

# THE BROKEN OATH'S CRUEL REVENGE

Black

## The Ashen Bargain

I walked through the silent streets of Everia, the wind off the Black Rose sewers whispering secrets to me alone. The Nightforged moon hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the cobblestones like skeletal fingers. My boots echoed off the buildings as I made my way to House Veylan, the air thick with the smell of old stone and forgotten history.

It had been five years since I'd sworn the Order's Oath, vowing to uphold balance over righteousness. I'd seen many who'd failed in their duty, letting passion cloud their judgment and consequence be damned. My path was one of subtle correction, a whispered secret here, a silent disappearance there. Not every imbalance demanded blood.

A figure waited for me at the entrance of House Veylan's manor. The silvered steel of Kael Varn's mask glinted in the moonlight as he nodded curtly and stepped aside to let me pass. His words were few: 'The Curator awaits.'

Inside, the hall was aglow with the soft luminescence of candles, casting a warm glow over the gathered Knights of the Black Rose Order. I spotted Lyrae, my fellow Knight, across the room, her eyes fixed on some point beyond me. She'd been distant since the Night of Whispers, when she'd failed to act in time and the balance had tipped towards chaos.

The Curator stood before us, its presence filling the space with an aura of quiet power. It spoke without preamble: 'We have received a petition from Queen Lyraia of Thalos. One of her own has been slain by the hand of House Veylan's own.' The Curator's eyes passed over me before focusing on Kael, who stood impassive.

I knew this was trouble. Petitions to the Order were rare, and those from sovereigns even rarer still. I also knew that Lyrae and I had a connection to Thalos - an unspoken pact forged in the depths of the Ashen Roads, far beyond the boundaries of our duty. The Curator's words hung like a weight, drawing us all closer to the precipice.

The Curator handed me a small, intricately carved box. Inside, I found a vial of Melosdra's essence - a concentrated distillate of the very fabric of balance itself. It pulsed with an otherworldly energy, but its use came at a terrible cost: a fragment of one's own memories, lost forever.

With a sense of foreboding, I accepted the burden. This was not just any assassination, but a blow struck against the delicate balance of power in the realm. Kael Varn fell in beside me as we set out for Thalos, leaving the silent streets and candlelit halls behind.

We walked among shadows and silence, the weight of our mission pressing down upon us like a physical force. I remembered Lyrae's words from the Night of Whispers: 'The balance is not just numbers, but faces.' This was about more than just correction – it was a test of loyalty, of friendship, and of the bonds we forged in the darkness.

As we approached the borders of Thalos, an unsettling quiet settled over me. The vial's power coursed through my veins like a dark river, its cost already taking its toll: memories began to slip away, lost like grains of sand between fingers. I closed my eyes and focused on the mission ahead, the Ashen Bargain echoing in my mind.

Upon arriving at Thalos, we were met with an atmosphere of dread and suspicion. The Queen herself stood before us, her usually unyielding visage twisted in anguish. 'You have come too late,' she said, her voice cracking under the weight of her loss. I knew that I had failed her – just as Lyrae had failed on the Night of Whispers.

With Kael's guidance, we navigated the treacherous web of Thalos' politics and secured a meeting with the accused, a young Veylan knight named Arin. His story was one of coercion and manipulation by House Veylan's more unsavory elements – a tale that echoed the very reasons I'd taken the Oath.

As night fell, we walked the streets once more, our footsteps carrying us through the city's heart. Lyrae joined us, her eyes haunted by the knowledge of what she could have done differently. I knew that my own memories were slipping away, like sand in the wind. The vial's power had been a double-edged sword – balancing the scales but exacting its price.

We stood before the Black Rose gates as Kael handed me back the box, now empty save for a small, crumbled fragment of parchment within. A fragment of my own memory lay there, lost to the void. The cost was clear: the fragments of our past, broken and scattered like ashes on the wind.

In that moment, I knew what it meant to truly uphold the Ashen Bargain – not just balance over righteousness, but redemption through action, measured by the price one paid for the right thing. And in that darkness, I found a glimmer of peace.

We stood outside the Black Rose gates, the empty box weighing heavily in my hand as I gazed up at Kael's mask. His eyes, usually shrouded behind a veil of silvered steel, seemed to hold a hint of something like understanding. The air was heavy with unspoken words, the weight of our oaths and the silence that lay between them.

The city gates creaked open as we re-entered Everia, the darkness swallowing us whole once more. We walked through the winding streets in silence, the only sound the soft crunch of gravel beneath our boots. I felt the vial's power still coursing through me, the lost memories a nagging ache within my mind.

The city's night watchmen eyed us warily as we passed, their torches casting flickering shadows on the walls. We made for the Nightshroud district, a labyrinthine warren of narrow alleys and cramped courtyards. I'd received a message from a contact within House Veylan - one who claimed to have information about the true culprit behind Arin's slaying.

We reached the designated meeting point, a dilapidated wine shop tucked away in a forgotten corner of Nightshroud. The proprietor, a gruff old man named Gorvoth, welcomed us with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. He handed me a small, rolled parchment bearing a cryptic message: 'The Rose's petal is not what it seems.'

I unrolled the parchment, studying the scribbled words as Kael and I exchanged a skeptical glance. The ink was crude, but the handwriting seemed to match the script of one person - Lyrae's sister, Eira. My gut told me this was more than just a simple message from a concerned citizen.

The night air seemed to thicken as I handed the parchment back to Gorvoth, his expression unreadable behind a mask of grease-stained skin. 'You're not going anywhere,' Kael said, his voice low and even, as he stepped between me and the watchmen who'd just arrived on the scene.

I felt the vial's power still burning within me, my memories slipping away like grains of sand in an hourglass. But I knew I couldn't afford to let it consume me - not yet. The balance was shifting, and with it, the shadows.

The night watchmen eyed us warily, their torches casting flickering shadows on the walls as they formed a semicircle around Gorvoth's wine shop. I recognized the insignia on their tunics - the mark of House Veylan's influence. It was clear that Lyrae and I weren't the only ones watching this night's events unfold.

Kael shifted his weight, a small gesture that spoke volumes about our situation. The watchmen were here for us, but we had information they didn't. Gorvoth, sensing the tension, retreated into his shop, leaving us to deal with the unexpected guests. I handed Lyrae the parchment, her eyes narrowing as she read Eira's scrawled handwriting.

"This isn't just a message," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's a warning." I nodded, my gut churning with every passing moment. The weight of the vial's power still clung to me like a shroud, memories slipping away into nothingness. Kael's eyes locked onto mine, his expression a mask of calm control.

"We need to know what Eira is trying to tell us," he said, his voice steady. "Before we leave this place." I nodded, and with a flick of my wrist, the watchmen hesitated. For an instant, their formation wavered, their commander's eyes darting towards Kael as if seeking guidance. It was a tiny opening, but it was enough.

Kael took advantage of the momentary distraction to slip forward, his hand extended in a gesture of truce. "We mean no trouble," he said, his voice carrying across the cobblestones. The watch commander's eyes lingered on Kael's mask, then flickered towards me, where the vial's influence still simmered, out of sight. For an instant, I thought I saw a glimmer of recognition – but it vanished as quickly as a flame in the wind.

"Let us speak with Gorvoth," Kael continued, his tone smooth as silk. "We have information he might find... enlightening." The commander's expression turned thoughtful, and he exchanged a brief glance with one of his men before stepping aside. "Very well. You have five minutes."

The watchmen parted, allowing us to enter the shop once more. I followed Lyrae inside, my eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of hidden threats. Gorvoth watched us from behind his counter, his expression unreadable as he poured a cup of wine with hands that trembled ever so slightly. The air in the shop seemed to vibrate with tension, like a harp string plucked by an unseen hand.

I leaned forward, my elbows on the counter, and met Gorvoth's gaze. "Tell us what you know," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Gorvoth's hands continued to shake as he poured another cup of wine, his eyes darting between Kael and me with a mixture of fear and desperation. "I know nothing," he said finally, his voice barely audible over the creaks and groans of the old shop.

Lyrae leaned in, her eyes locked on Gorvoth's, and I felt a surge of the vial's power respond within me, protesting the intimacy. I gritted my teeth against the growing discomfort, focusing on Gorvoth's reaction. He shifted uncomfortably, his face pale under the flickering torchlight.

The watchmen lingered outside, their presence a constant reminder that time was running short. Kael leaned back against the counter, his eyes never leaving Gorvoth's face. "We're not here to harm you," he said, his voice calm and measured. "But we need information. What do you know about Eira's message?"

Gorvoth hesitated, glancing towards the door as if seeking an escape route. I sensed a flicker of something like courage within him, but it was quickly extinguished by the weight of fear. "I... I saw her once," he stammered. "Eira. She came in here, several nights ago. Whispering about secrets and shadows." He looked up at me, his eyes

searching for something – forgiveness, perhaps, or absolution.

The air in the shop seemed to grow colder, the tension between us like a living thing. Lyrae's hand closed around my wrist, her grip a gentle warning not to push Gorvoth too far. I forced myself to breathe, to let the vial's power recede a little, but it left me feeling raw and exposed.

"I think she was searching for something," Gorvoth continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "Something hidden. She spoke of the Rose's petal... and the Veylan crest." His eyes darted towards Kael, who remained impassive behind his mask. "What does it mean?"

I shifted my weight, trying to find a comfortable position as the memories slipped further away from me. The thought of Eira's warning sent a shiver down my spine – what had she uncovered, and how did it tie back to Arin's murder? The vial's power still simmered within me, a burning reminder that time was running out.

The watchmen outside seemed to be growing restless, their conversation drifting into the shop. I felt a surge of anxiety – we were running out of time. Kael straightened, his eyes never leaving Gorvoth's face. "We'll need to speak with Eira," he said finally, his voice decisive.

I straightened, my eyes locked on Kael's as he turned to face the watch commander outside. "How long can we speak with Gorvoth?" he asked, his voice carrying across the street.

The commander hesitated, glancing at his men before responding, "Three minutes, no more. After that, you'll be coming with us." Kael nodded, his mask glinting in the torchlight as he turned back to Gorvoth. "Tell me about Eira," he said, his voice low and even.

Gorvoth's eyes darted towards the door, as if seeking escape or rescue, but Lyrae's grip on my wrist tightened, reminding me to keep him talking. I leaned forward, my elbows on the counter, and met Gorvoth's gaze. "What was Eira looking for?" I asked, my voice a low whisper.

Gorvoth's shoulders sagged, his eyes dropping as he stared at the floorboards. "I don't know," he muttered. "She whispered something about the Veylan crest... and the Rose's petal. She said it was hidden in plain sight." He looked up, his eyes wide with fear. "I told her I didn't know what she was talking about."

The air in the shop seemed to vibrate with tension as Kael stepped forward, his eyes locked on Gorvoth's. "What did you mean by 'hidden in plain sight'?" he asked, his voice soft and measured.

Gorvoth hesitated, glancing towards the door once more before responding. "I think she was talking about the city watch," he stammered. "The Veylan crest is everywhere - on the flags, the uniforms... it's like they're flaunting it."

Lyrae's grip on my wrist tightened, her eyes flashing with understanding. I felt a surge of the vial's power respond within me, protesting the revelation. The implications were clear: Eira had discovered something big, and now she was trying to tell us.

As Gorvoth finished speaking, Kael straightened, his mask glinting in the torchlight. "We need more information," he said, his voice decisive. "Tell us everything you remember about Eira's visit."

Gorvoth hesitated, his eyes darting towards the door as if seeking escape or rescue. But something like courage flickered within him, and he continued speaking, his words tumbling out in a rush. "She came in here three nights ago... around midnight. She whispered something about the Veylan crest being more than just a symbol - that it was a key to something hidden."

I leaned forward, my elbows on the counter, as Gorvoth's words painted a picture of desperation and urgency. "What did she say exactly?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Gorvoth's eyes locked onto mine, his face pale under the flickering torchlight. "She said it was hidden in plain sight... but we had to look with open eyes."

Gorvoth's words sent a shiver down my spine, and I felt Lyrae's grip on my wrist tighten as if sensing my unease. Kael's expression remained unreadable behind his mask, but I saw a flicker of interest in his eyes. "Tell us more about Eira's state when she came here," he said, his voice low and even.

Gorvoth hesitated, his gaze darting towards the door as if searching for an escape route. "She was... agitated," he stammered. "Whispering to herself, muttering about secrets and shadows. I've seen people like that before - desperate, I mean. They usually come in looking for something to quiet their minds."

I shifted my weight, trying to process the information, as Kael leaned forward, his elbows on the counter. "Did she mention anything specific?" he asked, his voice measured.

Gorvoth's eyes flicked towards me, and for an instant, I saw a glimmer of recognition - but it was quickly extinguished by fear. "She mentioned... the name 'Kaelin'," he stammered. "And something about the Black Rose Order. She said you were involved in it somehow."

The room seemed to grow colder, the air thickening with tension as Kael's mask glinted in the flickering torchlight. He straightened, his eyes locked on Gorvoth's face.

"What else did she say?" he asked, his voice low and even.

Gorvoth's eyes darted towards Lyrae, and I felt a surge of protectiveness toward her – but she stood firm, her grip on my wrist unwavering. "She... she said something about a 'web of deceit'," Gorvoth stammered. "That the Veylan crest was just one thread in it."

The watchmen outside seemed to be growing restless, their voices drifting into the shop as they began to murmur among themselves. I felt a surge of anxiety – time was running out, and we still had no answers. Kael's eyes locked onto Gorvoth's face, his expression unreadable behind his mask. "We'll need to speak with Eira," he said finally, his voice decisive.

I straightened, my elbows leaving the counter as I felt Lyrae's grip on my wrist relax. The commander outside called out, his voice carrying across the street. "Time's up, Kael! You have one minute left."

Kael nodded, his eyes never leaving Gorvoth's face. "We'll need more time," he said, his voice firm.

The commander's expression turned unyielding. "I'm afraid not, Captain. The watchman has a warrant for you – and your companions."

Kael's eyes narrowed, his gaze locked on the commander as he stepped forward. "We'll need a moment," he said, his voice measured.

The commander's expression remained unyielding. "I'm afraid not, Captain. You have one minute to leave with your companions or be taken into custody."

Gorvoth took advantage of the distraction to slip off the stool, his eyes darting towards the door as if seeking escape. Lyrae's grip on my wrist tightened, her eyes flashing with a warning as she whispered, "Stay still." I felt a surge of anxiety – we were running out of time.

Kael turned back to me, his eyes locked on mine. "We'll have to make our move," he said, his voice low and urgent. He nodded towards the door, his mask glinting in the torchlight as he pushed off from the counter.

I stood, my movements fluid, as Lyrae's grip on my wrist relaxed. Gorvoth's eyes darted towards us, his face pale under the flickering torchlight. "What now?" he stammered, his voice barely audible over the murmurs of the watchmen outside.

Kael's eyes locked onto Gorvoth's face. "We need to get out of here," he said, his voice firm. He nodded towards the door, and I felt a surge of the vial's power respond within me – anticipation, anxiety, and a creeping sense of dread.

The watch commander raised his hand, his eyes flashing with warning as he called out, "Now!" His men stepped forward, their torches held high as they moved to

surround us.

I grabbed Lyrae's arm, yanking her toward the door as Kael stepped forward, his eyes fixed on the watch commander. "You're making a mistake," he said, his voice steady.

The commander's face remained unyielding, but I saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes before he nodded to his men. They advanced, torches held high, as Kael and I pushed Lyrae toward the door. Gorvoth trailed behind us, his eyes darting towards the watchmen with a mixture of fear and desperation.

As we burst out into the night air, the cool wind slapped me in the face, carrying the stench of garbage and smoke from the city's many chimneys. The sounds of the city swirled around us – hawkers shouting, carriages rattling over cobblestones, and the distant clang of hammer on anvil from a nearby forge.

Kael led the way, dashing down a narrow alleyway between two towering tenements. Lyrae kept pace beside me, her grip on my arm firm as we navigated through the winding streets. Gorvoth lagged behind, his eyes scanning our surroundings with a look of panic. I slowed my pace to let him catch up.

"We need to get off the streets," Kael called back over his shoulder, not looking around. "We can't outrun them in daylight."

I nodded, knowing he was right. We needed a place to hide – and fast. Lyrae and I exchanged a look, and I nodded towards the nearby rooftops. The city watch had eyes everywhere, but with careful planning and a bit of luck, we might just be able to lose our pursuers in the labyrinthine alleys above.

Gorvoth stumbled as he followed us into a narrow alleyway between two buildings. Kael caught his arm, steadying him. "Move!" he shouted over the sound of the watchmen closing in. We picked up speed, our footsteps pounding against the cobblestones as we hurtled through the winding alleys.

The air grew thick with tension as Lyrae and I expertly navigated the rooftops, using fire escapes and ladders to make our way across the city. Gorvoth stumbled, his hands scrabbling for handholds on the slick metal, but Kael hauled him up with a firm grip on his arm.

We reached the edge of a narrow rooftop just as a squad of watchmen leapt onto the adjacent building, their torches casting flickering shadows across the walls. "Keep moving," Kael shouted above the din, pushing us towards a nearby stairway.

Lyrae and I descended the stairs with a celerity that sent my heart racing. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid tang of coal as we emerged into a narrow courtyard. We moved swiftly through it, our footsteps pounding against the cobblestones as Kael led us towards the city's lower districts.

As we navigated the winding streets, I caught snatches of conversation between the watchmen – curses, shouts, and an undercurrent of desperation that made me wonder if our pursuers were more than just a handful. Lyrae leaned in close, her voice barely audible over the din. "We can't shake them forever," she whispered.

I nodded, my eyes scanning the rooftops as we turned into a narrow alleyway between two massive stone buildings. Kael led us towards a small door hidden behind a tattered awning – and a flickering sign that read 'The Red Griffin'.

Tags: Redemption Measured, Weight of Consequence, Betrayal's Sting