ashen Roads. They spoke of memories lost to the darkness, of balance maintained through whispers and shadows. The more he walked this path, the more his own memories began to feel like debts owed.

Jourdain's words lingered in his mind - "The price is not paid in gold but in memory." Varenos wondered if this was true for everyone or just those who sought power. He'd always known that balance required sacrifice; it wasn't a concept but an inevitability, one that came with its own cost. As he navigated the labyrinthine alleys, Thalos' shadows danced with him, each step leading deeper into his own shadow.

The night deepened further as he walked, and Varenos found himself back at the city gates. He stood before them for a moment, weighing his next move. Melosdra had made it clear this mission wasn't about retrieval but correction - an imbalance to be righted by whatever means necessary. The figure in the shadows remained etched into his mind - a reminder of the unspoken alliance forged tonight.

The gates loomed ahead, their iron hinges groaning softly as they opened with a push. Beyond them lay the darker side of Thorn Key - vice dens and alleys that whispered secrets to those who listened closely enough. Varenos stepped out, leaving the safety of the city's walls behind. Tonight, he felt like an anchor, tied to paths unseen and memories yet to be lost.

He navigated through these shadows with a purpose now, his footsteps lighter as if the weight of the map had shifted from his chest to his mind. The darkness seemed less oppressive; each step led him closer to the answer Melosdra sought, closer to righting an imbalance that had been waiting in the wings for too long. He walked unseen through alleys, guided by the map and the echoes of past decisions.

A hooded figure watched from across a side street as Varenos navigated deeper into Thalos' night. The flickering torch on the wall cast eerie shadows across the figure's face, making them seem like a reflection of the city itself - a dark, unseen heart beating within its walls.

The hooded figure lingered for a moment, their gaze lingering on Varenos as he moved further into the shadows. They seemed to be studying him, assessing his every step with an unnerving intensity. A shiver ran down Varenos' spine as their eyes met, and for an instant, he felt a jolt of recognition - though their faces had never crossed before.

He quickened his pace, the map crinkling in his pocket. The hooded figure melted into the darkness, vanishing from sight as if it were a trick of the shadows themselves. Varenos' heart rate steadied, but he couldn't shake off the feeling of being watched. He navigated deeper into Thalos' underbelly, each step leading him closer to the vice dens and the information he sought.

The air thickened with smoke and cheap perfume as he turned down an alleyway lined with brothels. Women stood in doorways, their faces painted bright but their eyes dimmed from years of living in this shadowed world. Varenos recognized a few of them - familiar faces he'd seen on his previous walks through these alleys. They nodded at him now, their smiles welcoming and wary.

He passed by a musician who played a lonely tune on a lute, its melancholy notes hanging in the air like autumn leaves. The music followed Varenos as he walked, echoing off the walls and deep into his own heart. He recognized the melody - it was an old song from his past, one associated with memories lost to him now. The musician's eyes met his briefly before looking away, their expression unreadable.

Varenos' steps quickened, and the musician's song faltered for a moment before continuing with a new sorrowful note. He turned into a narrow side alley, the air thickening with the scent of cheap incense and something else - something like decay. A figure waited for him in the shadows, hood up, their features indistinguishable.

"Melosdra's messenger," they said as Varenos approached. "You've got your first lead."

The figure handed Varenos a piece of parchment, worn at the edges from repeated handling. It had a crude map sketched on it, with several symbols he didn't recognize. "Meet him at the old windmill on the outskirts," the messenger instructed before turning to leave.

Varenos took the parchment, his eyes scanning it for any clue as to who this person was and what they wanted in return for the information. The symbols seemed to

match some of the markings he'd seen earlier in the night, etched into the city's walls, a warning or reminder perhaps? He tucked the map into his pocket, alongside the original Path of Ashen Roads, wondering if these symbols were connected.

As he navigated back through the alleys, the music from the musician's lute receded into the distance. He couldn't shake off the feeling that being in this part of the city was weighing heavily on him – each step a reminder of paths unseen and memories yet to be lost. Varenos picked up his pace, his mind racing with possibilities and questions.

The vice dens grew thicker here, the air heavy with desperation. He'd walked these alleys countless times but never truly seen them, or himself within them. Tonight felt different; he was no longer just a guide, navigating through Thalos' shadows for Melosdra's sake. This time, he was searching for answers – and his own truth.

Varenos pushed open the creaky door to one of the brothels, stepping into a dimly lit room filled with smoke and murmured conversations. A hooded figure waited for him in the corner, their face obscured by shadows. They beckoned him closer, and Varenos found himself drawn to them, his steps feeling almost like a ritual – a progression from one unseen path to another.

The hooded figure handed him a small vial filled with a dark liquid. "You're looking for Kael," they said, their voice barely above a whisper. "Information about the Thalos' balance is expensive, but I think you can afford it." The liquid glinted in the dim light, and Varenos recognized its scent – a bitter reminder of another memory lost to him.

Varenos took the vial, weighing his options as he watched the hooded figure retreat into the shadows. He knew these streets; they were filled with people like this – information peddlers who walked between the lines of power and morality. The liquid in the vial seemed to weigh heavier now, its price more than just gold or memories. It was a reminder that in Thalos' night, every step led deeper into his own shadow.

The door creaked softly as Varenos stepped out back into the alleys, the musician's lute still echoing through the air. He followed the sound, his steps light and deliberate, guided by the melody's cadence. It led him to a courtyard deep within Thalos' underbelly – an oasis of sorts amidst the squalor. The musician stood on a makeshift stage, their eyes locked with Varenos as they strummed the final notes of the song.

In that moment, something shifted in Varenos – a memory long buried resurfaced, its presence announced by a flutter in his chest. He felt it like a door opening, revealing a room he'd forgotten existed within him. The musician's eyes met his again, and this time, Varenos saw more than just recognition; he saw a glimmer of understanding.

The music ended abruptly, and the courtyard fell silent. Varenos took another step forward, the movement almost automatic, as if driven by the weight of memories long

buried. The musician began to pack their instrument, but their eyes remained locked with his, a question forming there – what did he remember?

He took another step forward, his eyes never leaving the musician's face, but they didn't move from their spot on the makeshift stage. The courtyard was silent, the only sound the soft scrape of the musician's fingers against the lute strings as they carefully packed it away. Varenos felt a flutter in his chest, like a bird struggling to free itself from a small cage.

The musician's eyes seemed to hold a mixture of curiosity and wariness, as if waiting for him to remember more than he did. The dim light danced across their features, casting shadows on their cheeks that deepened their expressions. Varenos' hand instinctively rose, and he reached out, his fingers closing around the air where he expected to find the musician's hand. He felt a pang of disappointment when he found nothing but empty space.

"Your music," Varenos said, trying to recall why it was familiar, "it's been playing in my head for hours." The musician's gaze dropped to their lute case, and they began to zip it shut with a quiet efficiency. Their eyes flickered back up to meet his, the expression unreadable behind the mask of their face.

"I used to hear it at the old inn on the edge of the city," Varenos continued, trying to grasp onto anything that might connect him to this person and the melody. The musician's eyes narrowed slightly, their brow furrowing as if searching for something in his words. "It was... important to me, I think." The silence between them grew thicker than the air in the courtyard.

The musician stepped down from the stage, their movements fluid despite the hesitancy in their eyes. They paused beside Varenos, their hand reaching out to brush against his shoulder before withdrawing as if recalling the boundaries of their encounter. "Let's talk," they said, their voice softer now, less guarded.

Varenos nodded, falling into step beside them as they led him through the winding alleys towards a small tavern on the outskirts of the city's underbelly. The music from earlier still lingered in his mind, trying to claw its way out of the depths he'd locked it away in. The musician slid onto a stool at the bar, signaling for a drink with a subtle gesture.

"What do you remember?" they asked, their voice low and direct as the bartender poured them a mug of ale. Varenos took a seat beside them, his eyes drifting around the tavern to ensure they weren't being overheard. The dim light and murmured conversations made it difficult to gauge the atmosphere, but he sensed a contained tension emanating from the musician.

"I don't know," Varenos admitted, feeling the weight of his ignorance. "Bits and pieces, but nothing concrete." He watched as the musician took a sip of their ale, their eyes never leaving his face. The moment hung heavy with anticipation, like the air before a storm breaks.

"I was there when it happened," the musician said finally, their voice barely above a whisper. "You were... different then. More confident." They paused, collecting their thoughts before continuing, "Kael's been asking questions about you. About what you used to be, about your past."

Varenos' grip on his mug tightened as a surge of curiosity and fear tangled within him. He leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper. "What do you know?"

The musician's eyes drifted to the side, avoiding Varenos' gaze as they set their mug down on the bar with a gentle clink. "You don't remember because you've tried to forget," they said quietly, their voice weaving through the din of the tavern like a subtle melody. "Some things are better left in the shadows." The words hung heavy between them, carrying the weight of secrets and unspoken truths.

Varenos felt a spark of recognition at the musician's words, but it was smothered by a layer of dust he couldn't quite sweep away. He leaned back in his chair, trying to piece together fragments of a life that seemed to be slipping further out of reach with every passing moment. "What do you know about Kael?" he asked again, the intensity in his voice causing the musician to glance around the tavern cautiously before refocusing on him.

The musician's gaze dropped to their lap, fingers drumming a slow rhythm against the wooden counter as they hesitated. "He's been asking questions," they repeated, this time with a hint of wariness creeping into their tone. "Asking if you're still looking for her." The mention of Kael and 'her' sent a shiver through Varenos, but he couldn't quite grasp who or what that was supposed to be. A name, a person, a memory? He strained his mind, trying to recall something - anything - that might connect the dots.

"I remember being at the inn," Varenos said, his words spilling out like water from a cracked vessel. "The music was different back then." The musician's eyes flickered up, a look of surprise crossing their face before they nodded almost imperceptibly. "It was more... alive." Varenos tried to grasp onto the emotion, but it slipped through his fingers like sand, leaving him feeling frustrated and empty-handed.

"Alive?" The musician's voice trailed off, as if searching for a definition that might fit the memory he struggled to grasp. Their eyes seemed to cloud over, lost in thought as they stared into their ale. "It was more than just music," they continued, their words barely above a whisper. "You had... presence." The word hung between them like a challenge, or a warning.

Varenos leaned forward, his heart pounding against the cage of his ribs. "Presence?" he asked, his voice tight with anticipation, as if something was about to break free from its bonds within him. The musician's eyes flickered up to meet his, their gaze holding a mix of fear and curiosity that made Varenos' skin prickle.

The musician's words hung in the air like a challenge, making Varenos feel as though he was standing on the edge of a precipice, staring into an abyss with no safety net to catch him. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving the musician's face, trying to decipher what they meant by "presence". The tavern's patrons continued to murmur and laugh around them, but Varenos felt disconnected from the scene, his focus solely on the person beside him.

"What do you mean?" he asked again, his voice low and rough, like the stones of the city walls that surrounded them. The musician's gaze dropped to their lap once more, their fingers drumming a slow rhythm against the wooden counter as if searching for a hidden message in the wood grain. Varenos' eyes followed the movement, his mind racing with possibilities - memories he couldn't quite grasp, experiences he'd tried to forget.

The musician's silence was oppressive, weighing on Varenos like a physical force that threatened to crush him beneath its weight. He felt the air thicken between them, heavy with unspoken words and secrets that hung suspended, like autumn leaves clinging to their branch before falling to the ground below. The musician's eyes flickered up once more, this time to meet his gaze directly, and Varenos felt a jolt run through him, like the sudden drop of a trap door behind him.

"We need to be careful," the musician said, their voice barely above a whisper. "Kael will stop at nothing to find you." The words sent a shiver down Varenos' spine, making his skin prickle with unease. He leaned in closer, his face inches from the musician's, trying to read the fear that seemed to dance within their eyes. "What do you know about Kael?" he asked again, his voice barely above a whisper, as if sharing a dark secret.

The musician's gaze darted around the tavern once more, their eyes locking onto something - or someone - in the crowd before refocusing on Varenos' face. "I know he's been searching for you for weeks," they said, their words laced with a quiet intensity. "He thinks you have... something that belongs to him." The musician's hand reached out, hesitating just shy of touching Varenos' arm before withdrawing as if recalling the boundaries they'd set earlier.

Varenos' mind reeled, trying to grasp the threads of Kael and what he might be searching for. He felt a growing sense of unease, his instincts screaming at him to leave, to escape this conversation that seemed to be pulling him deeper into a mire from which there was no easy exit. But his legs seemed rooted to the spot, as if

anchored by the musician's words and the unspoken truths that hung between them like a challenge waiting to be accepted.

"I think it's time I remembered," Varenos said, his voice barely above a whisper, as if making a vow to himself rather than the person beside him. The musician's eyes locked onto his, their gaze holding a mixture of fear and curiosity that made Varenos feel like he was staring into the abyss once more, but this time with a sense of resolve that sent a shiver down his spine.

Tags: Thorn Key, Paths Unseen