

# A SILENCE THAT SPEAKS LOUD

Black

## Silence in Ashen Roads

Kael Varn stood at the window, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out into the night. The streets of Everia's capital city were always alive with whispers and secrets, but tonight they seemed to writhe like living shadows. He breathed in the scent of damp earth and stone, a familiar reminder that even in the heart of the Order, darkness seeped through the cracks.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his reverie. Kael turned from the window, eyes narrowing as he recognized the rap: two short knocks followed by three long ones, a message from House Veylan's messenger. He'd been expecting this summons for days.

He opened the door to reveal a hooded figure dressed in dark leather, the emblem of Ashen Roads emblazoned on their shoulder patch. "Kael Varn," they said, voice low and urgent. "Curator Thalia sends word: an... imbalance has developed."

The roads were always whispering secrets, but Kael knew this one was more than just idle rumor. He donned a cloak and followed the messenger through the winding streets of Everia's Nightforged district, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the damp buildings.

Their route led them to a small, unassuming tavern near the Black Rose Order's main square. Inside, Kael found Curator Thalia seated at a table near the fire, her eyes hooded and her face set in a stern expression. Across from her sat a young woman with dark hair and an anxious air, her hands clasped tightly together.

"Kael," Thalia said without rising. "We have a problem."

The woman introduced herself as Elianore Quasar, an apprentice astronomer who'd uncovered a disturbing pattern in the celestial charts. As Kael listened, his eyes narrowed. Quasar's words hinted at more than just astronomical anomalies – they spoke of an imbalance within the fabric itself.

"This is no trivial matter," Thalia said. "The Knighthood has requested your presence. The Order will send a team to investigate, and you are its member."

Kael nodded, the silence that lay between him and the unknown growing heavy as stone. He rose, his eyes meeting Quasar's. In her gaze, he saw a flicker of

understanding: she knew the weight of what was being asked.

Outside, beneath the night sky, Kael made his own connection. A whispered promise to Thalia - "balance over righteousness" - and he felt the faint hum of Nightforge's power. His fingers brushed against Quasar's as they parted, sending a tremor through him. The touch left its own subtle cost: memory loss. He remembered only fragments now: a forgotten melody, a face from his childhood.

He joined the team assembled to investigate, following them into the depths of Everia's undercity - narrow tunnels and hidden caverns where the true balance lay buried. As they descended, Kael felt Quasar at his side, her grip light on his arm.

Their task was not merely to find the source but to silence it, gently. A subtle correction: a whispered word here, a careful removal there. The balance required patience and restraint, lest they disturb the equilibrium further.

A long day of searching yielded nothing, save a fragment of broken glass from an ancient artifact. Kael pocketed it, the faint taste of the Nightforge's power still burning within him. It was late when he finally returned to his rooms, eyes tired but senses heightened.

Quasar waited on the step outside, her face illuminated only by the flickering torches of the city above. "What did you find?" she asked, voice barely audible over the night's soft roar.

Kael hesitated before answering. "Nothing that can be spoken."

The silence that followed was like a heavy blanket, crushing in its stillness. And then he spoke, his words low and deliberate: "But I will find it, Elianore. For balance's sake."

As she turned to disappear into the night, Kael felt another touch - a ghostly brush of fingers on his arm, leaving behind the faint whisper of Melosdra's blessing. Balance over righteousness, indeed.

The streets of Everia's Nightforged district seemed to writhe and twist around him like a living entity as Kael made his way back to his rooms, Quasar's words echoing in his mind: "Nothing that can be spoken." He wondered what secrets the undercity held, hidden beneath its ancient stones. The fragment of broken glass he'd found still clutched in his pocket seemed to hum with an otherworldly energy.

As he entered his quarters, a faint scent of old parchment and sandalwood wafted up from the desk, where a single candle cast flickering shadows on the walls. Kael shed his cloak and poured himself a cup of wine from the carafe on the sideboard. The silence that had settled between him and Quasar still lingered, heavy as a promise unspoken. He sat down at the desk, running his thumb over the edge of the broken glass, which he'd placed on a small dish in front of him.

The night wore on, Kael's thoughts consumed by the puzzle Elianore Quasar had presented: an imbalance in the fabric itself. He knew that if the fabric unraveled, the very foundation of the world would shudder. The weight of responsibility settled heavy on his shoulders as he delved deeper into the mystery, pouring over dusty tomes and seeking guidance from the whispers of Nightforge's power.

Hours turned into dawn, the city above awakening with the soft murmur of early risers and market vendors. Kael's eyes, tired but still burning with an inner fire, scanned the pages of a worn book on ancient astronomy. The text was cryptic, speaking of celestial harmonics and the balance of elements. He highlighted a passage in the margin: "When the harmony is broken, the fabric tears...and the silence speaks loud."

As he read on, the words blurred together, his mind snagging on a phrase: "the silence speaks loud." He felt an echo of the phrase resonating within him, a vibration that seemed to harmonize with the Nightforge's power still coursing through his veins. Kael set the book aside, his gaze drifting toward the small dish where he'd placed the fragment of broken glass. The air seemed to thicken around it, as if the silence was drawing near.

He rose from the desk, feeling the weight of responsibility settle heavier on his shoulders with each passing moment. Quasar's words continued to reverberate within him: "nothing that can be spoken." What did she mean? Was this imbalance a symptom of something greater, a ripple in the fabric of reality itself? He felt an unsettling connection to the woman, as if their shared understanding was a thread waiting to be pulled.

Kael's eyes roved around his quarters, searching for a way to process this newfound burden. The flickering candle cast eerie shadows on the walls, making him feel like he was being watched from all sides. He spotted the small, intricately carved box hidden beneath the stack of dusty tomes, its lid slightly ajar. Without thinking, he opened it, releasing a faint scent of sandalwood and something else – a hint of Melosdra's blessing, no doubt. The box contained a few items he'd collected over the years: a silver pin from his early days in the Order, a small crystal vial filled with Nightforge's power, and a folded parchment with a message written in his own hand.

His heart skipped a beat as he read the words scrawled on the parchment: "For Elianore Quasar, if ever you need me." The date was several years past, but Kael remembered the night he'd penned it, feeling the weight of his vows and the promise to Thalia. He recalled sitting at this very desk, pouring out his emotions onto the page. The words on the parchment seemed to hold a secret message, one that only Quasar could decipher.

A noise outside his quarters broke the spell: footsteps approaching through the winding corridors of Nightforged district's upper floors. Kael closed the box and tucked

it back into hiding, feeling a sense of unease settle within him. Who was coming for him now?

He stood frozen, his hand still grasping the parchment as the door to his quarters creaked open. A hooded figure slipped inside, their features obscured by shadows. Kael's instincts prickled with unease; no one visited unannounced in Nightforged district's upper floors.

"Brother Kael," a low voice called out from within the depths of the hood. "I see you're still awake."

Kael stepped back from the desk, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. The figure pushed its hood back, revealing a face he hadn't seen in years - Brother Arin, one of his earliest mentors in the Order. Arin's expression was etched with concern.

"What brings you here?" Kael asked, trying to place the time that had passed since they last spoke.

Arin glanced around the quarters, his eyes lingering on the box hidden beneath the tomes. "I've come to speak with you about your investigation, Brother," he said, his voice measured. "The Order has received... reports of a disturbance in the balance."

Kael's grip on the parchment tightened as he sensed the weight of Arin's words. He folded the paper and slid it back into hiding.

"The team found nothing, but I have reason to believe they may have been too obvious," Kael replied, trying to keep his voice steady.

Arin nodded. "I agree. We need a more... subtle approach. The balance is precarious, Brother. If we're not careful, the silence will grow loud indeed."

As Arin spoke, Kael felt the room's shadows seem to deepen, as if the very darkness itself was listening. His thoughts swirled back to Quasar's words: "nothing that can be spoken." What secrets lay hidden in the undercity?

Arin's words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt his mind racing to keep pace with the urgency creeping into his mentor's voice. "What makes you think we're being too obvious?" he asked, his tone firm but measured.

"Rumors are circulating among the factions," Arin replied, his eyes scanning the room once more before settling back on Kael. "Some believe the disturbance is connected to the recent disappearances in the lower districts. We can't ignore the possibility that our investigation has drawn unwanted attention."

Kael's gut twisted at the mention of the disappearances. He'd heard whispers of strange happenings, people vanishing without a trace or reappearing with no memory of where they'd been. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as he recalled Quasar's words: "nothing that can be spoken." Was this connected to her enigmatic

warning? "What do you propose we do?" he asked Arin, trying to keep the questions focused.

"We'll need to tread carefully," Arin said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I've arranged for Brother Elwynn to discreetly assist you in your investigation. He's...familiar with the shadows of this city." Arin's eyes seemed to bore into Kael's very soul as he spoke, the intensity sending a jolt through Kael's chest.

Arin's words trailed off, but Kael knew he was waiting for him to respond. He nodded, his mind racing with the implications of Arin's plan. Brother Elwynn, a skilled interrogator and expert in the dark corners of Nightforged district, would be a valuable asset in uncovering the truth behind the imbalance. But Kael's thoughts were elsewhere, fixated on Quasar's warning: "nothing that can be spoken."

He glanced at Arin, his expression neutral, and asked, "What makes you think Elwynn is the right choice for this task?" The question was not a challenge, but a genuine inquiry, and Arin's eyes narrowed slightly before he replied, "His skills are unmatched in this city's underbelly. Besides, I've instructed him to be...discreet. We can't afford to alert whatever forces are behind this disturbance."

Kael nodded, the words echoing in his mind: "nothing that can be spoken." He felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized the extent of Quasar's warning – not just about an imbalance, but about something more profound. The room seemed to darken further, as if the shadows were closing in around him, and Kael knew he had to tread carefully. Arin's words were laced with a quiet urgency, and he sensed that his mentor was hiding something.

The silence between them grew thicker, until Arin finally broke it by speaking again. "Brother Kael, I must warn you – the stakes are higher than we initially thought. If this imbalance is indeed connected to the disappearances...we may be facing a darkness unlike anything we've seen before." His voice was low and measured, but the underlying concern sent a jolt through Kael's chest.

Kael felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead as he processed Arin's words. A darkness unlike anything they'd seen before? What could that mean? He forced himself to focus on the present, turning back to Arin with a question: "What's Elwynn's current location?" The answer would determine their next move, and Kael knew they couldn't afford to waste any more time.

Arin's gaze flickered around the room once more before he replied, "He should be waiting for you at the old windmill on the eastern outskirts. Be careful, Brother – we're not sure what we're up against." The warning was clear, but Kael felt a spark of determination ignite within him. He was ready to face whatever lay ahead, armed with his wits and the cryptic warnings from Quasar.

Kael made his way through the winding streets of Nightforged district, the city's darkness swallowing him whole. The windmill on the eastern outskirts loomed before him, its weathered sails creaking in the gentle breeze. As he approached, a figure emerged from the shadows near the entrance – Brother Elwynn.

Elwynn's gaze was an unsettling combination of calm and intensity, his eyes seeming to bore into Kael's very soul. "Brother," he said, his voice low and measured as he fell into step beside Kael. They walked in silence for a few moments, the only sound the crunch of gravel beneath their feet.

"What do you know about the disappearances?" Kael asked, his mind racing with the implications of Arin's warning. Elwynn's expression turned enigmatic, and he replied, "Rumors are they're being taken by... something that doesn't leave a mark. No signs of struggle, no evidence of foul play." His words sent a shiver down Kael's spine as he recalled the look on Arin's face – a mixture of concern and fear.

The windmill loomed before them, its entrance creaking ominously in the wind. Elwynn pushed open the door, revealing a dimly lit interior that seemed to swallow the light from outside. "In here," he said, leading Kael into the depths of the abandoned building. The air was heavy with dust and decay, the scent of rot hanging thick over them like a shroud.

Kael's eyes adjusted slowly to the dim light, taking in the makeshift space Elwynn had set up as a temporary office. Flickering candles cast eerie shadows on the walls as he spotted several crates and dusty scrolls scattered about. "What have you found?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

As Kael stepped further into the windmill, his eyes landed on a large, hand-drawn map of Nightforged district spread out on a wooden table. Elwynn stood beside it, a slender finger tracing a meandering path through the winding streets. "We've been tracking reports of...disturbances," he said, his voice low and measured. "Small things at first – strange noises, flickering lights in the windows. Nothing to raise an alarm, but enough to suggest something is indeed amiss."

Kael's gaze followed Elwynn's finger as it moved across the map, noting the scattered marks that seemed to cluster around the lower districts. He recognized several locations mentioned in the disappearances, his gut twisting with every connection he made. "Do you think they're connected?" he asked, his mind racing with the implications.

Elwynn's expression remained neutral, but a flicker of tension danced in his eyes. "I believe they are, yes. The pattern suggests a... purposeful removal. Whatever is taking these people, it's not random." Kael's grip on his cowl tightened as he processed the words – a purposeful removal? What could that mean?

A faint scratching sound echoed from deeper within the windmill, making both brothers pause. Kael's hand instinctively went to the dagger at his belt, his heart rate quickening. Elwynn's eyes flicked toward the sound, but he didn't move. The creaking intensified, followed by the scrape of footsteps on the wooden floor. A figure emerged from the shadows, hood thrown back to reveal a woman with skin like polished mahogany and eyes that seemed to hold a thousand secrets.

Her gaze swept over Kael before settling on Elwynn, a fleeting flash of tension crossing her face. "Apologies for the interruption," she said, her voice husky and confident as she approached them. "I see you've found my work."

The woman's words dripped with an air of nonchalance, but Kael detected a hint of unease beneath her confident facade. Elwynn's expression remained neutral, but his eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded her. "What makes you think this is your work?" he asked, his tone measured.

The woman's gaze flicked to Kael before returning to Elwynn, a hint of curiosity sparking in her eyes. "I've been tracking these... disappearances," she said, her voice smooth as silk. "The absence of signs, the peculiar nature of the vanishings... it's too consistent to be mere chance." Her words hung in the air, punctuated by the creaking of the windmill's wooden beams.

Kael's eyes narrowed, sensing that there was more to this woman than met the eye. He took a step forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger, and asked, "What's your name?" The woman's gaze flicked to him once more before returning to Elwynn, her expression unreadable. "Lysandra," she said finally, her voice husky as ever.

Elwynn's eyes met Kael's, a silent understanding passing between them – this was no ordinary person. "Lysandra is a... collector of sorts," he explained to Kael, his words measured. "She has... sources within the city that inform her of such matters." Lysandra's gaze dropped to the map on the table, her eyes scanning it with an unnerving intensity.

A chill ran down Kael's spine as he watched her study the map. He sensed that she was seeing more than just lines on parchment – patterns, connections that only she could discern. The scratching sound had stopped, and an oppressive silence fell over the room, punctuated by the creaking of the windmill's wooden frame.

Lysandra looked up, her eyes locking onto Kael's with a piercing intensity. "You have questions," she stated, as if it were a fact rather than an observation. Elwynn's expression turned cautious, but he nodded almost imperceptibly, and Lysandra continued, "Ask them. I might know more than you think."

Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he met Lysandra's gaze, sensing that she was hiding something – or someone. He took a deep breath, pushing aside his

reservations, and asked the question that had been burning within him since their arrival: "What do you think is taking these people?"

Tags: Secrecy and Consequence, Dimming Age, Shadows Within