

# Ghostly Visitors

Black

## The Emissary's Reprieve

I walked alongside Thalos Nightforge, my footsteps echoing off the dark stone walls of Everia's crypt. The air reeked of damp earth and stale incense. This underground sanctum served as a refuge for those seeking absolution from the weight of their pasts.

Thalos' presence was a heavy anchor amidst the shadows. His stoic expression rarely wavered, but I'd grown attuned to the subtle shifts in his eyes, like a flicker of candlelight. He led me through narrow corridors, pausing at an alcove where several figures slumbered or meditated.

"Those who've sought absolution," he said quietly, "often find it easier to confront their demons in darkness."

I nodded, my gaze drifting over the sleeping forms. Each was a product of our Order: knights, curators, and others who had sworn to uphold balance in a world where the pursuit of justice often blurred into chaos.

We continued deeper into the crypt, passing alcoves containing relics of a bygone era. Thalos eventually stopped before an intricately carved door. He produced a small, ornate key and unlocked it with a soft click.

Beyond the door lay a small chamber filled with candles, their flames casting eerie shadows on the walls. An elderly woman sat cross-legged on the floor, her eyes closed as if communing with the spirits. Thalos motioned for me to wait, then approached the woman and gently shook her shoulder.

She opened her eyes, regarding us calmly. "Kaelin," she said, using my surname, "I sense your presence has brought you here seeking guidance."

Thalos stepped back, allowing the woman to focus on me. She beckoned me closer, and I knelt beside her.

"Your Order's reach extends far, but with great power comes great cost," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Many come seeking redemption, but few are willing to pay its price."

I recalled the weight of Melosdra's Oath on my shoulders: loyalty unto death, protection of balance, and the silencing of one's own conscience. It was a heavy burden, one that I bore alongside the rest of the Black Rose Order.

"What do you know of ghostly visitors?" I asked her, focusing on the task at hand.

She opened her eyes wider, the candles' reflections dancing within them like tiny flames. "Visitors from beyond the veil," she said. "Those who've crossed into the afterlife return, often with unfinished business or unquiet spirits."

I stood up, her words sparking memories of past cases where the living and dead had intertwined. The woman's words seemed to hold a deeper truth.

Thalos joined me, his presence a steadying force amidst the weight of the unknown. "We must investigate," I said, making my decision. "If these ghostly visitors are connected, it may be tied to the growing unrest in the kingdom."

The woman nodded, her eyes closed once more. "Then you have my blessing to seek out the truth, Kaelin. May your path be lit by more than just candlelight."

As we exited the crypt, Thalos turned to me with a question in his eyes: "Are you prepared for what lies ahead?"

I hesitated, weighing the cost of redemption against the price of balance. In this world, there was rarely a clear distinction between justice and mercy. The moral cost of loyalty, restraint, and our Oath hung heavy on my shoulders.

We walked out into the fading light of day, each step forward taking us further into the realm of the unknown, where ghostly visitors whispered secrets only the shadows could hear.

As we emerged from the crypt, the golden light of the setting sun stung my eyes after the dimness within. I blinked, surveying the sprawling city of Everia, its buildings a tapestry of stone and tile. We walked in silence, our footsteps leading us through narrow alleys and bustling marketplaces. The smell of roasting meats and fresh bread filled the air, mingling with the chatter of pedestrians.

Thalos' hand on my shoulder was a steady presence as we navigated the city's winding paths. I wondered what lay ahead, the elderly woman's words echoing in my mind like the faint whisper of a bell tolling in the distance. What unfinished business or unquiet spirits could be at play? We stopped at a food stall, where a vendor offered us steaming meat pies and a flask of wine. Thalos declined, but I accepted a pie, its savory aroma a welcome respite from the crypt's musty air.

We ate and drank in silence, our conversation tabled until we reached the relative safety of my quarters at the Order's compound. Night was falling now, casting long shadows across the city's rooftops. The flickering torches on our walk had only served

to heighten the sense of unease that clung to me like a shroud. In the stillness of our chambers, Thalos broke the silence: "What do you think we're facing, Kaelin?" he asked, his voice low and measured. His eyes were fixed on mine, a question in their depths.

I took a swig of wine, letting its warmth spread through my chest before answering. "Visitors from beyond," I said, the words barely above a whisper. "Elderly woman's words... they're tied to our Oath. The balance." Thalos leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, as if listening for a far-off drumbeat. I could almost hear it myself: the pulsing of the Order's very purpose. "If we investigate further," I continued, "it may hold answers about the unrest in the kingdom." His silence was my cue to continue.

As we sipped our wine, I couldn't shake off the feeling that Thalos was searching for something more than just my opinion. He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers together as if gathering his thoughts. "There's been a surge of reports," he began, "of nocturnal visitations across the kingdom. People claiming to have seen and spoken with... apparitions, specters, or whatever you want to call them."

I took another bite of my meat pie, the flavors lingering on my tongue as I listened intently. "What kind of people?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation light despite the growing sense of foreboding.

"All types," Thalos replied, his voice matter-of-fact. "Soldiers, farmers, even a high-ranking noble's lady. Each one telling stories of encountering the dead, often in places connected to their past or some traumatic event." He leaned forward, his eyes locked onto mine. "The unsettling part is the content of their tales: each claims the ghostly visitors bring messages, usually dire warnings about an impending catastrophe."

A chill ran down my spine as I recalled the elderly woman's words about unfinished business and unquiet spirits. The threads of a puzzle were beginning to weave together in my mind, but they refused to form a clear picture. "If these visitations are connected," I mused aloud, trying to connect the dots, "perhaps it's more than just a simple haunting." Thalos' nod confirmed my thoughts: we were onto something significant. The wine bottle sat empty on the table between us, but our conversation had only just begun.

"Let's gather more information," Thalos said, rising from his chair. I followed suit, our movements practiced and economical in the dimly lit quarters. We walked out into the crisp night air, the city's sounds carrying on the wind like a jester's mocking call. Our destination was the Black Rose Order's grand hall, where the evening's council meeting would be underway. I wondered if the ghostly visitors might hold a key to unraveling the mystery that had been plaguing the kingdom - or perhaps it was merely the beginning of an even greater nightmare.

We navigated through the crowded hall, avoiding the murmuring conversations and furtive glances. At the high table, our Commander stood resplendent in his finest attire, surveying the assembly with a gaze that brooked no dissent. Thalos and I took our seats near the back, observing the proceedings with a mixture of familiarity and detachment. The Commander's words dripped with gravity as he addressed the gathering: "Brethren, we stand at a crossroads. Reports of disorder spread throughout the kingdom, and the Order must find a way to restore balance." He paused, scanning the room for any signs of dissent, his eyes finally settling on me.

"Kaelin, Thalos," he called out, his voice booming through the hall. "I've assigned you both to investigate these... ghostly visitors. See if there's a thread connecting them, and find a way to end this disturbance." The assembly erupted into murmurs, but I stood firm, my gaze meeting the Commander's with a silent promise: I would uncover the truth behind these visitations, no matter the cost.

With that, the evening's proceedings drew to a close, and we made our way out of the grand hall, back into the night. Our steps led us through narrow streets, lined with shadows that seemed to writhe like living darkness. The moon hung low in the sky, casting an unearthly glow over the city as we walked toward the old windmill on the outskirts, a place where the living and dead intersected. Thalos' hand on my shoulder guided me through the winding alleys, our destination becoming increasingly shrouded in mystery.

As we turned a corner, I noticed a figure watching us from across the way - a young woman with eyes that seemed to see right through me. Her gaze held an unsettling intensity, and for a moment, I hesitated, sensing the presence of something beyond human understanding. Thalos followed my stare, but his expression gave nothing away. We continued on our path, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that we were being herded toward some unknown fate.

The windmill's skeletal silhouette loomed ahead, its sails still as the night air had stilled all movement. As we drew closer, I could see the old stones covered in ivy, their cracks reflecting the moonlight like a labyrinth of dark veins. We pushed open the creaking door and stepped into the musty darkness within.

The interior was cramped and dimly lit by candles, casting flickering shadows on the walls as the air thickened with the scent of decay. An old man tended to a massive stone wheel at the center of the room, his hands moving in time with the rhythmic creaking of the wooden beams. I had visited this place before, where the veil between worlds thinned and allowed for contact with the restless dead.

Thalos' hand on my shoulder guided me deeper into the windmill, where a figure cloaked in darkness leaned against the stone wall, watching us with an air of expectation. The young woman from the alleyway slipped into view beside him, her

eyes still fixed intently upon me. As we drew closer, I recognized the figure: Aevan, an elderly member of our Order, known for his knowledge of the spirit realm.

"What brings you to this place?" he asked in a low tone, his voice as worn as the windmill's stones. "I sense your presence has been preceded by others," he continued, his eyes flicking toward Thalos. The old man's hands paused on the wheel as he looked at me with an unspoken question: had we discovered what lay behind these ghostly visitations?

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts as I replied, "Elder Aevan, we've been investigating reports of nocturnal visitations across the kingdom. People claim to have seen spirits speaking to them, often warning of an impending catastrophe." The old man's expression remained unreadable, but his eyes held a flicker of interest.

Thalos spoke up, his voice measured. "We were hoping you might be able to shed some light on these occurrences. Is there any connection to the spirit realm?" Aevan's gaze drifted toward the young woman beside him, who was watching me with an unnerving intensity. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of recognition between them, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

The old man turned back to us, his hands resuming their rhythmic motion on the stone wheel. "There's been a... disturbance in the other realm," he said finally, his voice low and measured. "A rift, some might call it. Spirits are becoming trapped between worlds, unable to move on." He paused, studying me with an unspoken question: did I understand the significance of what he was telling us?

As I nodded, a shiver ran down my spine. "This could be connected to our Oath," I said, trying to keep my thoughts clear despite the creeping unease. Thalos leaned forward, his eyes locked on Aevan's. "What about the messages they're bringing? Do you know anything about their warnings?" The old man's expression turned grave as he replied, "The spirits speak of a darkness gathering in the heart of the kingdom. It spreads like a stain, consuming all in its path."

I felt a cold dread creeping up my spine as I glanced at Thalos, seeing a mirrored reflection of my own fear. The windmill's creaking seemed to take on a menacing tone, as if it too sensed the weight of what we were discussing. Aevan continued, his words dripping with an air of resignation. "We've lost control of something, brethren. Something that should have stayed hidden." His eyes locked onto mine, filled with a quiet warning: I had to tread carefully from here on.

The candles in the windmill seemed to gutter, casting flickering shadows on the walls as if echoing Aevan's words. Thalos' grip on my shoulder tightened, a silent signal that he too sensed the gravity of our situation. I knew we were walking a thin line between the world of the living and the realm of the dead – a line that was rapidly becoming

increasingly fragile.

"We need to find out what's causing this rift," I said firmly, trying to keep my focus from wavering. Aevan nodded, his expression serious. "I've been monitoring the spirits' messages. They speak of an old place: the Red Keep, a fortress where... events took their toll on the kingdom's balance." His eyes locked onto mine, a silent question hanging between us: were we prepared to face what was waiting for us in those ancient walls?

The Red Keep loomed in my mind, a monolith of forgotten secrets and ancient power. I recalled whispers from my early days within the Order – hushed tales of dark rituals performed there, of sorcerers who had attempted to wield forces beyond their control. The mere thought sent shivers down my spine, but I pushed them aside, focusing on the task at hand.

Thalos' grip on my shoulder tightened as we made our way back out into the night air. "We need to gather more information," he said, his voice low and urgent. "The Red Keep is too far from here; we can't risk a solo expedition." I nodded in agreement, already thinking of the network of allies and informants within the Order who might be able to provide us with more details.

As we navigated the winding streets once more, the young woman from the windmill fell into step beside us. Her eyes remained fixed on me, and I sensed a hunger there that made my skin crawl. "I can take you to someone who knows the Red Keep," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. I turned to Thalos, seeking his permission before responding.

"I'll listen," I said, eyeing the young woman warily. "But we need answers, and I'm not sure what kind of information your acquaintance can provide." The woman's gaze flickered with something akin to excitement before she nodded curtly and led us deeper into the city's labyrinthine alleys.

We walked for what felt like hours, the city's shadows swallowing our footprints. Finally, we arrived at a nondescript door nestled between two larger buildings, adorned only with a small symbol etched into its surface. The young woman knocked twice, and after a brief pause, the door swung open to reveal a dimly lit chamber filled with an overwhelming scent of incense.

Inside, a figure cloaked in shadows beckoned us forward, their voice a low whisper in my ear: "You seek knowledge of the Red Keep? I can provide it... for a price." The young woman's eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, I thought I saw a glimmer of warning. I nodded, steeling myself for what lay ahead.

The figure beckoned us deeper into the room, where the air was heavy with anticipation. Thalos' hand on my shoulder seemed to grow tighter as we moved

forward, and I sensed that we were crossing a threshold from which there would be no return. The figure gestured toward a collection of dusty parchments scattered across a nearby table.

"Read this," they said, their voice dripping with an air of expectation. "These are the journals of one who walked the Red Keep's walls, who bore witness to the darkness that lurks within." My eyes scanned the pages, and what I saw made my heart skip a beat: the writing spoke of ancient rituals gone awry, of those who had attempted to harness forbidden power. It also mentioned a single name: Eirlys of Eldrid - a sorceress rumored to be tied to the Red Keep's downfall.

As I looked up from the parchment, the young woman's eyes locked onto mine with an unnerving intensity, and for a moment, I felt like I was drowning in their depths.

I forced myself to meet her gaze, my mind racing with questions. "Who is Eirlys of Eldrid?" I asked aloud, my voice steady despite the unease creeping up my spine. The cloaked figure's eyes glinted in the dim light as they replied, "A woman of great power and ambition. Her name has become synonymous with dark magic within these walls." Thalos leaned forward, his expression intent. "And what of her connection to the Red Keep?" The hooded figure's voice dropped to a whisper. "She was the last one to attempt to harness its power."

I felt a chill run down my spine as I turned the pages again, searching for any mention of Eirlys' fate. A passage caught my eye: "\_Her ritual failed, but the cost was not her own... She paid it in full measure."\_ My gaze snapped up from the parchment to meet the hooded figure's. "What do you mean by 'in full measure'?" The figure's voice dripped with a morbid fascination. "Eirlys made a pact, trading parts of herself for power. Her sacrifices are still felt within the Red Keep's walls." I exchanged a troubled glance with Thalos, his face grim.

The young woman from the windmill stirred, her eyes never leaving mine. "We should leave," she said softly, but I could sense a reluctance behind her words. The hooded figure leaned forward, their voice low and urgent. "There is more you should know, travelers. The darkness gathering within the kingdom's heart is not a natural phenomenon. It has a name: \_Zha'thik\_, a creature forged from the remnants of dark magic." I felt Thalos' hand on my shoulder tense as the figure continued. "It seeps into the city like a stain, corrupting all it touches."

Thalos' eyes locked onto mine, his expression grave. "We've seen the effects firsthand," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. The hooded figure nodded. "Then you understand the gravity of your mission. You must reach the Red Keep before Zha'thik claims the city." I took a step forward, determination burning within me. "How do we find it? We can't be sure what's waiting for us there."

The figure beckoned toward the back of the room, where a large map was spread across a wooden table. "This is the layout of the Red Keep's corridors," they explained. "You'll need to navigate its secrets if you hope to uncover the source of the disturbance." I approached the map, my mind racing with strategies and contingency plans. Thalos leaned over me, his breath warm on the back of my neck as he whispered, "We should be careful. If Eirlys made a pact for power... what might Zha'thik have demanded in return?"

Tags: Era of Order, Moral Cost, Redemption