

Thorn's Dark Gift

Black

The Whispering Wastes

I recall the way Ashen Roads twisted through the darkness, a network of treacherous pathways that only the initiated knew. Kael Varn stepped along one such path, the faint scent of smoke and damp earth clinging to his boots. His specialty was subtle correction, the art of making wrongs right without drawing attention. He'd walked these roads for years, leaving behind whispers of correction in every town he passed through.

This evening's mission brought him to House Veylan's manor, where a particular balance needed attending. The Veylans had always prided themselves on their loyalty to the Order, but this family was no exception. Word had reached Kael that their daughter, Lyra, possessed the Dark Gift – an unwelcome inheritance passed down through generations of her bloodline.

As I stepped into the manor's great hall, a faint thrumming filled my ears; it was a hum of contained power, one that would eventually shatter its confines. Lyra Veylan sat cross-legged on a cushion, eyes closed as if listening to some distant frequency. Kael spotted the worn cover of *The Broken Writ* lying open on a nearby pedestal, pages fluttering with each beat of the thrumming.

"Kael Varn," Lyra said without opening her eyes. "I've been expecting you."

He approached quietly, acknowledging the formal address. "House Veylan's concerns must be... substantial, I suppose."

Lyra raised an eyelid to regard him. "You understand the burden we carry?"

A simple gesture of understanding – a tilt of the head – and she began to speak in hushed tones. The thrumming grew louder, an aching vibration that made Kael's teeth ache.

"My mother... she was not like this when I was a child," Lyra continued. "The power would come and go, and sometimes she could even harness it. But the last few years... it's all she can do to keep it inside."

He watched her, observing the way fingers curled into fists as if anticipating a crack in control.

"It's not just the Dark Gift," Kael said softly. "You've got blood ties that run deeper than you know."

Lyra opened her eyes to his words, their light like a spark on dry tinder. I felt it as well – an echo of power beyond hers, something she couldn't quite contain.

I made a silent promise: this would not end in spectacle or chaos. The thrumming increased to a near-deafening pitch, but Lyra's control wavered only for an instant before collapsing. She stumbled forward, hands outstretched.

As I moved toward her, the sound burst free – a scream that shattered windows and left me reeling, my ears ringing. When the silence returned, Lyra stood panting, eyes wide with fear. Kael Varn's task was clear: guide her, help her balance this power without causing more harm.

"Let me take your hand," I said, offering what little support I could.

She hesitated before placing her palm in mine – cold to the touch, but not quite still. As we stood there, a shiver ran along my own arm, an unseen thread of connection to the Dark Gift.

With every step toward balance, Lyra's hold on it tightened. Sweat beaded across her brow as I helped her find a way to channel this... thing within her. Every breath was a battle against its power, until finally, we stood before the small wooden box that contained Thorn Key.

"Cut yourself free from this," I told her, voice barely audible over her ragged breathing. "Leave it for now, and let's focus on quieting what remains."

Lyra's hand trembled as she opened the box, releasing a thread of silver light into the room. A small part of me – not quite Kael Varn – wished we could stay here, surrounded by such fragile balance, but duty had its pull.

"You're the one they call... Kael walks where armies cannot," Lyra said softly, as if remembering.

"Those words have lost their meaning to you already," I replied gently. "Your gift may be a shadow of my own, but we'll keep it contained, together."

In that instant, I found myself standing on the edge of balance – not the balance of the world, nor the order of things – but a personal one within Lyra herself. For now, it held.

I guided Lyra through the manor's corridors, the quiet of the night a stark contrast to the chaos we'd unleashed in that momentary lapse of control. Our footsteps echoed off the stone walls as we descended into the damp cellars beneath. The air grew thick with the scent of aged wine and mold. In this part of the house, few people ventured willingly.

She led me through narrow aisles between rows of dusty barrels, the flickering torches above casting eerie shadows on our faces. Kael Varn had walked many paths like these in his years, guiding those afflicted by the weight of their own secrets. Lyra's hand remained grasped tightly around mine, a reminder that her balance was precarious.

We reached a small chamber off to the side, the door slightly ajar as if inviting us into this sanctuary. Inside, candles cast a warm glow on the walls, their scent mingling with the faint tang of incense. A set of worn wooden shelves lined one side of the room, holding various texts and strange objects that Kael couldn't quite identify – an odd pendant made of dark crystal, an ornate box adorned with symbols he didn't recognize.

"Father used to come here," Lyra said softly, her voice a whisper against the silence. "He'd sit for hours, reading and writing. When I was younger, I used to join him." The pain in her eyes was almost palpable as she gazed around the room. "Now... there's nothing left of him but this."

I offered no words of comfort, choosing instead to let her fill the silence with thoughts best left unspoken. My gaze settled on a book lying open on a nearby stool – *The Broken Writ*, a section highlighted in the margin. This was more than just a text; it held knowledge passed down through generations of those affected by the Dark Gift.

"The threads," Lyra whispered suddenly, her eyes snapping towards me with a look of fear. "They're getting stronger."

A flicker of unease danced along my fingertips as Lyra's hand tightened around mine, her grip like a vice. I forced a gentle smile to reassure her, but she just looked at me with a mix of fear and desperation.

"The threads," I repeated softly, "are an old theory. Not much is known about them."

Lyra stepped closer to the book on the stool, her eyes scanning the highlighted passage as if seeking answers within the words themselves. The candelabras cast eerie shadows on her face, making it seem as though she was reading a different language altogether. I followed her gaze to the marked text.

"...They bind the gifted to their ancestors," Lyra read aloud, "a web of power and pain that only grows stronger with each generation."

I nodded quietly, letting her absorb the concept. The notion that her family's Dark Gift came with ties to those who had come before was nothing new, but hearing it again in these words brought a weight she couldn't shake.

"It's said," I began slowly, "that every thread has its anchor – someone whose power holds the others in check."

"Anchors?" Lyra whispered. Her eyes darted towards me, the fear turning to urgency. "Does that mean...?"

I didn't answer immediately; instead, I walked over to a small, ornate box on the shelf, its lid slightly ajar as if someone had recently opened it. Inside lay a note with a simple message scrawled on the parchment: "Do not follow the threads." The words seemed penned by the same hand that had left the highlighted passage in *The Broken Writ*.

A sudden realization dawned on me – this was more than just a family's burden; it was a warning from someone who knew the risks.

I pulled out the note, holding it up to examine it closer, hoping some hidden clue would reveal itself. The handwriting was unmistakable – Father's. I had seen his scrawl in countless letters, each one filled with warnings about the weight of their family's legacy.

"Father...?" Lyra's voice trailed off as she stepped closer, her eyes fixed on the note.

"No," I said firmly, trying to shield it from her view. "This was meant for me." Her gaze snapped up to mine, confusion etched across her face.

"This is about the threads," I continued slowly, my words chosen with care. "He must have suspected what was happening."

"Thoughts of anchors and threads," Lyra muttered to herself, as if trying to connect the pieces of a puzzle. The soft murmur turned into a cold realization: we had stumbled upon something that was meant to stay hidden.

"We should leave this room now." I said it softly but with a firm undertone, knowing our presence here could undo everything.

Lyra didn't hesitate; she nodded almost instinctively and began to back away from the shelves. Our footsteps echoed through the silent corridors as we climbed up towards the main level of the manor. We didn't speak until we were back in the relative safety of Kael's chambers, the moonlight casting a silver glow over the room.

"Kael walks where armies cannot," Lyra whispered suddenly, her eyes closed, her voice barely audible.

I led Lyra back to her quarters, my mind racing with the implications of the note and *The Broken Writ's* passage. What had Father discovered that made him take such drastic measures? And who else was involved in this web of threads and anchors? We didn't speak a word until we reached the door, where I turned her gently but firmly towards me.

"We need to be careful," I said, my voice low but urgent. "This goes beyond family secrets now."

Lyra's eyes fluttered open, the moonlight catching the unshed tears in them. For an instant, I saw a glimmer of the pain and fear that lay beneath her composed exterior. Then she straightened, a cold resolve settling on her features.

"I know," she said firmly, as if steeling herself for what lay ahead. "We have to find out what Father wrote."

The night air outside our windows had grown chilly, but I felt no chill in the way Lyra's words stung. I knew she was not ready for this – ready to confront the darkness within her family's legacy. Yet I also knew that we couldn't escape it.

I handed her a soft cloak from the closet. "Let's go outside, into the garden."

The moon cast an eerie glow over the manor's grounds as we stepped out into the night air. A chill ran through me despite my coat, but Lyra shivered more violently as she wrapped the cloak around herself.

"What are you thinking?" I asked softly, but she didn't respond, her eyes scanning the garden with a mixture of longing and trepidation.

The darkness seemed to close in around us, the shadows deepening into pools that swallowed sound. Yet I knew we had to tread this path – one that would lead us deeper into the heart of Lyra's family's secrets.

In the distance, a faint light caught my attention: torches lit along the garden paths, casting flickering shadows across the ground. They seemed to be beckoning us towards some unknown destination, but I knew we shouldn't follow them. The fire that had been kindled within Lyra was growing, its flame eating away at the control she struggled to maintain.

We walked on, our footsteps quiet in the night stillness, until we reached a small stone bench at the edge of the garden. A figure stood beside it, shrouded in shadows – someone who'd been watching us from afar. The air seemed heavy with anticipation, but I couldn't discern what waited for us here.

The figure stirred, stepping into the light. My breath caught as recognition dawned: it was Thorne, Father's closest friend and confidant – a man we thought had long since disappeared.

His eyes met Lyra's, filled with a deep sorrow that seemed to hold a thousand secrets. "Welcome," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Thorne's gaze lingered on Lyra, his expression a mask of quiet pain. I felt a pang in my chest at the sight – Father's confidant had become a reminder of all we'd lost. His eyes flickered towards me, and for an instant, I thought I saw a flash of warning.

"Please," he said softly, "come with me."

The air seemed to vibrate with unspoken meaning, but Lyra didn't hesitate; she stepped forward, the cloak still wrapped tightly around her. I followed closely behind, Thorne leading us through the winding garden paths until we reached a secluded arbor hidden from view by the house. The moonlight filtered through the trellis above, casting an ethereal glow on the stone bench within.

Thorne gestured for us to sit, his movements economical and precise. I took a seat beside Lyra, trying to read his expression in the dim light. His eyes met mine again, this time holding a quiet urgency. "I know what you've found," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

Lyra leaned forward, her face set in determination. "What do you know?" she demanded, but Thorne's gaze shifted to me before answering. "Your father knew more than he let on," he said quietly, "about the threads and anchors - their true nature, the risks they pose."

I felt Lyra's hand tighten around mine, a cold sweat breaking out on her forehead. I shot a glance at Thorne, searching for answers, but his expression was inscrutable. "He discovered something that could've destroyed us all," he continued softly, "something we can't undo now."

A faint breeze rustled the leaves above, its soft whisper seeming to underscore the gravity of Thorne's words. I exchanged a tense glance with Lyra, our minds racing with the same question: what had Father found out? And what did it have to do with the threads that bound us all together?

Thorne's words hung in the air like a challenge, his eyes locked on ours as if daring us to push for more information. I felt Lyra's hand tighten around mine, her grip a mixture of tension and fear. The silence between us was heavy with unspoken questions, but Thorne remained silent, his face a mask of quiet resolve.

A faint scent wafted through the arbor, carried on the breeze - the acrid tang of smoke, followed by the sweet aroma of incense. I frowned, my mind working to place the combination. Then it hit me: the mixture was reminiscent of the old apothecary in town, where my father used to take me as a child. The memory sparked something within me, and I leaned forward, my eyes locked on Thorne's.

"Tell us," Lyra said finally, her voice firm but laced with a hint of pleading. "What did Father discover?" The words seemed to break the spell that had held us captive, and Thorne's expression faltered for an instant before he spoke.

"He found out about the Devourer's true purpose," he said quietly, his eyes darting around the arbor as if searching for unseen listeners. I felt a shiver run down my spine at the mention of the name - a myth whispered among the Order, a terror that lurked in every shadow. Lyra's hand trembled within mine, and I wrapped my fingers around

it more tightly, trying to offer what little comfort I could.

Thorne's eyes returned to ours, his gaze steady but his voice barely above a whisper. "It's a hunger that cannot be satiated, a power that draws on the very threads of fate itself." His words conjured images in my mind – dark forests where threads seemed to writhe like living things, ancient powers that clawed at the fabric of reality.

The air around us thickened, heavy with foreboding. I felt Lyra's hand tense within mine, her eyes fixed on Thorne as if searching for answers he might not have. My own mind reeled with the implications – what Father had discovered was more than just a family secret; it was a revelation that threatened to upend everything we thought we knew about our world and its workings.

"You're saying...?" Lyra's voice trailed off, her face pale in the moonlight. Thorne's eyes met hers, his expression grim. "Your father found out the Order's most sacred truth: that the Devourer is not a myth, but a reality – one that feeds on our very essence."

A faint tremor ran through me as the words struck home. My mind reeled with the weight of Thorne's revelation, and Lyra's hand within mine seemed to crumple in despair. The world we thought we knew had just been turned upside down, and I couldn't help but wonder what other secrets lay hidden beneath the surface – secrets that could unravel everything we held dear.

The darkness seemed to press in around us, the silence heavy with unspoken questions and unacknowledged fears. I felt Lyra's hand tremble within mine, her eyes fixed on Thorne as if searching for some glimmer of hope in his words. But there was none, only a weighty gravity that threatened to crush us all.

"What do you mean by 'our essence'?" I asked finally, my voice barely above a whisper. Thorne's eyes met mine, his expression grim. "The Devourer feeds on the life force of those who wield the threads," he said quietly. "It's why the Order has kept this knowledge hidden for so long – the risk of discovery was too great, and the cost...unacceptable."

A faint scent wafted through the arbor again, carried on the breeze – the sweet aroma of incense mingling with the acrid tang of smoke. I recognized it now: a mixture used to mask the stench of decay, one that hung heavy in the apothecary's shop. My mind recoiled at the connection, and I exchanged a tense glance with Lyra.

"You're saying Father was killed because of what he discovered," Lyra said finally, her voice laced with accusation. Thorne's eyes dropped, his shoulders sagging under the weight of his own guilt. "Not directly...but he became a liability. If the Devourer's existence were to become known, it would be catastrophic. The Order would have to deny everything, cover up the truth at any cost." His words trailed off, leaving an

unspoken threat hanging in the air.

The moon above seemed to hang low in the sky, casting long shadows across the arbor as if trying to escape the weight of Thorne's words. I felt Lyra's hand slip from mine, her eyes fixed on the darkness beyond our sheltered sanctuary. "And what about us?" she asked softly, her voice barely audible over the distant hum of crickets.

The shadows cast by the moon seemed to deepen, as if trying to conceal Thorne's guilt-ridden expression from prying eyes. I felt Lyra's gaze drift towards him, her eyes searching for answers he refused to give. "What about us?" she repeated, her voice a soft echo in the stillness.

Thorne's hands clenched into fists, his knuckles white-knuckled as he struggled with the weight of his words. The silence that followed seemed to stretch on forever, heavy with unspoken promises and broken oaths. I shifted uncomfortably, feeling the stone bench beneath me grow cold beneath my weight. "You two are already entangled in this," Thorne said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "The Devourer's hunger is not limited to those who wield threads; it also draws on the threads of fate that bind them together."

I felt Lyra's hand brush mine again, her fingers intertwining with mine as if trying to anchor me to reality. Her eyes met Thorne's, pleading for reassurance he couldn't give. "What do you mean?" I asked, my voice shaking slightly as the weight of Thorne's words settled in.

Thorne's gaze darted around the arbor once more, his eyes searching for unseen listeners. The moon seemed to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the garden paths as if trying to conceal the truth from prying eyes. "Your father knew that you two were connected," he said quietly, his voice laced with a hint of apology. "You share a...thread, a bond forged during a ritual when you were both young." Lyra's grip on my hand tightened, her knuckles turning white as she absorbed the weight of Thorne's words.

A cold dread crept up my spine at the mention of the ritual, and I exchanged a nervous glance with Lyra. "What kind of ritual?" she asked softly, her voice trembling despite her attempt to hide it. Thorne's eyes met hers, his expression grim. "One that bound you two together in more ways than one," he said quietly. "The Devourer senses your connection; it's drawn to the threads that bind you, making you both more vulnerable than you realize." The air seemed to thicken around us, heavy with foreboding as I realized the true extent of our entanglement.

Thorne's words hung in the air like a challenge, his eyes locked on ours as if daring us to deny or ignore the truth. But Lyra and I both knew better - we'd felt it ourselves, a sense of connection that went beyond mere family ties. The knowledge sent a shiver down my spine, and I squeezed Lyra's hand tightly, trying to offer what little comfort I

could. But as I met Thorne's gaze, I saw something there that chilled me to the bone – a glimmer of a plan, one that would put us all in greater danger than we could ever have imagined.

Tags: Era of Order, Moral Cost, Secrecy