

ASHEN ROADS' BURDEN AND BLESSING

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The night air clung to Kael Varn like a damp shroud, heavy with secrets. He navigated the narrow, torch-lit streets of Everia's Outer Ring, eyes scanning for any sign of his contact. The Ashen Road stretched before him, an endless ribbon of worn stone and whispered legends.

People avoided this section of town, preferring the bright lights and safety of the city center. But Kael had no such luxuries. His specialty was subtlety – a whispered promise here, a disappearance there – and he knew every alleyway and hidden corner of Everia's darker depths. The Ashen Road's burden weighed on him still; three years past, his last assignment had left an indelible mark. Not every balance demanded blood.

A hooded figure emerged from the shadows, beckoning Kael into a deserted courtyard. He entered with a measured step, eyes adjusting to the dim light within. The air reeked of old books and decay. Shelves of yellowed scrolls lined the walls, each one a thread in the vast tapestry of history.

"My lord Kael," the figure said, voice low and gravelly. "I trust your...reputation precedes you."

"Tell me," Kael said, his gaze roving over the room's contents. This was no library for the faint of heart – or those who cherished their memory.

"I possess information regarding a High Curator," the hooded figure continued, producing a small, intricately carved box from their cloak. "Elder Elwynn of Nightforge's Thalos has gone missing. We fear something is amiss within the Curators' stronghold."

Kael's hand closed around the box, a weight settling in his chest. He'd had dealings with the Order of Melosdra before; they prized secrecy above all else, their loyalty not for sale to the highest bidder.

The figure handed him a small, ornate key. "We believe this unlocks Elwynn's study within the Curators' stronghold. We require your... particular set of skills to retrieve

her and uncover the truth."

A faint hum began in Kael's left ear, responding to his agreement. A debt he couldn't repay, not yet – it was a debt he'd come to accept.

Kael tucked the key into his belt pouch, weighing the risks and costs. Missing Curators were not unusual, but this one carried weight. Elwynn had been instrumental in shaping the Nightforge's policy, guiding their hand in matters of balance and justice.

The courtyard's air thickened with tension as he turned to leave. "You understand my terms," Kael said over his shoulder. "What I find out comes back to you alone. This isn't a favor."

"Of course, my lord Kael," the hooded figure replied, voice steady despite the weight of their request.

In the darkness beyond Everia's Outer Ring, Kael Varn set his eyes on the Ashen Road, feeling the familiar burden settle in – for now, it would be enough to bear.

Kael navigated the narrow streets, his senses on high alert as he made his way through the city's winding alleys. The Ashen Road beckoned, its reputation preceding him like a shadow. He'd carried out countless tasks for the Order of Melosdra, but something about this job felt different – the weight of it settling heavier than usual.

He reached the edge of town, where the last buildings gave way to an endless expanse of packed dirt and gravel. The Ashen Road unwound before him, stretching into the darkness like a serpent slithering through the night. Torches marked the road at irregular intervals, casting flickering shadows that danced on the surrounding hills.

Kael's hand instinctively went to his belt pouch, where the ornate key lay waiting. He'd known Elwynn since their respective...arrangements had begun, but this felt like a personal challenge. What had happened within Nightforge's stronghold? And why had the Order of Melosdra seen fit to send him?

He mounted the pack mule he'd acquired for this journey, settling into the worn leather saddle with a practiced ease. The beast's ears pricked up as Kael nudged it forward, their procession beginning. They rode in silence, the only sound the soft crunch of gravel beneath hooves and the rhythmic creaking of the pack straps.

As they left the city behind, the darkness began to take on a palpable quality – heavy and damp, like a wet shroud clinging to skin. Kael's senses pricked up; he'd encountered this sensation before, in the early days of his...adventures. It spoke of things hiding just beyond sight, lurking in the shadows.

A gust of wind sent the torches dancing, casting eerie shadows on the hillsides as they rode deeper into the night. Kael's hand tightened on the reins, a familiar sense of unease spreading through him. The Ashen Road held its secrets close, but he'd found

that often it was better to uncover them sooner rather than later.

Ahead, a huddle of silhouettes marked the first settlement along the road – a place called Blackthorn's Rise. Kael's mule quickened its pace as they entered the scattered collection of hovels and rough-built shops. Firelight spilled from doorways, casting flickering shadows on the surrounding hills.

Kael tied his mule to a post outside a local tavern, ducking inside as the wind whipped past him like a slap. The air was thick with smoke and conversation, the patrons a mix of weary travelers and locals. Kael slid onto a stool at the bar, signaling for a drink and surveying the room.

He spotted a hooded figure near the fire, their face obscured by shadows. An older man nursed a mug on the opposite side of the common room, his eyes flicking towards Kael before returning to his contemplative gaze. The fire crackled, spitting sparks onto the hearthstones as Kael leaned in close to the barkeep.

"Information on Nightforge's missing Curator?"

The barkeep polished a mug with a dirty apron, his gaze flicking to the hooded figure before returning to Kael's face. "Word is, strange happenings at Nightforge," he said quietly, leaning in close. "Some claim to have seen...things lurking in the shadows. Others speak of Elwynn's research having gone awry."

Kael signaled for another drink as he studied the hooded figure, wondering if his contact was among them. The older man near the fire caught his eye again; his expression seemed lost in thought, but Kael detected a glimmer of curiosity. He slid off the stool and approached the man, his footsteps quiet on the creaking floorboards.

"Your name?" Kael asked, taking a seat beside him. "You're not from around here." The older man's eyes flickered towards the hooded figure, then back to Kael. "I am Garen," he said slowly, "a traveler. Just passing through." Kael's grip on his mug tightened; this wasn't a casual stopover.

In the silence that followed, the fire spat a particularly large spark onto the hearthstones. Garen picked at a loose thread on his sleeve, eyes drifting to the hooded figure once more. Kael leaned in, his voice barely audible over the crackling flames. "I'm looking for information on Nightforge's missing Curator, Elder Elwynn."

Garen's eyes snapped back to Kael, a hint of wariness creeping into his expression. "What business do you have with Nightforge?" he asked, his voice low but laced with a sense of trepidation.

Kael leaned in closer, the flickering firelight casting eerie shadows on the walls. "I've been hired by the Order of Melosdra to investigate Elder Elwynn's disappearance," he said, watching Garen's reaction closely.

Garen's gaze darted towards the hooded figure once more, before settling back on Kael. For a moment, they simply sat in silence, the fire crackling between them like a living thing. Then, with a slow nod, Garen spoke up, his voice barely above a whisper. "I might know something. But I'll need to speak with you outside."

Kael nodded, finishing his drink as he slid off the stool. He followed Garen out into the night, leaving the warmth of the fire behind. The wind had picked up, whipping dust and debris through the narrow streets of Blackthorn's Rise. Kael tied his cloak around him, eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of danger.

As they walked, the sounds of the tavern gave way to the creaking of wooden signs and the distant howling of wolves on the outskirts of town. Garen led him to a small, run-down shop tucked away in a side alley, the sign above the door reading "Moonwhisper's Curios." The air inside was heavy with the scent of dust and old books.

Garen motioned for Kael to enter, his eyes flicking towards the hooded figure waiting just beyond the threshold. "Please, let us speak," he said, his voice low but urgent.

Kael ducked into the shop, his eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light within. The air was thick with the scent of old books and something else - a tangy smell that made his stomach turn. He spotted the hooded figure, their face still obscured by shadows.

A small, nervous-looking woman stood beside them, her hands fluttering over a collection of strange artifacts on a nearby shelf. "Ah, Garen, thank the gods you've brought him," she said, her voice trembling.

Garen's eyes darted to Kael, his expression a mixture of warning and expectation. "This is Althaea, our... local expert on such matters," he said, his voice low and measured. Kael's gaze flickered towards Althaea, taking in the nervous energy emanating from her as she fidgeted with the artifacts.

"Please, sit down," Garen gestured to a rickety wooden chair in the center of the room, but Althaea waved him off, her hands still fluttering over the shelf. "No, no, we can't afford to be seen talking openly," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael's eyes narrowed; he'd expected this level of caution, but it was always good to see confirmation.

Garen stepped forward, his movements economical and deliberate. "Let us speak plainly then, Althaea. We've come seeking information on Nightforge's missing Curator, Elder Elwynn." Althaea's hands paused in mid-air, her fingers hovering over a small, ornate box. For a moment, she seemed to be weighing something - or someone - before finally nodding.

"Very well," she said, her voice still barely audible over the creaking of the old building. "I can tell you what I know, but first... Garen, you have to understand, this

comes with risks." Kael's grip on his mug tightened; the air in the room seemed to thicken, heavy with unspoken implications.

Garen nodded, his expression grim. "We're aware of the stakes, Althaea. What is it you know?" The nervous energy emanating from her spiked, and for a moment, Kael thought she might bolt – but instead, she took a deep breath and began to speak in a low, measured tone.

"Elder Elwynn was researching something... dark," she said, her eyes darting towards the hooded figure. "Something that could unravel the very fabric of our world, if mishandled." The air in the room seemed to vibrate with the weight of her words. Kael's thoughts turned to his own role in this – what he'd been hired for, and why.

The hooded figure shifted, its presence seeming to fill the small space, but its face remained hidden. Althaea's eyes flickered towards it before returning to Garen, her expression a mixture of fear and determination. "We've seen... things," she said, her voice cracking. "Lurkers in the shadows, creatures that shouldn't exist. And I think – I'm sure – that they're connected to Elder Elwynn's research."

Garen's eyes met Althaea's, a silent understanding passing between them before he turned to Kael. "What kind of research?" he asked, his voice measured.

Althaea took another deep breath, her hands still hovering over the shelf as if holding onto it for support. "Elder Elwynn was searching for a way to... bypass the weight of the Ashen Roads," she said, her words barely above a whisper. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine; he'd heard whispers about the Ashen Roads, but thought them mere myth.

The hooded figure shifted, its presence seeming to grow more substantial in the dim light. Althaea's eyes darted towards it before returning to Garen and Kael. "We've seen things moving between the roads," she said, her voice shaking. "Not just people – not just anything. Things that shouldn't exist, things that defy understanding." The air in the room seemed to thicken, heavy with the weight of unspoken terrors.

Garen's expression was grim. "What do you know about these... lurkers?" he asked, his eyes locked on Althaea.

She swallowed, her hands tightening around each other as if bracing for impact. "We've seen them in the alleys at night," she said, her voice cracking. "They seem to be drawn to the Ashen Roads – like moths to flame." Kael's thoughts turned to his own journey along the roads; he'd never seen anything out of the ordinary, but now that Althaea spoke of these lurkers, he wondered if he'd been blind to signs he shouldn't have missed.

As she finished speaking, the hooded figure shifted again, its movement like a ripple in the air. Kael's eyes flickered towards it, sensing something about the figure's

presence that didn't sit right – but it remained shrouded in shadows. Garen's gaze never wavered from Althaea, his expression intent on extracting every shred of information from her.

"What do you think they're searching for?" Kael asked, his voice low and deliberate, as if he were navigating a minefield.

Althaea's eyes darted towards the hooded figure once more before returning to Garen. "I think it has something to do with the lost city of Erebo," she said, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the old building. Kael's mind reeled; he'd studied the ancient lore of Erebo in his training – a place where the fabric between worlds was said to be thin.

The hooded figure shifted again, its presence seeming to grow more substantial by the minute. Althaea's words hung in the air like a challenge: what did they know about Erebo? What lay beyond the veil of myth and legend?

As Althaea spoke, the hooded figure seemed to grow larger, its presence suffocating the small shop. Kael's skin crawled under the weight of unspoken menace. Garen's grip on his mug tightened, a subtle warning to remain vigilant.

"What do you know about Erebo?" Kael asked again, his voice firm but controlled. The hooded figure's response was a low, almost imperceptible hum, like the thrumming of a harp string. Althaea's eyes darted towards it, her face pale in the dim light. "I think it's connected to Elder Elwynn's research," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Garen stepped forward, his eyes locked on the hooded figure. "We'll take that as a given," he said, his tone dripping with skepticism. "Tell us more about these lurkers." Althaea hesitated, her eyes flicking towards Kael before returning to Garen. "They seem... drawn to the Ashen Roads," she repeated, her voice cracking under the weight of unspoken terrors.

The hooded figure shifted once more, its presence seeming to grow more imposing by the minute. Kael felt a bead of sweat trickle down his spine as Althaea continued, her words spilling out in a panicked rush. "We've seen them in the alleys at night – they seem to be drawn to the Ashen Roads like moths to flame." The air in the shop seemed to thicken, heavy with unspoken implications.

Garen's expression was grim, his eyes narrowed on Althaea. "You're saying these creatures are attracted to the very fabric of our reality?" he asked, his voice laced with disgust. Althaea nodded, her hands shaking as she grasped a nearby candle holder. "Yes – it's as if they're searching for something, or someone." Kael's thoughts turned to the roads themselves, wondering if he'd inadvertently led these creatures deeper into their world.

The hooded figure seemed to expand, its presence filling the small shop with an unspoken threat. Althaea's eyes darted towards it before returning to Garen and Kael. "We need to be careful," she said, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the old building. "If they find what they're searching for... I fear the consequences will be catastrophic."

The hooded figure's presence seemed to be absorbing all the light in the room, leaving only an oppressive darkness in its wake. Kael shifted uncomfortably under its gaze, his eyes darting towards Althaea as if searching for reassurance. She stood frozen, her hands clutching the candle holder like a lifeline.

Garen, ever the strategist, broke the silence. "We need to know more about these creatures," he said, his voice firm but measured. "What do you know about their origins?" Althaea's eyes flickered towards the hooded figure before returning to Garen, her expression haunted. "I've seen... things in my research," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Legends of beings born from the very fabric of reality itself."

The air in the room seemed to thicken as Althaea's words hung in the air. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine; he'd always thought the Ashen Roads were a myth, a cautionary tale told to frighten wayward travelers into staying on the beaten path. But now, with Althaea's words, he wondered if there was truth behind the legends.

The hooded figure shifted once more, its presence like a palpable force that filled the room. Althaea's eyes darted towards it, her face pale in the dim light. "If I tell you what I know," she said, her voice cracking under the weight of unspoken terrors, "will you help me stop them?" Garen's expression was grim, his eyes locked on the hooded figure. "We'll do what needs to be done," he said, his tone firm but laced with a hint of uncertainty.

Althaea's eyes searched Kael's face before returning to Garen. "I think... I think they're connected to Elder Elwynn's research," she repeated, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the old building. The hooded figure seemed to expand, its presence suffocating the small shop. Kael felt a bead of sweat trickle down his spine as Althaea continued, her words spilling out in a panicked rush.

"We've seen them in the alleys at night - they seem to be drawn to the Ashen Roads like moths to flame," she said, her voice cracking under the weight of unspoken terrors. The air in the shop seemed to thicken, heavy with unspoken implications. Garen's expression was grim, his eyes narrowed on Althaea. "You're saying these creatures are attracted to the very fabric of our reality?" he asked, his voice laced with disgust.

The hooded figure shifted once more, its presence like a living thing that seemed to be growing more substantial by the minute. Althaea's eyes darted towards it before

returning to Garen and Kael. "I'm saying they're searching for something," she said, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the old building. "Something connected to Elder Elwynn's research - or perhaps even before that." Kael's mind reeled as he thought back to his own journey along the Ashen Roads; he'd seen nothing out of the ordinary, but now Althaea's words made him wonder if he'd been blind to signs he shouldn't have missed.

As Althaea finished speaking, the hooded figure seemed to coalesce into a presence that filled the room. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as Garen stepped forward, his eyes locked on the figure. "We need to leave," he said, his voice firm but measured. "Now."

Tags: Ashen Roads, Weight of Consequence, Traveler's Guilt