

Inheritance of Loyalty, Ashen Roads' Call, Era of Expansion

Black

The Weaver's Test

Eira trudged through the forest, her boots heavy with dew as she navigated the overgrown path. The air clung to her like a wet shroud, weighing down every step. Her fingers brushed against the worn wooden staff that rested against her thigh, its intricate carvings a reminder of her role as the Shadow Weaver for House Veylan.

As she walked, the trees seemed to close in around her, casting deep shadows that swallowed what little sunlight filtered through. Eira's eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she spotted the clearing ahead. Smoke curled from the stone hearth within, beckoning her towards warmth and rest.

The house was a place of refuge for those who'd worn themselves out on Ashen Roads – like herself. A refuge where whispers were spoken in hushed tones and judgments made in silence. Eira had come seeking solace, but the master's eyes told her that would not be easy to find.

'My child,' he said, as she entered the great hall, 'I see you've been running. When did you last rest?'

Eira hesitated before answering, weighing loyalty against honesty. She'd been a Nightforge knight for years, working with Thalos and Curators to keep balance in the shadows. Her debt was paid, but the cost of magic had taken its toll – sleepless nights, dreams heavy with visions that bled into her waking hours.

'Night before last,' she replied finally.

The master's expression softened, though his eyes held a glint of warning. 'You know you can't keep this pace. There are... others who'll take your place.'

Eira nodded, the truth like an anchor in the darkness. She'd known it, felt the weight of the Broken Writ bearing down on her – every correction made, every balance struck. The cost was real; she couldn't forget the faces lost along Ashen Roads.

She had come to make a choice: take another oath or walk the roads again as a free agent. As she stood, her eyes drifted towards the fire where Melosdra's words were etched into the stone hearth – 'Even shadows have a price'. The master's call was

clear; one that would seal her fate for years to come.

With a deep breath, Eira steeled herself and spoke. 'I'll take another oath.'

The master nodded once, a small smile creasing his face. In the silence that followed, Eira felt something settle within her – the weight of loyalty reattached itself to her shoulders like a mantle, ready to be worn into the darkness.

As she left the house, staff in hand and fire-dulled, she knew there would be no rest soon enough.

She walked for hours, the forest swallowing her whole. Trees loomed above, their branches tangled in a canopy of leaves that muted sound and amplified the stillness. Eira's staff led the way, its wooden slats worn smooth by years of use. She trailed it across the ground, tracing paths she'd made countless times before.

As night began to fall, casting long shadows across the forest floor, Eira heard the distant thrum of a drum. Its beat pulsed like a dark heartbeat, drawing her towards the edge of the trees. Her pace quickened, curiosity and unease tangling together like skeins of rope. The drumming grew louder, a hypnotic rhythm that drew her closer still.

She emerged into a clearing, and in its center stood a lone figure swaying to the beat, eyes closed as if entranced. A hood shrouded their features, but Eira's gaze locked onto the staff slung over the shoulder – its head was fashioned from a piece of Nightforged steel. Curiosity warred with unease; who would wear such a thing? The figure raised its arms, letting out a low cry that harmonized with the drumming, drawing in other sounds from deeper within the forest.

Eira's hand went to her own staff, a comforting weight that belied her trepidation. She took a step forward, her eyes scanning the periphery of the clearing for signs of others. The figure raised its arms again, and Eira recognized the cry as the cadence she'd heard in her own dreams – though her own voice was heavy with blood, like the sound of a bell clanging through thick fog. It sent a shiver down her spine; memories like cobwebs snagging on a worn cloak.

A faint rustling broke the rhythm, and Eira spun towards it. A pair of figures emerged from the trees – one with skin slicked black as coal, eyes that seemed to drink in the fading light, and the other with eyes like lanterns lit from within, reflecting the very darkness they stood against. Their gaze swept over her, assessing, before shifting to the figure swaying in time.

'Your call has been answered,' the first speaker said, voice low as the drumming.
'We've come for you.'

The figure's swaying slowed, arms still raised to the rhythm of the drum. Eira's gaze flicked between the new arrivals and the entranced figure, a mix of wariness and curiosity simmering beneath her surface. The master had warned her about this – calls made on Ashen Roads, like the one that brought her to his doorstep.

Eira took another step forward, her hand tightening around the staff's worn wood. "What call?" she asked, though she suspected she already knew. The figure in the center of the clearing began to lower its arms, and Eira saw the glint of Nightforged steel on their fingers – same as the one on their staff. A faint hum emanated from it, like a heartbeat trying to break free.

The figure's eyes snapped open, and they regarded her with an intensity that made Eira's skin prickle. "Your debt," the entranced one stated, voice still carrying the drumbeat. "It's due." The words sent a shiver down her spine – debt being what kept balance on Ashen Roads, what tied Nightforged knights to their oaths and masters. Eira's thoughts flashed back to the master's warnings, his gentle pressure to reconsider.

"Come," the figure in black said, stepping forward. "We've been sent for you." The one with lantern-like eyes shifted towards Eira, their gaze lingering on her staff before returning to the entranced figure. A spark of unease danced across Eira's skin; she sensed a power at play here, something that didn't quite fit in the world she knew.

"Who are you?" Eira demanded, hand tightening around her staff as she took another step forward. The drumming had ceased, replaced by an oppressive silence that felt almost palpable. The entranced figure spoke up, voice now clear and detached from the drumbeat, "I am Kaelin. We – we are sent to guide you home."

The entranced figure, Kaelin, took another step forward, its movements eerily synchronized with the one in black. Eira's hand remained tight on her staff, a shield against the unseen forces that seemed to be gathering around her. The master's warning echoed in her mind – 'others who'll take your place' – and she wondered if these two were here to replace her on Ashen Roads.

"You're not from Night's Watch," Eira said, trying to sound confident despite the creeping unease. "What business do you have with me?" Kaelin's eyes, an unsettling mix of light and darkness, locked onto hers, but it was the one in black who replied, voice dripping with a weight that made Eira's skin crawl. "We've been sent by those who believe your services are required elsewhere." The lantern-like eyes flicked towards her staff once more, and for a moment, Eira thought she saw a glimmer of understanding – or perhaps something else entirely.

Eira tightened her grip on the staff, a sense of trepidation building within her. She'd traded her freedom for another oath not long ago; this felt like a debt collector come to collect. "I'm under contract," she stated, trying to sound firm despite the doubts

rising within. The one in black's gaze never wavered, but its voice softened slightly, "The terms are... fluid, knight. We'll need to discuss the details with your master."

Eira's hand instinctively tightened on her staff, a reflex born of years of walking Ashen Roads. She'd seen many like this before – collectors, or rather, gatherers. Their masters had an uncanny ability to track their servants, even when they sought to leave the path laid out for them. The master's words whispered back into her mind: 'Others who'll take your place'. She wondered if these two were part of that, brought in to keep order on Ashen Roads while she was... elsewhere.

"We won't be needing your master," Kaelin said, its voice detached, yet somehow laced with a subtle undertone that made Eira's skin prickle. The one in black moved forward, its steps gliding across the forest floor like a ghost. "We have our own terms to discuss." Eira took another step back, her eyes darting between the two as they closed in.

She'd dealt with collectors before, usually over dinner or during hushed moments in taverns, but never directly on Ashen Roads. The air seemed to thicken with unspoken words and implications, weighing down upon her like a physical force. Her hand flexed around her staff, readying it for the possibility of conflict. Kaelin's gaze locked onto hers once more, an unsettling intensity there that made Eira shift uncomfortably. "We must walk," it stated, voice detached from any emotion.

The one in black nodded, taking another step closer. Eira sensed an almost... urgency to their movements, a sense that every moment counted and they'd lose their advantage if she didn't follow now. The forest floor seemed to darken around her as night deepened, the shadows coalescing into presences of their own. She considered calling out to them, asking for clarification, but something within her hesitated – perhaps it was the way the air vibrated with hidden meaning or Kaelin's unnerving detachment.

With a deep breath, Eira made her decision, a choice born from long experience on Ashen Roads: when faced with unknowns, she walked forward.

As she followed them, the darkness around her seemed to close in like a shroud. The air grew heavy with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves, and Eira's senses went on high alert. She'd never been one for walking into situations blind; her master had always taught her to listen to her instincts, and right now, they screamed at her to get out while she still could.

The forest floor seemed to writhe beneath their feet like a living thing, the underbrush thickening as they walked deeper into the woods. Kaelin's lantern-like eyes cast an eerie glow over the darkness, illuminating twisted roots and gnarled branches that reached out like skeletal fingers. Eira's grip on her staff tightened, her hand instinctively reaching for the familiar comfort of its weight.

The trees thinned, and a clearing opened up ahead, lit by a fire that crackled with a fierce, blue-green flame. The light was unlike anything Eira had ever seen before – it seemed to sear itself into her retinas, making her squint against the intensity. Kaelin led the way, moving with an unnerving silence across the clearing's edge. The one in black trailed behind, its movements fluid and economical, like a predator stalking prey.

Eira hesitated at the fire's edge, the heat from it washing over her like a wave of warmth after the chill of the forest. Kaelin halted before her, turning to face her with an expression that might have been calm if not for the flicker of something beneath its surface. "Sit," it said, voice detached but commanding.

Eira hesitated, unsure what lay ahead. The one in black moved forward, its gaze locked onto hers, and she felt a shiver run down her spine as it sat beside her on the ground, its body seeming to slide across the air like a shadow. The fire crackled and spat, casting shadows that danced across the surrounding trees, making Eira's skin crawl.

"Drink this," Kaelin said, holding out a small vial filled with a liquid that seemed almost black in the firelight. Eira eyed it warily, unsure what to make of it or its contents. The one in black leaned forward, its voice low and even, "It will... clarify things." Its eyes seemed to bore into hers as if searching for something.

Eira's hand flexed around her staff, her mind racing with the possibilities. She'd dealt with plenty of dubious offers in her time on Ashen Roads, but there was something about this situation that made her feel... uncertain. The master's warnings echoed through her mind – 'they'll bind you deeper' – and she wondered if this vial held more than just a drink.

She raised an eyebrow at Kaelin, which merely stood waiting, its gaze fixed on her with an unnerving intensity. "What is it?" Eira asked finally, her voice firm despite the doubts creeping in. The one in black shifted forward, its eyes locked onto hers as if trying to drill into her thoughts. "It's a gift," it said quietly.

As she eyed the vial, Eira felt a shiver run down her spine. She'd seen such liquids before – dark potions brewed by alchemists with dubious intent. The one in black's words, 'it will clarify things', echoed through her mind, and she wondered what exactly they meant to achieve. Kaelin's gaze didn't waver, its lantern-like eyes seeming to bore into hers as if searching for something hidden deep within.

She hesitated, weighing the risks against the uncertainty of the situation. Her hand flexed around the staff, a habit she couldn't shake – preparation for battle or flight, whichever came first. The fire crackled and spat, casting shadows that danced across the clearing like dark spirits trying to claim her. She'd walked into situations blind before, but never with an unknown potion offered as 'a gift'. Her master's words

resurfaced in her mind: 'They'll bind you deeper' – and she wondered if this was one of those offers too good to be true.

Eira took a deep breath, the air thickening with anticipation. The one in black leaned back, its eyes never leaving hers as it seemed to wait for her decision. Kaelin's gaze didn't flicker either, but Eira sensed a tension beneath its detached demeanor – a thread of something waiting to be unraveled. She raised an eyebrow at the vial once more, weighing her options. "What does it do?" she asked finally, voice low and even.

The one in black leaned forward again, its eyes locked onto hers with an unnerving intensity. "It allows you to see what lies within," it said quietly, its voice dripping with weighty meaning. Eira's grip on the staff tightened as the implications sank in – they wanted her to see something hidden, something she shouldn't be privy to. She considered declining, but a part of her curiosity got the better of her. What was this 'something' that only this potion could reveal?

Kaelin's gaze didn't waver, its expression still, as if waiting for her to make a decision. The one in black leaned back, its eyes never leaving hers, but Eira detected a slight relaxation of its posture, a subtle acknowledgment that she was considering their offer. She felt the weight of their words settle upon her, the import of what they proposed. To see what lay within – it was a phrase that echoed through her mind, full of promise and menace.

Eira's thoughts turned to her past experiences with collectors and vendors on Ashen Roads. Some had offered her potions for 'clarity', but she'd learned to be wary of their promises. Each vial or draught came with a price – physical, emotional, or spiritual. She recalled the merchant in Vorgath who'd sold her a potion that claimed to reveal hidden truths. It had indeed shown her secrets, but at the cost of a fragment of her memories. She shivered at the recollection, wondering what this vial might exact from her.

The one in black's eyes seemed to bore into hers once more, as if willing her to make a choice. Kaelin remained motionless, its gaze still fixed on hers with an unnerving intensity. Eira's grip on the staff tightened, her hand flexing around it like a vice. She knew she should be wary – this was a negotiation, not a gift. But a part of her curiosity got the better of her. What could this potion reveal that was so vital to them? She eyed the vial again, weighing the risks against the unknown benefits.

With a quiet deliberation, Eira reached out and took the vial from Kaelin's hand. The moment their skin touched, she felt a jolt of something like electricity run through her fingers. The one in black nodded almost imperceptibly, its eyes never leaving hers as if tracking her every move. She uncorked the vial with a small twist of her wrist, releasing the scent of dark spices and something acrid that made her wrinkle her nose. The liquid inside seemed to ripple, like it was alive.

Eira raised the vial to her lips, hesitating for a moment as memories of Vorgath's merchant flooded back. She'd thought she was wiser now, but the temptation of knowing what lay hidden was hard to resist. With a slow motion, she tilted her head back and poured the liquid down her throat.

It tasted like tar and burning earth, a bitter flavor that coated her tongue and the roof of her mouth. She swallowed, feeling it slide down into her stomach with an unnerving slowness. The fire in the center of the clearing seemed to grow brighter, as if responding to some signal she couldn't see. Kaelin's gaze didn't waver, its expression still, while the one in black watched with a focus that bordered on obsession.

Eira closed her eyes, waiting for... something. Anything. The air around her seemed to thicken, growing heavy with an expectation that made her skin prickle. She felt a creeping sense of unease as the liquid began to spread through her body like a chill. Her vision blurred and sharpened in rapid succession, colors deepening as if seen for the first time.

A shiver ran down her spine as her eyes snapped open, focusing on a sight that defied explanation. The trees around the clearing seemed to lean in, their branches tangling together like skeletal fingers. The fire at the center danced with an otherworldly light, illuminating things hidden from view – threads of silver and dark blue that webbed through the air like fine embroidery. Kaelin's form was surrounded by a subtle shimmer, as if its very presence wove these unseen connections into place.

The one in black leaned forward once more, its eyes burning with an unnerving intensity. "See it now," it whispered, voice barely audible over the crackling of the fire. Eira felt her mind recoil, overwhelmed by the sheer scope of what she beheld – a tapestry of threads and shadows that underlay everything. Her thoughts reeled as she struggled to comprehend its significance.

The darkness was alive, she realized – pulsing through every thread like a vital current. Connections linked every part of the forest, even the trees themselves. It was a living, breathing entity, one Eira couldn't quite fathom. The realization made her skin crawl as she stumbled backward, away from the sight, trying to break free from its hold. Her hand still gripped the staff, her fingers flexing around it like talons.

Kaelin's gaze followed her movement, but its expression remained impassive. The one in black leaned back once more, its eyes never leaving hers as if ensuring she grasped the full weight of what she saw. Eira stumbled to her feet, her vision reeling with the sheer magnitude of this hidden world. "What is it?" she asked, voice barely above a whisper, but her words hung in the air like a challenge.

The one in black shifted forward once more, its movements economical and precise. "It's the web," it said quietly, voice still dripping with weighty meaning. "A network of connections, unseen paths that shape the world around you." Eira's mind reeled as

she stared at Kaelin, searching for answers in its unyielding gaze.

Tags: The Shadow Weaver, Dark Alchemies, Dimming Age