

Oaths of The Flame

Pieter Loose

original edition

Oaths of The Flame

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Cover design by Pieter Loose

Last Edited by Pieter Loose

original First paperback edition, 2025

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SBN: 9789403803449

Dedicated to my Mother

*“We are not what we have done,
we are what we have overcome.”*

— *Anonymous*

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Chapter 1

The Dance of Velvet and Vows

***T**hey met under the vaulted ceilings of the Citadel Hall, where chandeliers hung like captured constellations and every whispered promise was a weapon waiting to strike. Selene Veylor moved like smoke through the crowd, her gown a shade darker than mourning.*

She wore no jewels — she was the jewel, the shimmering proof that House Veylor had survived the Quiet Purge when so many others had burned. Survival had a cost. She carried it like a blade hidden in velvet, honed sharper with every breath she took. Around her, courtiers laughed too loudly, their mirth thin and brittle, their lips stained with lies. Every smile, a snare. Every glance, a judgment. Eyes followed her like hounds. Some with envy.

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Others with suspicion. Stewards in dark crimson livery drifted at the room's edge, bearing the sigil of the Dominion Triumvirate

*a triskelion of iron thorns.
Watching. Weighing.*

The Dominion rules everything — the court, the church, the Houses — and it rules by fear, not truth. And my father serves them. So does every House that still smiles at their table. And among the courtiers, Selene spotted ***Lady Riona Thorne***. Riona stood like a promise no one could afford to keep — all gold and grace, with a mind sharp enough to cut silk mid-fall. She smiled like a saint, whispered like a spy, and watched Selene not with hatred, but with calculation. Riona did not destroy enemies; she made them destroy themselves.

Her gaze brushed over Selene, lingering a heartbeat too long. Her lips curved in a smile that held no warmth — a promise, perhaps.

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Or a threat. Selene inclined her head in perfect civility and moved on, heart steady, smile unbroken. “You look stunning, my dear,” Riona said as Selene passed. Selene smiled — flawless, empty, practiced — and did not stop walking. And across the room, leaning with idle arrogance against a marble pillar, was young *Lord Cassian Merrow*. Cassian, the enemy. The temptation she could not afford.

The one man her House had sworn to destroy. His gaze found hers through the press of lords and ladies, pinning her in place more surely than any blade. He lifted his glass in a mocking salute, the tilt of it lazy, almost insolent. A steward hesitated mid-step. A noblewoman’s laughter faltered. Cassian Merrow’s presence was not a scandal. It was a challenge. He was not supposed to be here — his family had been stripped of lands, titles, and dignity after the failed rebellion. Cassian was the last heir of his house since the Quiet Purge claimed his father’s life. His appearance tonight was an act of open defiance. A dare, flung like a gauntlet at the feet of the court. Selene’s blood hummed with warning.

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If her father — or worse, the Minister of Shadows — saw her looking, even for a heartbeat, it would be over. Not whispers.

Not scandal. Execution. Disgrace.

The stripping of her House's name from the rolls. The end of Veylor — not in fire, but in silence. And yet, when Cassian pushed away from the pillar and began threading his way through the golden throng toward her, Selene found she could not move. Could not breathe. Could not look away. They met not in words, but in the shared silence of those who understood:

this would ruin them.

This would damn them.

And still, when Cassian bowed low and offered his gloved hand, Selene placed hers atop it without hesitation. The orchestra shifted into a slower cadence, a waltz built not for joy but for spectacle.

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Selene felt the weight of a hundred gazes pivot toward them as they took the floor, spinning beneath the chandeliers' cruel, unblinking eyes. Her heart hammered. At the edge of the hall, she caught Riona again, murmuring behind a silk fan with another courtier. Their gazes slid to Selene, sharp as knives. "You shouldn't be here," she murmured as Cassian drew her into a slow turn, their bodies too close, their hands too sure. Cassian smiled, a wolf's smile polished to courtly charm — but in his eyes, something raw flickered: exhaustion, grief, a hollow place not even arrogance could mask. "Neither should you."

"I haven't betrayed anyone,"
she said softly, her pulse thudding.

"No," he agreed.

"You're just the one they'll make betray herself."

The words cut deeper than they should have. Selene set her jaw, her steps sharp and flawless, keeping time even as her thoughts frayed. Around them, the court whispered. The scent of wine and wax and ambition pressed close.

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Stewards moved like shadows at the room's edge. Eyes narrowed.

Daggers were drawn — some no longer just in metaphor. “You’ve caused a scandal just by showing your face. Your presence alone is a crime now. The Lords Triumvirate will demand blood.” “Let them demand,” Cassian said, voice low, meant for her ears alone. “They can have my blood — when they earn it.” “And mine?” she asked, before she could stop herself. For a heartbeat, Cassian’s hand tightened fractionally at her waist. His gaze burned into hers with something far more dangerous than defiance — something closer to devotion. Recognition of the same breaking inside her. “No,” he said. “Yours is the one thing I will not give them.” The dance ended with a flourish. The court applauded, some too eagerly, some with knives glinting behind their smiles.

Selene curtsied; Cassian bowed. For the span of a breath, she thought they might part ways — play their roles, pretend none of it had happened. Then a hand brushed her sleeve — discreet, almost accidental. Cassian slipped a folded scrap of parchment into her palm.

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Midnight. The Winter Gallery.

The handwriting was unmistakable, and the parchment still held the scent of him. Selene barely blinked as she tucked it into the folds of her gown, expression serene. To refuse would be safe. Wise. Loyal. She was Veylor. Daughter of legacy. Servant of power. Not a fool. And yet, as she stepped away into the swirling sea of politics and poison, Selene already knew she would go.

The Winter Gallery

The bells of the Inner Court tolled midnight, each chime heavy as a sealed fate. Selene moved like a shadow through the abandoned halls of the Citadel, her steps soundless against the marble. Her gown was gone, traded for a cloak the color of deep wine, the hood drawn low over her hair.

No attendants. No guards. No alibis. Every step carved the path of her own undoing. If anyone saw her wandering alone at this hour, the rumors would write themselves

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before dawn — and the executioners would not lag far behind.

The Winter Gallery was the oldest part of the palace, left untouched by rebuilding after the Purge. Here, the stones still bore the scars of ancient sieges, murals faded into ghosts, histories the Dominion would rather erase than honor. A cold draft gusted through the cracked mosaics, carrying the faint scent of ash.

Selene paused before a faded fresco — a crowned figure standing defiant against a burning sky. Strange sigils wreathed the figure's brow, half-erased, half-forgotten.

Old blood. Old vows.

Something in her chest ached. Something ancestral. Something dangerous. The sound of armor rattling in the distance shook her loose from the moment. She pressed deeper into the shadows, heart hammering against her ribs. Tonight, I choose my ruin, she thought grimly. Not theirs. Not my father's. She stepped inside. Cassian was already waiting.

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He leaned against the far wall, half-swallowed by the gloom. Only the silver embroidery at his collar caught the moonlight.

He looked as he always had — reckless, self-assured — but Selene could see it now: the careful set of his shoulders, the tension radiating from him, like a man walking a blade's edge. "You came," he said. "You left me no choice," she answered, though both of them knew it was a lie. A flicker of a smile crossed his lips — quick, bitter. "There's always a choice." Selene said nothing. In the Dominion's court, choices were illusions — prettied up in silk, sharpened into knives.

She moved closer. "You should have stayed gone," she said.

*"The Dominion declared your House forfeit. Your lands.
Your titles. Your name."*

"And yet,"

Cassian said, pushing off the wall,
"here I stand. And here you are."

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Their eyes locked. The silence between them said too much. “You think this changes anything?” she asked. “I think it changes everything,” he said. “I think you and I are already lost, Selene. The only question left is how we fall.”

For a moment, the world outside the Winter Gallery ceased to exist.

No Dominion. No Houses.

No loyalties but the ones they made themselves. Selene reached up and pulled down her hood. The moonlight painted her hair silver. Cassian drew in a sharp breath, almost imperceptible. “You think you can survive this court without a House to shield you?” she said, voice cutting. “Without blood ties to barter? Without a sigil to swear by?”

“I don’t need a House,” Cassian said. He took a step closer, and Selene did not retreat. “I need an ally.” “And you think I would ever ally with you?” Cassian smiled, but Selene caught it — the flicker of doubt beneath the danger. “You already have.”

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Before Selene could answer — before she could summon the anger she should feel — Cassian reached out and brushed his fingers lightly against hers. The touch was nothing. And yet it shattered something inside her.

Selene closed her eyes, just for a heartbeat, and let herself imagine it: a world without sigils or blood debts. A world where she could want what she wanted without drowning in guilt and ruin. She opened her eyes. Cassian was still there, waiting — not demanding, not forcing. Simply waiting for her to choose.

Madness. Death. And then: freedom.

“I have secrets,” Cassian said, voice low. “Information your father would kill to possess. Information that could tear the Dominion apart.” “I have names, Selene. Dates. Letters signed in your father’s own hand. Proof of the Quiet Purge — of nobles, soldiers, even children, erased without trial and buried without record. The Dominion feeds on silence, but I’ve stolen its voice.” He leaned closer, eyes flickering with dangerous fire. “Your House wasn’t spared.

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Some of those names... they wore your colors before they vanished." Selene's heart kicked painfully against her ribs.

"Meet with me," Cassian said. "No one has to know. Help me, Selene. Help yourself." It was suicide. It was treason. It was the first breath of a future she dared not dream.

Her hand trembled, just once. "When?" she whispered. Cassian smiled — a real smile this time. Unguarded. Broken. Radiant.

"I'll find you," he said. And before the weight of what she had agreed to could crush her, he was gone, swallowed by the shadows. Selene stood in the ruins of a forgotten gallery. The threads of her future slipped through her fingers like a tapestry come undone.

And tonight, she had chosen.

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The Dance of Blade and Oath

Obsidian Hold, the seat of House Veylor, juts from the cliffside like a blade in the dark — severe, angular, and cold as judgment. Its halls, carved from black stone veined with fire-gold, seem built not to shelter, but to command obedience. Selene lunged across the polished marble, her practice sword flashing. Sweat slicked her back beneath the high-collared tunic, each step measured, each strike deliberate.

Across from her, *Master Corlin* moved like a wraith in gray — his blade tapping aside her attack with effortless disdain. “Again,” Corlin barked. “And this time, less hesitation.” Selene ground her teeth and struck anew, the sharp crack of steel echoing between the high walls. Her muscles burned. Each breath felt like swallowing fire. Above them, carved balconies loomed, and she knew unseen courtiers watched — weighing her worth as surely as any duel. Corlin parried easily, pressing her back. “A Veylor blade defends legacy, girl. Not foolish passions.”

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Cassian's mocking bow at the ball flashed behind her eyes.

Her grip wavered. Her strike faltered. Corlin caught her off-balance, knocking her weapon wide. Sweat stung her eyes. Her lungs ached for air. He stepped close, voice dropping to a cold whisper. "If you let your heart guide your hand, the court will bleed you dry before the first blow lands." Selene wrenched free, cheeks burning with more than exertion.

"You are the future of House Veylor," Corlin said. "You are the blade in velvet. Not some trembling girl led by sentiment. Emotion is a weakness we can't afford — not here. Not now." He circled again, forcing her to move, to guard, to sweat and strain until every blow came from instinct, not feeling.

"A blade with a heart," he sneered, "is a blade that rusts." Selene drove forward, teeth bared, forcing him back for the first time. Corlin's grin was razor-thin. Then it softened — just barely. "Good," he said. "Now show them what Veylor steel remembers."

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The Hollowspire.

Once the seat of House Marivell, the Hollowspire rises like a broken crown over drowned ruins — elegant in decay, its spires cracked but unbowed. When the Quiet Purge erased his bloodline, Cassian cast off his name. Merrow became his mask in the ashes — a name chosen, not inherited.

Half a city away, in the blackened skeleton of a once-grand estate, Cassian drove his sword hard against his sparring partner's. The force jarred up through his bones. Steel shrieked as old *Master Derran* twisted, catching the blow and throwing it wide with effortless precision. Dust and broken mortar crumbled beneath their boots.

"You're thinking again," Derran snapped. His voice was dry gravel. His white hair hung loose over his brow, and his tunic was scorched and threadbare — as if it too had survived the purge. Cassian didn't answer. He circled slowly, boots grinding over shattered flagstone. The winter chill had numbed his fingers, but the burn in his shoulders and thighs was sharp and real. Each breath misted, shallow and fast.

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“Hard not to think,” he muttered finally, “when half the city wants you dead.” Derran tilted his head. “And the other half?” Cassian hesitated. A flicker of memory — Selene’s hand in his, the court’s stares, the silent promise in her eyes — stabbed through him.

“Gone,”

he said.

“Dead already. They just don’t know it.”

Derran grunted.

“Now you’re learning.”

He lunged without warning. Cassian barely got his blade up in time. The clash rang through the courtyard like a bell tolling for ghosts. They fought in tight, brutal exchanges, blades flashing beneath the open sky.

The ruins loomed around them — shattered arches, blackened windows, ivy curling through broken stone like veins through old bone. Once, it had been proud. Now it was ash and memory. “Your House is gone,” Derran barked between strikes. “Your father’s bones were taken with the trash.

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Your name — nothing but a whisper in rooms you'll never enter again." Cassian's guard broke. Derran knocked his sword aside, stepped in, and struck him hard across the jaw with the hilt. Cassian staggered, breath ragged, mouth filling with the taste of iron. "And you," Derran said, closing in, "still think fury is enough to keep you standing."

"I don't want their titles."

Cassian spat blood, raised his blade. "Then what do you want?" He feinted left, twisted his hips, slashed right — forcing Derran back a step, then another. He pressed forward, eyes blazing. Derran struck three times, each blow a blur. "Dead, dead, and dead. Gods, concentrate."

"I want them to choke," Cassian hissed. "On every lie they've fed us. On the purge. On the silence. On the names they erased." "I want the Dominion to burn." For a breath, Derran didn't move. Then he smiled — barely a ghost of one. "Good." He raised his sword. "But anger without control is just noise." Cassian rushed in — too fast, too wild.

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His swings were powerful, but undisciplined. Frustration, not form. Derran blocked one, ducked the next, then swept his leg under Cassian's. The younger man hit the ground hard, the air blasted from his lungs. "Again," Derran said flatly. Cassian lay still, staring up at the colorless sky through broken beams. His chest rose and fell in ragged rhythm.

"Is that your grand plan?" Derran asked. "Burn fast, die spectacularly — and what, hope someone tells your story afterward?" Cassian rolled onto one elbow, glaring. "It's better than rotting in silence." Derran studied him. Something colder settled in his eyes — not cruelty, but the weight of survival. "Maybe," he said. "Or maybe it's just another way to lose."

He offered no hand. Only words. "Whatever you're planning, it's not enough to hate them. You have to want something more than revenge. You have to want yourself alive." Cassian didn't answer. He stood slowly, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. Derran gave him one last look — measuring, cautious. "You're not your father." A pause. "That's not a warning. It's a chance."

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He turned and walked away. "Get stronger, Cassian. Or don't waste your breath being clever. Breaking things is easy. Building them — that takes blood." Cassian stood alone in the cold, broken estate. His fingers curled around the hilt of his sword. This wasn't about dying for a cause. It was about making them remember why they feared his name in the first place.

Steel rang in Selene's ears as Corlin drove her toward the courtyard's fountain. "Legacy, girl!" he snapped. "Every step you take, every smile you offer, every blade you draw — it is not yours. It is Veylor's." She countered, faster now, each movement flowing with purpose, not anger.

Cassian wiped blood from his split lip, raising his blade again beneath the sagging bones of his ruined hall.

"No banners left to die for," Derran said, circling. "Only ghosts whispering in the cracks."

Selene locked blades with Corlin, their swords straining between them.