

# In the Shadow of Thorn Key

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The sun had long since dipped into darkness, casting the streets of El'goroth in a cold, unforgiving light. I moved through the shadows, my eyes fixed on the small, ornate door that led to the hidden chambers beneath Thorn Key's ancient keep. The city was asleep, its people trusting in the Order's watchful eyes and the Curators' whispered promises of safety.

I'd received a message from an unknown sender—a simple note with a crude drawing of a thorn branch and the words: 'Meet me at midnight. I have information about your sister.' My heart beat faster at the mention of her name, and for a moment, I forgot my oaths, my duties, everything but the need to find her.

The door creaked open with a soft push, and I stepped inside, my hand on the hilt of my sword. The air was heavy with incense and the scent of old parchment. A figure emerged from the shadows—a hood over their head, face obscured. We stood there for a moment, sizing each other up.

"You're the one who sent the message," I stated, trying to keep my voice even.

The figure nodded, the movement almost imperceptible.

"What do you know about my sister?" I asked, taking a step forward.

"My name is Arin," the figure replied. "I used to be part of House Veylan's inner circle. Your sister—"

"Elara," I interrupted, my grip on my sword tightening.

Arin nodded again. "Yes. She was involved in something, something big. I'm not sure what. But I do know it put her in the crosshairs of the Broken Writ."

I felt a cold dread spreading through me. The Broken Writ was the Order's term for their own, internal corruption—those who'd traded their oaths for power and gold.

"What do you want from me?" I asked Arin, trying to keep my emotions in check.

Arin handed me a small, rolled parchment. "This is what your sister left behind. It's the key to stopping whatever is coming."

I unrolled it, my heart sinking as I saw the simple, crude drawing on the page—a single thorn branch, surrounded by the words 'Melosdra's judgment'.

"You're not telling me something," I said, looking up at Arin.

"I'm telling you the truth," Arin replied. "But I have a feeling there's more to this than you know."

I tucked the parchment into my belt and turned away from Arin. "Thank you for your help," I said, the words feeling hollow in my mouth.

As I left the hidden chambers, I felt the weight of my oaths bearing down on me. What had Elara gotten herself into? And what lay at the heart of the corruption that threatened to consume us all?

I made my way back through the city, the streets seeming darker and more oppressive than before. The thought of facing whatever danger awaited me weighed heavily on my shoulders, but I knew I had no choice.

The pursuit of balance over righteousness echoed in my mind as I walked, a mantra I'd repeated to myself countless times since joining the Order. But it was getting harder to keep the two separate—the weight of consequence piling up with each passing day.

I stopped at a small, secluded fountain in the city's center and dropped to one knee, dipping my fingers into the icy water. For a moment, I simply let out a ragged breath and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, the world seemed different—the shadows less dark, the stars twinkling like diamonds above. I stood up, took a deep breath, and began the long walk back to the Order's barracks, ready to face whatever lay ahead, one step at a time.

I entered the barracks, the warm glow of lanterns spilling out into the night air, a stark contrast to the darkness outside. The familiar sounds of sleep and murmured conversations enveloped me, momentarily calming my racing mind. I made my way to my quarters, the worn stone floor creaking beneath my boots as I climbed the stairs. Inside, I lit a single candle, casting flickering shadows on the walls as I sat at my desk. The parchment with the thorn branch drawing lay before me, an open book of ancient lore beside it.

My eyes drifted to the page, seeking answers that didn't come easily. Melosdra's judgment was a legend, a cautionary tale whispered among the Curators about the consequences of power and corruption. Elara's involvement in something like this sent a shiver down my spine – what had she gotten herself mixed up in? I replayed our conversation with Arin, searching for hidden meanings or clues that might have

slipped past me.

A knock at the door broke the stillness, and I cursed under my breath. Who could it be at this hour? I rose from my chair, a sword at the ready as I opened the door to find Brother Marcus standing in the hallway. His face was somber, his eyes flicking towards the parchment on my desk before returning to mine. "What's wrong?" I asked, though I knew better than to trust him with the truth.

Brother Marcus cleared his throat. "Just a reminder that the Curators are expecting you at dawn. They've... scheduled an audience." His tone was laced with an uncharacteristic tension, and I sensed something beneath the surface. What wasn't he telling me? A weight settled in my stomach as I nodded curtly, stepping back to allow him to pass.

The door creaked shut behind Brother Marcus, leaving me with more questions than answers. Why would the Curators summon me now? Was it connected to Elara and the Broken Writ? Or was something else afoot? The uncertainty swirled in my mind as I stood there, weighing my options and the consequences of each step forward.

I blew out the candle, plunging myself into darkness, but my thoughts refused to quiet. They ran on like a mule, trampling over every promise I'd made, every oath I'd sworn. In the silence, one phrase kept echoing – Melosdra's judgment – and with it, a growing sense of foreboding that I couldn't shake.

I stood there for a while, the darkness making my skin prickle with unease. My eyes strained to pierce the shadows, as if expecting Brother Marcus to reappear at any moment. But the silence was absolute, broken only by the faint creaks and groans of the old barracks. I took a deep breath, trying to shake off the feeling that something was watching me.

As I lit the candle again, a small flame danced to life on my desk, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The parchment with the thorn branch drawing seemed to mock me now – an enigmatic message that held more questions than answers. Melosdra's judgment... Elara's involvement... What was this 'something big' Arin had spoken of? I replayed their words in my mind, searching for a hidden meaning or a clue that might have slipped past me.

The flickering flame made the room seem to shift and writhe around me. My thoughts churned like a maelstrom as I paced back and forth across the small space, trying to untangle the threads of Elara's activities from the rumors and half-truths I'd heard over the years. It was no use – every door led to more questions, every lead vanished into shadows. And yet... Something nagged at me, a feeling that there was more here than met the eye.

The sudden quiet of the room shattered as the night watch's warning bell tolled outside, and with it, my resolve hardened. The Curators' summoning couldn't be a coincidence – not now. Whatever lay ahead, I needed answers, no matter how dark they might lead me down. With the parchment clutched tightly in my fist, I extinguished the candle, plunging myself into darkness once more.

The walk to the Curators' chambers seemed shorter than usual, as if the shadows themselves were urging me forward. The cold night air still hung heavy over El'goroth, and I wrapped my cloak tighter around me, its worn leather creaking in protest. In my mind's eye, the image of Arin's hooded face lingered – a fleeting vision that refused to be erased.

I approached the Curators' chambers with trepidation, the night watch's torches casting an eerie glow on the stone façade. The door was guarded by two silent figures who parted for me as I entered. Inside, the Curators waited, their faces illuminated by the soft light of candles and a small fire that danced in the hearth.

"Brother," Elder Thorne began, his voice smooth as silk. "We have summoned you for your expertise – and discretion." His eyes locked onto mine, searching for something I couldn't quite grasp. "A matter has come to our attention... concerning one of your own."

I tensed, a cold sweat trickling down my back. "Who?" I managed to ask, my voice steady.

"Brother Arin," he replied, his gaze flicking towards the hooded figure standing at the edge of the room. My eyes met theirs for an instant – guilt etched into their face like a scar.

Elder Thorne's words hung in the air like a challenge, his eyes never leaving mine. "Brother Arin has... overstepped," he continued, his tone measured but with an undertone of severity. I felt my grip on the parchment tighten, the drawing seeming to burn a hole into my palm.

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but inside, alarm was racing through me like a wildfire. Arin's eyes darted towards Elara, and for an instant, our gazes locked – a fleeting moment of understanding that sent a shiver down my spine. I forced myself to focus on Elder Thorne, who gestured to the figure standing beside him, a younger Curator with an unyielding face.

"Brother Rael will brief you on the specifics," Elder Thorne said, his voice like a gentle brook compared to the turmoil raging within me. "But let us be clear: this is not a matter for public discussion or speculation." His gaze narrowed, pinning mine as if daring me to defy him.

I nodded curtly, my heart racing with each passing moment. What had Arin done? And what did it have to do with Elara and the Broken Writ? Brother Rael stepped forward, his eyes cold and detached, as he began to speak in a flat tone, reciting a list of charges that left me reeling.

"...concealment of documents, unauthorized use of Order funds... tampering with the records..." Each word landed like a hammer blow, crushing the air from my lungs. Arin's face had lost all expression, his eyes fixed on some point beyond the room. I searched for Elara, but she was gone - vanished into the shadows.

The words continued to spill forth, painting a picture of betrayal that threatened to engulf me whole. I felt like a child lost in a storm, unable to find shelter or truth in the tempest raging around me. My mind reeled as Brother Rael concluded his report, and Elder Thorne nodded gravely, his eyes still locked onto mine.

"This is not a decision for us to make," he said, his voice dripping with an unspoken weight. "Brother Arin's actions have brought the Order into disrepute. The Council will decide his fate." My gut twisted into knots as I met Arin's gaze - guilt and fear etched into every line of their face.

"You are to take Brother Arin into custody," Elder Thorne continued, his voice dripping with finality. "Until the Council convenes, he is under your care. See that he understands the gravity of his actions." My hand clenched around the parchment, a cold sweat trickling down my spine as I met Arin's pleading eyes - and knew I had to choose.

"Very well," I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper, though it felt like the fate of the Order itself hung in the balance. Elder Thorne nodded once, his expression stern, before turning away to extinguish the candles, plunging the room into darkness.

I stepped forward, my heart heavy with the weight of the task ahead. As I approached Arin, their eyes met mine once more, and for an instant, I saw a flash of desperation there - a plea to be spared from the fate that now hung over them like a guillotine's blade. But it was not in my power to grant such mercy.

I gestured to the guards standing by the door, and they stepped forward, their hands closing around Arin's arms as I led them out into the chill night air. The darkness seemed to swallow us whole, the flickering torches casting eerie shadows on the walls of the Curators' chambers. As we walked, I couldn't shake the feeling that Elara was watching me still - a silent observer to this dark dance.

The silence between us was oppressive, punctuated only by the soft crunch of gravel beneath our feet as we made our way back through the barracks. Arin's head hung low, their shoulders slumped in defeat, and I couldn't help but wonder what secrets lay hidden behind that stoic mask. I led them to my quarters - a small cell deep within

the barracks' labyrinthine corridors – and gestured for them to take the narrow cot.

The dim candlelight cast a golden glow on the stone walls as Arin settled in, their eyes never leaving mine. For an instant, I thought I saw a spark of something there – defiance or rebellion? – but it was quickly snuffed out. "Thank you," they said finally, their voice barely above a whisper.

I shook my head, unable to meet their gaze. "This isn't gratitude you should show me." The words felt like a slap in the face, and I knew I'd struck a blow that would leave its mark. Arin's eyes dropped, and for a moment, we were silent, the only sound the soft creak of the wooden cot beneath them.

I turned away, walking to the small desk where I kept my personal belongings. The parchment with the thorn branch drawing lay there still, a constant reminder of the secrets that had brought me here tonight. I picked it up, running my thumb over the intricate design – the lines seemed to blur and shift in the candlelight. I turned back to Arin, who watched me with an air of quiet desperation.

"What will happen to him?" they asked finally, their voice cracking beneath the weight of what lay ahead.

I shook my head, trying to clear the emotions that threatened to overwhelm me. "The Council will decide his fate," I repeated, the words feeling hollow in the face of Arin's pleading eyes.

Arin's gaze dropped to their hands, which were clenched into fists as if trying to hold onto something tangible in a world that was rapidly unraveling. The silence between us grew thicker, heavy with unspoken words and unresolved emotions. I knew I had to break it before it suffocated me. "We need to talk about what happened," I said finally, my voice firm but soft.

Arin's eyes flickered up to mine, a flash of something like fear crossing their face. "What do you mean?" they asked, the words barely above a whisper.

"I mean, we need to understand what went wrong," I replied, trying to keep my tone even. "The Curators seemed... invested in this. Whatever your transgression was, it must have touched on something bigger." The shadows cast by the candlelight danced across Arin's face as they shifted uncomfortably on the narrow cot.

The door creaked softly behind me, and I turned to see Elara slipping into the room, her eyes darting towards Arin before locking onto mine. For an instant, our gazes met in a charged silence that was broken when she stepped forward, her movements fluid as a dancer's. "I'll take over," she said softly, her eyes never leaving mine.

I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I should trust Elara to handle this situation – or if it even mattered anymore. Arin's gaze flickered towards her, a mix of wariness and

something like hope on their face. The air seemed to thicken as Elara approached the cot, her eyes never leaving Arin's. "Let me take care of this," she said again, her voice low and soothing.

I nodded, my mind still reeling from the revelations, and stepped back, allowing Elara to take over. As I moved away, I caught a glimpse of something in Arin's face – a flash of desperation, a glimmer of resolve? – before it was shrouded by the folds of their cloak. I couldn't help but wonder what secrets lay hidden behind those guarded eyes.

As I retreated from the room, Elara's soft voice enveloped me like a shroud. "You did what you had to do," she said softly, her words aimed at my back as I walked away from the cell.

The dim corridor beyond my quarters was a blur as I walked, Elara's words hanging in the air like a challenge. I felt lost, my mind reeling from the web of deceit that had been spun around me. The Curators' motives were still unclear, and Arin's fate hung precariously in the balance. What had they done, and who stood to gain from their actions? I replayed the fragments of Elder Thorne's words in my head – "the Order into disrepute" and "the Council will decide his fate." The memory sent a shiver down my spine as I stopped before the barracks' entrance, peering out into the darkness.

The wind carried the distant tolling of the chapel bells, its melancholy tone echoing through the night like a requiem for something lost. My hand tightened around the parchment still clutched in my fist, and I wondered if I'd made a grave mistake by taking Arin into custody. Had I condemned them to the very fate they now feared? The doubts swirled, a maelstrom of emotions that threatened to consume me whole.

I took a deep breath, pushing aside the thoughts that plagued me. What was done was done; now I had to see it through. I turned back into the barracks, making my way to the great hall where the evening meal was usually served. The fire pit had burned down to embers, but the shadows cast by the flickering torches seemed to writhe and twist on the walls like living things. I spotted a few of our brethren huddled in the corner, their faces lit only by the dying flames. They nodded at me in passing, but I couldn't muster any response. My mind was elsewhere – with Arin, with Elara, and the tangled web of secrets that threatened to destroy us all.

I slid into my seat at the far end of the hall, trying to blend into the background as I sipped from my cup. The meager rations were a stark reminder that times were hard in these uncertain days. Our stores had dwindled since the raids on the nearby settlements; the once-proud Order was struggling to survive. And yet... and yet, there were whispers – hushed conversations about hidden riches, secret funds, and mysterious favors extended by unknown benefactors. I pushed the thoughts aside, trying to focus on more immediate concerns.

A gentle touch on my arm made me turn, and I met Elara's gaze across the hall. She smiled softly and inclined her head towards the corridor leading out of the great hall, a subtle invitation. "Meet me outside," she mouthed silently.

Tags: Power, Betrayal, Corruption