

Beyond the Silent Gate

Black

The Silent Conductor

Kael Varn's eyes adjusted to the dim light of the Ashen Road's tavern, its patrons a blur of hooded figures and whispered conversations. He had walked these roads for nigh on twenty years, mastering the art of subtle correction – the whispered truth, the silent disappearance, the occasional whispered promise of retribution. Not every balance demanded blood, but some required it all the same.

The barkeep's voice cut through the din, calling out a name he'd never heard before: 'Lysander Thorne'. Kael's eyes scanned the room, locking onto a lone figure seated in the corner, hood thrown back to reveal a mess of dark hair and pale skin. The air around him seemed to vibrate with tension.

Kael slid onto the stool beside Lysander, signaling the barkeep for a drink without making eye contact. He'd been sent to meet this man; their brief was from the Curators, though they never gave him names or details – just a whispered message and a nod in his direction.

'There's a problem,' Lysander said, not looking up from his cup. His voice was low, rough as worn stone. 'I had a package sent to me by a client. Word is, it contains information on one of the Black Rose Order's own.'

Kael's grip on his mug tightened – he didn't like loose ends, and whispers of treachery within the Order were not to be taken lightly.

'A problem?' he echoed, letting the barkeep refill his cup in silence.

Lysander nodded curtly, eyes snapping up to meet Kael's. 'The package was meant for our Queen, but it never reached her. Now I'm being hunted. They'll stop at nothing to get what they want.'

As Lysander spoke, the tavern door creaked open, and a figure slipped in – one of the Knights of Nightforge, their armor dented and battered. Their gaze swept the room, homing on Kael and his companion.

Lysander's eyes narrowed. 'Looks like we have company.'

The Knight pushed through the crowd, a cold glint in their eye. 'You're Thorne,' they growled, hand resting on the hilt of their sword. 'We need to leave now.'

Kael stood, signaling Lysander with a hand – they moved quietly towards the door, followed closely by the Knight and the rest of the tavern patrons, all eyes fixed on the unfolding drama.

Outside, the Ashen Road stretched before them like a dark ribbon. The stars above cast eerie shadows across the ground as Kael motioned for Lysander to keep walking. 'The package...'

Lysander hesitated, casting a nervous glance back at the tavern. 'I don't know what it contains.'

Kael's eyes locked onto his, searching for any sign of deception – though he'd grown wary of such signs over the years.

'I didn't think so,' Kael said, falling into step beside Lysander. The silence between them grew thicker with every passing moment, until it felt like a living thing, a creature that might devour them whole if they gave in to its hunger.

They walked for an hour, maybe more – time lost all meaning when the roads grew dark and treacherous. Kael's fingers drummed a slow beat against his thigh as he watched Lysander's back, sensing the weight of his secrets like a leaden shroud.

A mile passed, then another, until the sound of running water grew louder. Kael slowed, hand on the hilt of his own dagger. They had reached the Silent Gate – an ancient ruin where three great rivers met to form the Blackwater.

The Knight caught up, their face pale and sweaty. 'We can't go through there,' they warned. 'It's said the rivers themselves are cursed.'

Lysander turned back to Kael with a curious expression. 'And you?'

Kael shrugged, eyes narrowing – he'd walked this path before, but never in such haste.

'If we don't pass through,' he said quietly, 'whoever is after us will catch up, and next time...'

The Knight's eyes widened in understanding. 'It won't be just a beating.'

Lysander nodded, voice barely above a whisper. 'We have to get the package to the Queen.'

A fierce resolve lit his features, and he plunged forward into the night – the others close behind.

The Silent Gate loomed ahead, a skeletal archway where three rivers met in perfect silence. Water churned at its base, creating a mist that danced like ethereal fingers. Kael waded through it first, boots sinking into the icy water as the Knight and Lysander followed.

Magic seeped out of the air – not much, but enough to leave him breathless and lightheaded, a shiver creeping up his spine as he emerged on the other side. It was a small price for what they sought: balance in the midst of chaos.

Their footsteps echoed off the archway's stone pillars as they pressed onward, into darkness.

The pillars rose like skeletal sentinels, their weathered stone reflecting the faint moonlight in a sickle's glow. Lysander pushed forward, his pace quickening as he scanned the ground ahead. Kael fell into step beside him, eyes downcast to avoid the water pooling around their ankles. The Knight brought up the rear, their footsteps heavy and purposeful.

Weeds snagged at their clothes as they walked, and the air was thick with the scent of damp earth and decay. Lysander's breathing grew ragged, and Kael watched him with a mixture of concern and curiosity – what drove this man to risk so much for something he barely understood? The Knight, too, seemed on edge, their hand resting more heavily on the hilt of their sword as they navigated the treacherous path.

A faint rustling noise echoed through the air, followed by the soft thud of a body hitting the ground. Kael's head jerked up to see Lysander stumble, his eyes wide and unfocused. The Knight cursed, drawing their sword with a metallic whisper – but it wasn't an attack that had felled him. A dark stain spread from Lysander's side, spreading like a bruise across his white shirt.

Lysander's face contorted in pain as he doubled over, clutching at the wound. 'No,' he whispered, eyes flashing to Kael – but it was the Knight who stepped forward, their face a mask of concern. 'We have to keep moving,' they said firmly, cutting off Lysander's protests.

Kael caught up with them, surveying the cut on Lysander's side – shallow but deliberate, made by something sharp and clean-cut. A memory stirred in his mind: a lesson taught by one of the Order's elder members – the mark of a skilled poisoner, one who knew exactly what they were doing.

He looked up to meet Lysander's desperate gaze, their eyes pleading for reassurance. Kael offered a grim smile, forcing himself to speak calmly. 'We'll get you out of here,' he said, trying to inject some measure of confidence into his voice. 'We just have to keep moving.'

Lysander's eyes flicked to Kael, searching for a lie, but he met them with his best neutral expression – one that said *'I'm trying to keep you alive, I swear it'*. The Knight watched this exchange warily, hand still resting on the hilt of their sword. 'We should move,' they said again, voice firm, though their eyes betrayed a flicker of doubt.

Lysander nodded, wincing as he pushed himself up, hand pressed to his side. Kael watched him with concern – he'd seen men succumb to poison before, the way it seeped into your bones like cold water. This wound wasn't mortal, not yet, but it was bad enough to slow them down. He gestured for Lysander to keep moving, keeping an eye on the Knight as they set a brisk pace.

The path narrowed ahead, forcing them closer together – Kael between Lysander and the Knight, ready to shield his companion if necessary. The darkness seemed to press in around them, heavy with secrets and unseen dangers. Lysander stumbled again, gasping for breath, and the Knight cursed under their breath as they adjusted their pace.

A faint rustling noise caught their attention – leaves crunching beneath a hidden weight. Kael spun, hand on his dagger, as a figure emerged from the shadows. Tall, gaunt, with skin like old parchment and eyes that seemed to bore into their souls, the stranger wore no expression, but moved with an unsettling fluidity.

'You're a hard man to find,' they said, voice low and detached, 'Kael Thorne.'

The figure's words hung in the air, and Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he met their gaze. He didn't like being sought out – it was unwise to attract attention, especially from those who moved with such... deliberate slowness.

Lysander, however, seemed to stiffen at the sound of Kael's name, his eyes flicking up to the stranger with a mix of caution and wariness. The Knight stepped forward, hand on their sword hilt, as if to shield Lysander – but this figure didn't seem interested in them. Their attention remained fixed on Kael.

"You're looking for me," Kael said, his voice neutral, trying to keep the stranger from escalating things. He'd walked a narrow line before; it wouldn't do to let his emotions get the better of him now. The Knight's eyes met his, searching for permission to act – but Kael shook his head almost imperceptibly.

The stranger nodded slowly, their gaze never wavering. "You're in possession of something I believe belongs to me," they said, voice dripping with a calm that made Kael's skin crawl. "A package, I'm told."

Lysander's eyes narrowed, hand clenched into a fist at his side – and for a moment, Kael thought he'd lunge forward. But the Knight caught his arm, holding him back. The figure took a step closer, their movements smooth as silk.

Kael let out a slow breath, weighing his options – but one thing was certain: this conversation had to end. He had to protect Lysander and the package, no matter what it took. The stranger's eyes seemed to bore into him now, searching for something Kael wasn't quite willing to give.

"Lysander," he said quietly, hand on his friend's shoulder – though it felt like a mistake even as the words left his lips. The stranger's gaze flicked to Lysander, and their expression didn't change, but there was something almost... calculating in their eyes.

The silence stretched, heavy as a physical weight, as Kael waited for the stranger to make their move. Lysander's eyes were locked on the figure, his hand still clenched into a fist at his side – the Knight's grip on his arm was the only thing keeping him in place. The air was thick with tension, each breath a slow and labored thing that seemed to vibrate through Kael's entire body.

"We mean no harm," the stranger said finally, their voice low and even, like the quiet lapping of water against stone. "But I have... business with you, Kael Thorne." Their eyes never left his face as they spoke, and for a moment Kael felt like he was drowning in their gaze – it was as if they were seeing right through him to some dark, hidden truth.

Lysander shifted, trying to break free from the Knight's grasp – but they held firm. "What business?" Kael asked, his voice still neutral, though his mind was racing with possibilities. He'd expected ambushes, or worse, not this... whatever it was. The stranger's eyes flicked to Lysander, and for an instant Kael thought he saw something there – a glimmer of curiosity, perhaps, or even a spark of interest.

"Business of the past," they said, their voice still low and even. "A package I believe you're carrying is... important to me." The stranger's eyes snapped back to Kael, and he felt a shiver run down his spine as he met their gaze. There was something in those eyes that made him want to take a step back – but his feet seemed rooted to the spot.

Kael's mind was racing now, trying to piece together what this could mean. The package, the poison, Lysander's wound – it all seemed connected somehow, though he couldn't quite see how yet. He glanced at the Knight, who watched the stranger with a wary expression, hand still on their sword hilt. Lysander was watching him now, his eyes searching for something in Kael's face – but he just shook his head slightly, trying to convey reassurance without giving anything away.

The stranger took another step closer, their movements still eerily silent. "I think it's time we talked about what you're carrying," they said, their voice dripping with an unspoken menace that made Kael's skin crawl. He felt a surge of adrenaline, and his hand instinctively went to the small pouch at his belt – but it was empty, of course, for he'd left the package safely stashed elsewhere.

"Who are you?" Kael asked finally, trying to stall for time as he searched for an escape or a way out. The stranger's eyes seemed to bore into him, searching for some hidden truth, and he felt his face heat up with a flush of discomfort – but it was nothing compared to the cold dread that settled in his stomach as they replied, their voice

dripping with an unnerving calm...

The stranger's words hung in the air, heavy with implication, as Kael struggled to place them. There was something familiar about their face, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. The Knight shifted, hand tightening on Lysander's arm, and for a moment Kael thought they'd intervene - but the stranger seemed to be waiting for him, their eyes fixed intently on his.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kael said finally, trying to sound convincing despite the lie that hung in his throat. The stranger's gaze didn't waver, and for a moment he felt like they were probing the very marrow of his bones. He glanced at Lysander, who watched him with an anxious expression, but didn't seem to understand what was happening.

The stranger took another step closer, their movements eerily silent on the forest floor. "Don't play dumb, Kael Thorne," they said, voice low and even, like a knife cutting through silk. "I know what you're carrying. I've been watching you for some time now." A faint smile played on their lips, and for an instant Kael thought he saw something almost like... amusement.

He felt a shiver run down his spine as the stranger's eyes locked onto his, searching for something hidden beneath the surface. "Who are you?" Kael asked again, trying to keep his voice steady despite the growing sense of unease that was building inside him. The stranger's smile grew, and they took another step closer - but this time, Lysander shifted, hand on the hilt of his dagger.

"Ah," the stranger said, their voice dripping with a quiet satisfaction. "I'm someone who's been waiting for you, Kael Thorne. Waiting a very long time." Their eyes seemed to bore into him now, searching for something hidden deep within - and for an instant, Kael felt like he was drowning in their gaze.

The Knight stepped forward, hand on the hilt of their sword, but the stranger raised a hand, palm outwards, in a smooth, fluid motion. "No need for that," they said, voice low and even. "I'm not here to harm you - at least, not yet." Their eyes flicked to Lysander, and Kael saw something almost like... curiosity there, but it was quickly replaced by their usual calm expression.

"We need to talk," the stranger said, taking another step closer. "About what you're carrying, and why I've been waiting for you so long." Kael felt a surge of adrenaline, and his hand instinctively went to the empty pouch at his belt - but he knew it was futile. The stranger's eyes seemed to see right through him now, searching for something hidden deep within.

Lysander shifted again, trying to break free from the Knight's grasp, and Kael felt a pang of guilt as he met their anxious gaze. He couldn't let them get hurt because of

him – but how could he trust this stranger, or know what they wanted? The Knight's grip on Lysander's arm tightened, holding them in place, and for an instant Kael thought they'd lunge forward.

The air was thick with tension now, each breath a slow and labored thing that seemed to vibrate through Kael's entire body. He knew he had to think quickly – but his mind was a jumble of possibilities and doubts, and he couldn't quite piece together what was happening. The stranger's eyes seemed to bore into him now, searching for something hidden deep within – and for an instant, Kael felt like he was trapped in their gaze, unable to move or breathe.

The stranger's words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning, as Kael struggled to catch his breath. He glanced at Lysander, who watched him with an anxious expression, but he couldn't seem to reassure them with a glance or a gesture. The Knight's grip on their arm tightened, holding them in place, and Kael felt a surge of anger at the restriction – but it was tempered by a growing sense of unease as he met the stranger's gaze.

"I don't know what you want," Kael said finally, trying to sound convincing despite the lie that hung in his throat. The stranger's eyes seemed to bore into him now, searching for something hidden deep within, and for an instant Kael felt like he was drowning in their gaze. He took a step back, but his feet seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move or break free from the stranger's intense scrutiny.

The stranger's smile grew, and they took another step closer – but this time, Lysander shifted, hand on the hilt of their dagger. Kael felt a surge of protection towards them, and his heart quickened as he prepared for a fight. But the stranger raised a hand, palm outwards, in a smooth, fluid motion. "No need for that," they said, voice low and even, like the quiet lapping of water against stone.

Kael's eyes narrowed, trying to read the stranger's expression – but their face was a mask of calm, with only a glimmer of something almost like... curiosity in their eyes. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he met their gaze, and for an instant he wondered if they were playing him, using some subtle magic to get inside his head. But there was no sign of it – at least, not yet.

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The Knight shifted, hand tightening on Lysander's arm, as if sensing the growing tension between them. But the stranger didn't seem to notice – they were too focused on Kael, their eyes burning with an unnerving intensity that made his skin crawl. "You don't remember me," they said finally, voice low and even, like a knife cutting through

silk. "But I'm someone who remembers you, Kael Thorne."

Kael's mind was racing now, trying to piece together the stranger's words – but he couldn't quite connect the dots. He shook his head, trying to clear it, but the stranger's eyes seemed to see right through him, searching for something hidden deep within. "Who are you?" he asked again, trying to stall for time as he searched for an escape or a way out.

The stranger's smile grew, and they took another step closer – but this time, Kael didn't back down. He stood his ground, hand on the hilt of his own dagger, ready for whatever came next. The Knight seemed to sense it too, their grip on Lysander's arm tightening in preparation for a fight – but the stranger just chuckled, a low, throaty sound that sent shivers down Kael's spine.

"It's been a long time," they said finally, voice dripping with an unnerving calm. "But I think we can catch up, don't you?" Their eyes seemed to bore into him now, searching for something hidden deep within – and for an instant, Kael felt like he was drowning in their gaze, unable to move or breathe.

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The stranger took another step closer, their eyes locked onto Kael's, searching for something hidden deep within. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he met their gaze - it was like staring into the depths of a dark pool, unable to see the bottom but sensing the weight of what lay beneath. The air seemed to thicken, heavy with unspoken meaning, and Kael knew that he had to think quickly - or risk being pulled under by the stranger's unnerving intensity.

Tags: Secrecy, Betrayal, Redemption