

Ashen Roads' Weight of Silence

Black

The Weight of Ashen Silence

I traversed the shadowed paths, flanked by ancient trees that stood like skeletal sentinels. The air was heavy with damp earth and decaying leaves, a reminder that even in the heart of Everia's capital, nature maintained its unyielding grip. My boots made barely a sound on the packed earth as I walked among the night's whisper-thin veil.

My specialty, they called it – Kael Varn, the name whispered behind my back. A whispered correction, a silent disappearance. Not every imbalance demanded blood; sometimes, it was enough to let the weight of silence settle upon those who dwelled in darkness.

In the Nightforge district, the scent of baking bread and roasting meats drifted through the air, drawing in night wanderers from across the city. I sidestepped a group of revelers clustered around a makeshift stage, where a lone musician plucked at the lute's strings with a haunting melancholy. The notes seemed to cling to my skin like winter's chill.

A knock on the door. My hand paused mid-strike against the stone wall as I listened, but it was not my name they called out. "Curator Vara?"

Vara's absence allowed me the luxury of response. "Who seeks Curator Varn?"

"A package from House Veylan," a soft voice replied.

I retrieved the envelope from the hand extended through the door crack and examined its seal – an open eye within a crescent moon. My heart rate picked up, not from worry but from anticipation; this could mean another letter from the Queen herself or one of her discreet messengers.

The note inside was brief, the words direct: 'A House Veylan shipment is missing from the Nightforge's southern docks. The family requests your... particular talents in retrieving it.'

Ashen silence hung heavy on me as I weighed the cost and benefit of intervention. Loyalty called; restraint beckoned; and above them all, the memory of Melosdra whispered caution – 'the price of balance paid in the coin of the soul.'

My decision made, I stepped back from the doorway, into the flickering shadows beyond.

This was no task for speed or might; I had to walk where armies wouldn't tread.

The mist-shrouded alleys of Nightforge swallowed me whole as I made my way to the docks, every step deliberate and silent. The wind carried the stench of rotting fish from the nearby market, but it was not what drew my attention. The flickering torches that lined the dock's edge cast long shadows across the water, making it seem as though the river itself was restless.

A hooded figure waited by the warehouses, its presence as quiet as mine. I approached with measured steps, my eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of movement or hidden threats. The air was heavy with the smell of salt and tar, but beneath that lay a more pungent scent – charred wood and smoke. My gaze landed on a stack of crates nearby, its edges singed as if from a recent fire.

"You're Varn," the hooded figure said without preamble, their voice like a whispered secret in my ear. "House Veylan sent me to ensure you receive this." They handed me a worn leather satchel with a silver lock, embossed with the emblem of Night's Spire – a token of Veylan's favor.

I took the satchel and weighed its contents, but it was light, almost empty. "What am I looking for?" I asked the hooded figure, my eyes narrowing against the rising wind that whipped through the alleys. The figure hesitated before pulling back their hood to reveal a young woman with sun-kissed skin and eyes like polished onyx.

"We were transporting goods from the northern mines," she began, her voice laced with an accent I couldn't place. "But... there's been a problem. One of our guards reported seeing shadowy figures lurking around the cargo holds. We believe something's been taken – or hidden." Her gaze locked onto mine, a hint of desperation creeping into her tone.

"Describe these figures," I said, the weight of the satchel settling heavier on my hip. The wind died down as if sensing our conversation was turning dark.

"They were tall and lean, dressed in black... or rather, what remained of their clothing. They moved like ghosts, vanishing and reappearing without warning." Her eyes darted around us, as if she feared being overheard.

I tied the satchel's leather strap around my waist, a plan forming in my mind. "Tell me more about these northern mines," I said, already knowing the answer but needing confirmation.

The night air clung to me like a damp shroud as I made my way through the winding alleys of Nightforge, the satchel's weight an unspoken reminder of what lay ahead.

The hooded woman followed close behind, her footsteps light on the cobblestones. We traversed the crowded streets without drawing attention, a testament to our shared understanding of this city's delicate balance.

As we walked, I noticed the flickering torches seemed to grow more sparse, the buildings leaning inwards as if sharing secrets. The stench of tar and charred wood grew stronger, and my heart picked up its pace, responding to the intuition that something was amiss. We turned a corner, and the alleys opened onto a large central square. In the center stood an imposing stone fountain, its waters stagnated like the heart of Nightforge itself. The figure beside me slowed, her eyes scanning the area with a mixture of wariness and longing.

"Welcome to the heart of our district," she said softly, her words lost in the distant hum of the city. "Here, we forge our own darkness." I followed her gaze, taking in the dimly lit stalls that lined the square, their owners huddled in small clusters, speaking in hushed tones. The wind carried a snatch of laughter from a nearby tavern, but it was the faint scent of smoke on the breeze that drew my attention to the fountain's rim.

A charred inscription had been etched into the stone: "In umbra sumus" - we are in shadow. I remembered the words Melosdra had spoken about the city's dual nature, how Nightforge straddled light and darkness like a blade on its edge. This square, with its stagnant fountain and huddled figures, was its very heart.

"You have told me what you know," I said to the hooded woman, "but I still sense something is off. More than just shadowy figures or missing goods." Her eyes flickered towards the satchel at my side before settling on mine. A silent understanding passed between us - she knew more than she let on.

I nodded, the silence between us thickening like a promise of secrets unspoken. "Tell me," I said finally, my voice low as the evening air. The hooded woman glanced around the square once more before leaning in close, her breath whisper-soft against my ear. "There are those who believe... the missing goods are not just any goods."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, and I felt the weight of Nightforge's balance shift ever so slightly. "Go on," I urged, my eyes scanning the square for any sign of movement or attention.

She hesitated again, her eyes darting towards the tavern where laughter still spilled out into the night. "Some think... it's a piece of something greater. Something they can use to tip the scales." The way she said it sent a shiver down my spine - not from fear, but from the weight of possibility.

I took a step back, weighing the implications, as the hooded woman fell into stride beside me. We walked on, our footsteps weaving through the crowded stalls, until we

reached the edge of the square where a series of narrow staircases led down into darkness. The air grew colder here, heavy with the scent of damp earth and mold. I descended first, my hand instinctively reaching for the dagger at my belt.

At the bottom of the stairs, a network of tunnels stretched out like a subterranean city. The walls were rough-hewn stone, the air thick with the smell of age and decay. We moved through the tunnels with caution, the hooded woman leading the way as we navigated narrow passages and alcoves. Every step echoed off the walls, our footsteps mingling with the distant hum of Nightforge above.

We turned a corner, and I caught sight of a makeshift workshop – tools scattered about a workbench, and half-finished projects hanging from the ceiling like macabre mobiles. A figure sat at the workbench, bent over a piece of metalwork, its shape twisted and contorted in ways that defied explanation. The hooded woman nudged me forward, her hand gesturing towards the figure, and I recognized the glint of sun-kissed skin even before I saw the face.

"Amara," I said, my voice barely above a whisper, as recognition dawned on me.

The hooded woman stepped aside, her eyes fixed on Amara as if willing her to remain still. I approached slowly, my hand on the dagger at my belt, but my mind racing with questions. What was she working on? And why was she down here in this damp tunnel system? Amara's fingers moved deftly as she shaped and molded the metal into a form that seemed almost... organic.

As I drew closer, the shape resolved into something resembling a delicate bird's wing. The feathers were meticulously crafted from small pieces of silver wire, each one connected by a web of fine threads. The metal itself was dark, almost black, and seemed to absorb the faint light filtering down from above. My gaze lingered on it, sensing the weight of magic at play here, but I couldn't pinpoint what kind.

Amara's head lifted, her eyes meeting mine with a hint of wariness. "Varn," she said softly, her voice hesitant as if she wasn't sure how to greet me. I hesitated, unsure whether she recognized me or simply knew my name from whispers and rumors. Our paths had crossed before, but our interactions were always brief, usually in the company of other members of Night's Spire.

I cleared my throat, breaking the silence that had grown between us. "What are you working on?" I asked, trying to sound casual despite the growing unease in the pit of my stomach. Amara's gaze dropped back to her craft, and she picked up a small hammer, tapping gently at the metal as if willing it to take shape.

The hooded woman took a step forward, her eyes flicking between us with an undercurrent of tension. "Amara," she said softly, her voice almost apologetic, "this is... Varn. He's here for the satchel." Amara's fingers stilled, and she looked up at me

again, this time with a glimmer of curiosity rather than wariness.

I nodded towards the tunnel entrance above. "From House Veylan," I said, my voice even as I tried to gauge her reaction. The hooded woman stepped forward, a hand extended in a silent signal for Amara to remain still. I took this as my cue to take the satchel from its hiding place at my waist and hand it over to Amara.

She accepted the satchel with a quiet nod, but her eyes never left mine, as if searching for something hidden within them. For a moment, I thought she'd say more, but instead, she turned back to her workbench, the metal wire and threads of silver at her fingers seeming to shimmer in the faint light.

I felt a shiver run down my spine as Amara's hands moved deftly over the piece, the sound of hammering growing softer until it was almost imperceptible. I looked away from the workshop, my gaze wandering through the dim tunnels, and that was when I saw it - a sliver of movement in the distance.

The hooded woman followed my gaze, her eyes narrowing as she took in whatever caught my attention. "Wait," she whispered, grabbing my elbow to slow me down. I strained my ears, trying to pinpoint the sound, but it had vanished into silence once more.

"Let's be careful," she said softly, her grip on my arm firm as a warning.

I turned back to Amara, my eyes locking onto hers as I strained to sense what had captured her attention. Her gaze met mine for a fleeting instant before she refocused on her workbench, her fingers moving with precision over the metal form. The hooded woman's grip on my elbow relaxed, and she took a step forward, her movements deliberate.

I followed her, our eyes scanning the tunnel ahead as we moved cautiously towards the faint disturbance. As we turned a corner, I caught sight of a figure huddled in the shadows, its back against the wall. It was a child, no more than ten winters old, with a look of terror etched on its face. The hooded woman's hand reached out, beckoning the child forward, and it stumbled towards us like a wild animal.

"Get behind me," I whispered to the hooded woman, my fingers instinctively tightening around the hilt of my dagger. She nodded, her eyes darting between the child and the tunnel beyond, as if searching for signs of pursuit. The child halted in front of us, its chest heaving with sobs. "S-sister," it whispered, its voice trembling, "they're coming."

The child's words sent a jolt of alarm through me, and I took a step forward, my eyes scanning the tunnel behind us for any sign of movement. The hooded woman positioned herself protectively in front of the child, her hand on its shoulder as she whispered something reassuring. Amara looked up from her workbench, a faint

expression of curiosity on her face, but no alarm.

"What are they?" I asked, my voice low and urgent, as I kept my gaze on the tunnel entrance above. The hooded woman's grip on the child's shoulder tightened, and she took another step back, her eyes never leaving mine. "Who are you talking about?" I pressed, but she just shook her head, her mouth sealed shut. Amara, however, took a small step forward, her eyes darting towards the child before returning to me.

The child's sobs grew quieter as it took a deep breath, its chest still heaving with fear. "They came for Eira," it whispered, its voice barely audible over the sound of dripping water and distant footfalls. The hooded woman's grip on my arm turned like ice, and she leaned forward, her eyes searching the tunnel beyond us once more. I felt a shiver run down my spine as I realized that this child was speaking of Eira, Amara's sister - someone we thought was long gone from Nightforge.

"Get the satchel," the hooded woman said, her voice sharp and urgent, as she pushed the child towards me with a gentle hand. "We need to move." I hesitated for an instant before snatching up the satchel and slinging it over my shoulder. The weight of it felt heavier now, a tangible manifestation of the danger we'd just narrowly avoided.

The child's words hung in the air like a challenge, and I felt Amara's gaze snap towards me, her eyes searching for something unspoken. The hooded woman's grip on my arm tightened, her fingers digging into my skin as she pulled me back. "We need to move," she repeated, her voice low and urgent, but not quite panicked. I nodded, tucking the satchel tighter against my chest, its weight settling like a presence behind my shoulders.

Amara's hands stilled on the metal wire, and for an instant, I thought she'd say something - reveal a connection to Eira or shed light on the danger lurking in the tunnels. But her eyes remained fixed on me, their depths seeming to hold a question unspoken. The child, sensing our unease, took a step closer, its eyes darting towards Amara before returning to mine with a plea for safety. I felt my heart rate quicken as the hooded woman pushed us all towards the nearest passage, her movements swift and deliberate.

As we moved through the winding tunnels, the sound of footsteps grew louder, echoing off the damp stone walls. The child's sobs receded into gasps for air, its eyes fixed on me with a mix of fear and uncertainty. I slowed my pace, allowing the hooded woman to take the lead, her eyes scanning ahead as if searching for an escape route or potential ambush points. Amara brought up the rear, her hands still clutching the hammer and metal wire as if reluctant to leave her work unfinished.

The tunnels twisted and turned, leading us deeper into the belly of Night's Spire. I felt the weight of the satchel pressing against my back, its secrets heavy with unspoken

danger. My eyes met Amara's once more, searching for a glimmer of understanding or explanation, but her gaze remained guarded, her expression a mask of calm intent. We turned another corner, and the hooded woman halted us in front of a narrow opening that seemed almost camouflaged into the stone. "Get through," she whispered, pushing us forward.

We slipped through the opening, finding ourselves in a narrow, dimly lit chamber filled with crates and old wooden boxes. The air was stale and musty, heavy with the scent of aged paper and leather. The child stumbled towards me, its eyes fixed on Amara as if seeking reassurance that she'd follow. I reached out, hesitantly offering my hand to support the child, but Amara intervened first, scooping it up into her arms as if claiming a burden. The hooded woman motioned for us to move further into the room, her eyes never leaving the tunnel entrance behind.

As we moved deeper into the storage chamber, I noticed that the crates and boxes were stacked haphazardly, some of them bearing the insignia of House Veylan on their worn labels. My mind began to spin with possibilities - was Amara using this place as a makeshift workshop or storage for Night's Spire? And what was the significance of Eira's name being spoken in hushed tones? I glanced over my shoulder, catching the hooded woman's gaze lingering on me before she refocused on our escape route.

With each passing moment, the silence grew thicker, heavy with unspoken questions and secrets. The child's grip on Amara's neck relaxed slightly as it looked up at her, its eyes squinting in curiosity. I sensed a connection between them - a bond forged in shared experiences or memories. My thoughts swirled around the satchel, weighing the danger we'd narrowly avoided against the mysteries now unfolding before us.

The air in the storage chamber was heavy with dust, and cobwebs clung to the edges of crates like ghostly fingers. We moved deeper into the room, the hooded woman's eyes darting between us and the tunnel entrance behind. I could feel her tension, a live wire running beneath her skin, as she probed our surroundings for any sign of pursuit. The child's eyes had fallen closed, its breathing steady against Amara's chest. She cradled it with a gentleness that seemed out of place amidst the desperation in our flight.

As we navigated through the maze of crates, I spotted something glinting from beneath a nearby stack - a piece of metal, partially hidden by shadows. Curiosity getting the better of me, I stepped closer to investigate, my hand on the satchel for reassurance. The hooded woman's eyes flickered towards the object, her grip on her own dagger tightening as if anticipating trouble. Amara followed my gaze, her expression unreadable behind a veil of calm.

I reached down and pulled out the glinting object – a small, intricately crafted pendant made from a single piece of silvered steel. A small inscription etched into its surface read "Eira" in elegant script. The name sent a jolt through me, and I turned to Amara, my eyes locking onto hers. For an instant, we just stared at each other – the air thick with unspoken meaning. Then, without a word, she looked down, her gaze dropping towards the child still cradled in her arms.

The hooded woman shifted uncomfortably, her weight distributing from one foot to the other as if sensing our tension. "Keep moving," she said softly, though there was an undercurrent of warning beneath her words. I nodded, turning back to the tunnel entrance, my mind racing with possibilities and connections. The air inside the storage chamber seemed to vibrate with secrets, and I felt like a thread being pulled through a delicate tapestry – unsure where it would lead or what would unravel.

Amara took another step forward, her pace deliberate, as if searching for something specific in the sea of crates. The child stirred in her arms, its eyes fluttering open, and for an instant, our gazes met across the space between us. I felt a shiver run down my spine as Amara's lips curved into a faint smile – a gesture that seemed both reassuring and enigmatic. We moved forward, the silence deepening, until the hooded woman halted us at the far edge of the room.

The walls here were lined with a series of narrow shelves, stretching high above our heads. Each shelf held a single item, carefully selected or perhaps intentionally placed – an assortment of trinkets, tokens, and relics that seemed to hold stories in their own right. My gaze drifted across the shelves, taking in the collection: a golden amulet on one shelf, a silver arrowhead beside it; further along, a length of chain coiled like a snake, with small, intricately carved keys suspended from its end.

The hooded woman's eyes lingered on me, her expression unreadable behind the shadows. Amara, however, took a step closer to the shelves, her gaze fixed on one particular item – an ornate locket made from dark wood and adorned with tiny hinges that seemed to be of no ordinary material. The child in her arms leaned forward, its eyes fixed on the locket as if drawn by some unseen thread.

Tags: Balance, Retribution, Weighed