

# When Mercy Fails

Black

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The rain-soaked streets of Ashen Roads stank with desperation. Kael Varn navigated these alleys with practiced ease, dodging muggers and beggars as he went. His client, a hooded figure, waited by the decrepit fountain at the crossroads. The air reeked of mold and decay, and the flickering torches cast eerie shadows on the walls.

"Your... employer," Kael said, eyes locked on the hood, "has told me that your son lies gravely ill."

The hood slipped back, revealing a woman with sunken eyes and skin like worn leather. "Aye, Lord Varn. He's the only family I have left." Her voice trembled as she fished a pouch from her cloak.

Kael took the coin and silver necklace she offered. His fingers closed over it; he counted out the exact weight before handing it back. "These are... insufficient." He pocketed the tokens, feeling the familiar, heavy tug of the Order's debt mechanism settling within him.

"You've been to Thalos, tried every apothecary," she said, her words laced with desperation.

"Thalos is not my realm, madam. Your son's condition... I can sense it." Kael closed his eyes and breathed in; the rain-washed stench gave way to the sweet scent of decayed flowers and death – his familiar. He stepped closer, senses reaching out, weighing the threads that bound her child's life.

The cost of this probing, a faint echo within his mind: memories of Melosdra's sister, Elara, dying in his arms. He blinked it back.

"The black flux has consumed him," Kael said finally. "My employer told you I could help."

"I... I was desperate." Her voice cracked as she clutched his sleeve.

He released her grasp and turned to leave. "You should have sought me sooner, madam. Now the price will be higher. We need—"

"Please," she begged, falling to her knees. "Do it. For my son's sake."

Kael hesitated at the edge of a scream within himself. This was why he walked where armies couldn't – for these broken souls who sought him out when all else had failed. He pulled out his dagger and pressed the blade to his palm, channeling the blood into his hand.

A thin stream flowed from his hand as he raised it toward the child's room in the alley above. The woman didn't see what happened next – only that her son stirred in bed before collapsing again.

Kael turned back down into the rain, wiping the cool water on his face to erase the memory of Elara's death. "I'll... I'll keep watch," he said without turning. His voice was a whispered reminder of his own debt: a constant vigil, night and day.

As he descended deeper into Ashen Roads' labyrinthine alleys, shadows swallowing him whole, Kael felt it – the slow burn that would one day become an unending fire within him.

As he walked, the rain-soaked streets seemed to close in around him, mirroring the darkness gathering within. Kael Varn had long since lost count of the nights he'd spent watching, waiting for the inevitable, the debt's heavy weight settling on his shoulders like an unyielding shroud.

His client's coins and trinkets still weighed heavy in his pocket, a tangible reminder of the price he paid to keep the balance. He navigated through alleys so narrow the torches on the walls seemed to hover above him like sentinels, casting flickering shadows that danced on the wet stone beneath his feet.

Kael's thoughts turned back to the woman and her son, her eyes sunken with desperation. He'd seen it before – the desperation that clung to those who sought the Order's aid. It was a desperate grasp at straws, a final prayer in the dark. He'd done it himself once, long ago. The memory of Elara's face twisted in pain as he held her still echoed through his mind like a cold wind.

At last, Kael emerged into the relative safety of the narrow canals that crisscrossed Ashen Roads. A lone gondola awaited him, piloted by the silent figure of Lyra, an old ally of sorts – not a member of the Order, but one who kept her own secrets and traded in them when it suited her.

"Where to?" she asked as Kael settled into the cushions, his eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of pursuit. The canal water lapped gently against the hull, a soothing melody that contrasted sharply with the turmoil brewing within him.

Kael hesitated before answering. "I need supplies – herbs, potions, anything I can find. Thalos won't be able to provide what we need, and I'll need something to make up for the debt..." He trailed off, lost in thought as Lyra nodded silently and began to navigate the winding canals.

As they glided past darkened houses and shuttered shops, Kael watched the city's underbelly unfold. It was a place where darkness seeped into every pore, where the only thing more plentiful than shadows was desperation. He knew its rhythms, its cadence – but tonight, something felt off.

"What's bothering you?" Lyra asked quietly as she guided the gondola beneath an overhanging bridge, the water below them a deep, inky black.

Kael closed his eyes, letting the silence wash over him. It wasn't just the weight of the debt or the memory of Elara that haunted him – it was something more. Something he couldn't quite name. "Nothing," he lied finally, the sound hollow even to his own ears.

Lyra's expression was unreadable in the dim light, but she said nothing further as they glided deeper into Ashen Roads' hidden heart.

The city's shadows seemed to close in around them, and Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as Lyra navigated a particularly narrow stretch of canal. He'd known her for years – she was a woman of few words, but one whose loyalty he could rely on in the dark corners of Ashen Roads.

As they reached the docks, the city's sounds grew louder: hawkers calling out their wares, the clang of hammer on anvil from the nearby blacksmith. Lyra docked the gondola with a practiced hand and leapt out onto the dock, disappearing into the crowd. Kael followed, his eyes scanning the rooftops for any sign of pursuit.

The streets were alive tonight – more so than usual. He spotted a group of rough-looking men huddled near the market stalls, their faces obscured by cloaks and hoods. Their laughter was low and menacing, and Kael's grip on his dagger tightened instinctively as he passed by them. Lyra caught up to him, her own hand slipping into the pocket of her tunic where a small blade waited.

"You didn't tell me you were making any new enemies," she said, her voice barely audible over the din of the market.

Kael hesitated before answering, unsure how much he wanted to reveal. "I'm not sure I am – yet."

Their supplier, an old apothecary named Cassius, was tucked away in a narrow shop near the edge of the market. The sign above the door creaked in the wind, bearing a faded image of a serpent coiled around a staff. Lyra pushed open the door, revealing a cluttered space filled with the pungent scent of herbs and strange concoctions.

Inside, Cassius looked up from his workbench, where a delicate task was suspended mid-craft: the delicate assembly of a series of tiny glass vials. His eyes flickered between Kael and Lyra before settling on the black pouches at their feet. "So you're here for more... donations," he said, his voice dry as the dust that coated every

surface in his shop.

Kael winced inwardly – Cassius didn't approve of the debt mechanism, but he knew better than to refuse the Order's requests. He pulled out a handful of silver coins and laid them on the counter. "We need something... for a child," he said finally. "The black flux. I know it's not common, but we've tried everything else."

Cassius' expression turned grave as he surveyed the pouches again before reaching beneath his workbench. "You're playing with fire, Kael Varn," he muttered, producing a small vial filled with a dark liquid that seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy.

Kael took it, feeling the familiar tug of the debt mechanism stirring within him – a reminder that this wasn't just a simple purchase, but a transaction in blood and soul.

The apothecary's warning hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael just handed over the pouches containing Elara's tokens, the coins clinking against the vial of dark liquid as he accepted it. Cassius' hands were always stained with ink and dust, but tonight they looked worn, his eyes sunken into their sockets. "What's wrong?" Kael asked, a flicker of concern rising.

Cassius rubbed at his temple, wincing as if the question itself pained him. "Just the usual, I suppose – the Order's influence spreading its roots deeper into Ashen Roads. The whispers in the night are getting louder, and the... requests. More often than not they're for things that can't be paid back." His voice dropped to a whisper as he glanced around the shop, as if ensuring they were truly alone. "You know I'm not one for politics, Kael Varn, but even I've seen the signs – Thalos has a price to pay now, and you're just the instrument."

Lyra shifted beside him, her hand on the grip of her blade, while Kael's thoughts spun with the implications. Cassius was usually tight-lipped about the Order's machinations, and for him to speak so openly meant something had changed – or at least, someone's patience had worn thin. He glanced around the shop once more before returning his attention to the apothecary. "What do you mean by 'Thalos has a price to pay'?" Kael asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Cassius took a step back, gesturing toward the rear of the shop where shelves stacked with dusty jars and forgotten artifacts loomed in the shadows. "You've seen it before, I'm sure – the way those who take on... commitments to the Order start to lose themselves. Their eyes, their skin – even the lines of their lives seem to change, as if time itself is bending to accommodate the weight of what they're asked to bear." His voice grew hushed once more. "I've seen it in you, Kael Varn, and I'll not pretend ignorance if I don't see it in my own family soon."

The apothecary's words felt like a slap to the back of his head, forcing Kael's thoughts into sharp focus. He'd walked this tightrope for so long, maintaining the balance

between his duties to the Order and his humanity – but with each step forward, he felt himself slipping further away from what little remained of that original self. His mind wandered back to Elara, and he could almost feel her hand slipping through his fingers like sand in an hourglass.

A sharp nudge from Lyra brought him back into the present, the apothecary's words seared into his memory now. He nodded once, acknowledging Cassius' warning, before asking, "We'll pay for what we need – but is there anything else you can tell me?"

Cassius exchanged a glance with Lyra that spoke volumes about their mutual unease. When he spoke, his tone was measured, every word weighed. "There's talk of a new initiate, someone who's managed to tap into the deeper channels within the Order's network. Thalos is said to be testing them, pushing the limits of what they're capable of – and the cost... I've seen some of what it costs."

The apothecary's words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt his grip on the vial of dark liquid tighten involuntarily. He thought back to his last encounter with Thalos – the pressure had been palpable, the air thick with anticipation as he'd pushed himself to the limits of what was possible. The cost had been steep then, but manageable, and he'd paid it without hesitation. But Cassius' words hinted at something new, something that threatened to upset the balance he'd fought so hard to maintain.

"You're saying this initiate is... different," Lyra said, her voice low and even, but with a thread of curiosity weaving through it. She leaned in, her eyes locked on the apothecary's face as if searching for any sign of deception.

Cassius nodded once, his expression grim. "Yes. I've seen some of their... endeavors. The things they're capable of – it's like nothing I've ever seen before." He paused, studying Kael and Lyra intently before continuing. "But there's a price to pay, as I said. One that goes far beyond mere life or limb."

Kael felt a shiver run down his spine at the apothecary's words, and he glanced around the shop once more, this time searching for any sign of an eavesdropper. The streets outside seemed just as crowded as before, but the air felt charged with an undercurrent of tension – as if everyone was holding their breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

"What kind of price?" Lyra asked, her voice a little sharper now, her hand tightening on the grip of her blade.

Cassius' eyes dropped to his workbench, where the delicate assembly of vials still waited. "Memories," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "The initiate is taking them – memories from others, memories that aren't their own. And with each

one they claim... the initiate grows stronger, more connected to the very fabric of the Order itself."

Kael's mind reeled at the words, his thoughts tumbling back to Elara and her haunted eyes. He'd always known the Order's power came at a cost, but this – this was something new, something that threatened to rip apart the very foundations of their world.

"Cassius," he said finally, his voice low and urgent, "who is this initiate? Where do I find them?"

The apothecary glanced around the shop once more before leaning in close. "I don't know who they are, Kael Varn – but I can tell you where they're being tested." He scribbled a hasty note on a piece of parchment and handed it to Kael, his eyes flicking between the pair as if searching for any sign that he was making a grave mistake.

"Be careful," he said finally. "The initiate's... influence is spreading. You don't want to be anywhere near them when they break."

Kael took the note, his heart pounding in his chest as he unfolded it and scanned the scribbled address – an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Ashen Roads, a place rumored to be under the Order's direct control. He knew what that meant: Thalos' testing ground.

Without a word, Kael tucked the note into his pocket, the vial of dark liquid clutched tightly in his hand as he turned towards Lyra. "We need to move," he said finally, his voice low and urgent.

The streets were a blur as Kael led Lyra through the winding alleys of Ashen Roads, the darkness swallowing them whole. They moved with a practiced silence, their footsteps light on the worn cobblestones. The note clutched in his hand seemed to burn with an inner fire, its address seared into his mind like a brand. He'd been here before, but never for this purpose.

A faint mist hung over the rooftops as they approached the outskirts of the city, casting long shadows across the deserted streets. The abandoned warehouse loomed ahead, its walls cracked and worn, the windows shattered like empty eyes. Kael's gut twisted with a mix of trepidation and anticipation – he'd faced Thalos' trials before, but never one this... delicate.

Lyra moved closer, her hand on his arm as they slowed to a stop in front of the warehouse. "You ready for this?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the distant hum of the city's nightlife.

Kael took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the structure with a practiced gaze – searching for any sign of traps or hidden guards. But there was nothing; just an

oppressive silence that hung like a shroud over the building. "Let's do this," he said finally, tucking the note into his sleeve and drawing his blade in a smooth, fluid motion.

Together, they slipped into the warehouse, their footsteps echoing off the walls as they moved deeper into the darkness. The air inside reeked of mold and decay, the stench hanging heavy over them like a miasma. Kael covered his nose with his sleeve, his heart pounding in anticipation – this was it; this was where the initiate waited.

A series of makeshift cells lined the walls, each one containing a figure or more slumped against the bars, their eyes vacant and dull. The air was thick with the weight of memories – not just anyone's, but memories shared across the network, the initiate's influence seeping into every corner of the warehouse. Kael's skin crawled as he realized that Cassius had only scratched the surface.

He spotted a figure standing at the far end of the room, a hood pulled up over their head as they surveyed the cells with an air of detached interest. The initiate, perhaps? Kael's eyes narrowed – there was something familiar in their stance, something that sent a shiver down his spine.

As Kael watched, the figure turned, their hood slipping back to reveal a mop of tangled brown hair that fell to their shoulders in loose waves. Elara's eyes met his, her gaze like a cold wind that sent shivers down his spine. For an instant, he was frozen, his mind reeling as he struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. Then, with a jolt, reality snapped back into focus and he took a step forward, his hand on the grip of his blade tightening involuntarily.

"Elara," he said, the word barely above a whisper, as if saying it aloud might shatter the fragile thread of reality that bound them to this place. She didn't respond, her eyes fixed on him with an unblinking intensity that made his skin crawl. Kael's gaze darted around the warehouse, searching for any sign of Thalos or the initiate, but they were alone. For now.

He took another step forward, Lyra moving in tandem beside him, their footsteps echoing off the walls as they approached Elara. The cells seemed to stretch on forever, each one containing a figure lost in a sea of memories, their eyes empty and vacant. Kael's mind recoiled at the thought of what lay within – memories stolen from others, fed into the initiate like fuel for a fire.

"Elara," he said again, his voice firmer this time, as if repetition might somehow anchor him to reality. She blinked once, her gaze flicking towards Lyra and back to Kael before focusing on something behind him. Her eyes widened, and for an instant, a spark of recognition flared in their depths. Then it was gone, extinguished like a candle in a gale.

Thalos emerged from the shadows, his presence like a cold wind that sent shivers down Kael's spine. He wore a mask of calm interest, but his eyes gleamed with a hunger that made Kael's gut twist with foreboding. "Ah, Kael Varn," he said, his voice low and measured. "I've been expecting you. You're just in time to witness the initiate's next test."

Kael's eyes locked onto Thalos, his mind racing with questions as he took another step forward, Lyra moving in sync beside him. "What test?" he growled, trying to keep the anger from his voice.

Thalos' smile was a thin line. "The initiate has chosen you, Kael Varn. You're to be its next subject." He gestured to Elara, who stood frozen, her eyes fixed on some point behind Kael's shoulder. "You see, she's been collecting memories - not just from the initiates, but from those who have failed the trials. And now, it seems you'll join their ranks."

Kael's gut twisted with a sense of unease as he glanced over his shoulder, and that was when he saw it - a row of figures slumped against the far wall, their eyes vacant, their skin grayed. Lyra followed his gaze, her hand tightening on her own blade.

"Where are we going?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of Thalos' footsteps as he moved closer to Elara. The initiate's eyes flickered towards him, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw something there - a glimmer of recognition, or perhaps even warmth. But it was snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

Thalos led them deeper into the warehouse, through rows of cells that seemed to stretch on forever. Each one contained a figure lost in a sea of memories, their eyes empty and vacant. Kael's skin crawled as he realized just how many lives had been touched by the initiate - how many people had given up pieces of themselves to this dark purpose.

They reached a large door at the far end of the warehouse, adorned with intricate carvings that seemed to pulse with a faint blue light. Elara moved ahead, her eyes fixed on the initiate's back as Thalos pushed open the door with a creak. "This is where it happens," he said, his voice dripping with anticipation.

Inside, Kael found himself in a small room filled with strange equipment - vials of liquid, delicate instruments that seemed to hum with a soft blue light. Elara stood at the center of the room, her eyes fixed on some point ahead as she reached out a hand to touch a nearby console. The initiate's influence seemed to seep from every corner of the room, wrapping around Kael like a shroud.

"Begin," Thalos said, his voice low and urgent. "The initiate is ready for you, Kael Varn." And with that, Elara's hand closed on the console, and the room plunged into darkness.

Tags: Kael Varn, Judgment, Consequences