

# In the Absence of Light

Black

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The carriage rattled over the cracked earth, spewing dust and gravel as it devoured the miles between Thalos and Nightforge. Eira's hands clenched the wooden frame, knuckles white with tension. The last time she'd ridden these roads was under siege, fleeing the flames that consumed her family's home in Everia.

Her driver, Jaxen, glanced back, voice low. "You okay, lass?"

Eira forced a nod. This wasn't about pain or anger. It was about balance.

Ahead, the fortress city of Nightforge rose like a jagged silhouette against the grey sky - black stone walls topped with glittering silver, banners of House Veylan snapping in the wind. As the carriage approached the main gate, Eira's thoughts turned to Kael Varn, a man who made his living in the shadows, quietly correcting the excesses of power. His specialty was delicate; some called it subtle correction.

They entered the city's main square, the sound of hammering and sawdust hanging heavy over the air. The Broken Writ was on display, its intricate script like wounds carved into stone. Eira approached, running her fingers over the etching as she'd been trained to do - but her mind wasn't here. She'd been sent by Queen Lyra's own hand, with a mission to meet Kael Varn.

Her escort, one of the Curators from the Order, leaned in. "You know why you're here, lass?"

Eira met his gaze. "Because there's no light left to claim, not even in shadow. The people are restless."

Jaxen spoke up, a growl in his voice. "They say the Queen's been using your... unique talents, Eira. Asking too much without paying its due."

She turned back to Jaxen, but her attention wavered as she took in the square. People of all castes and orders moved with purpose, yet there was an undercurrent - of discontent, fear. Her eyes settled on Kael Varn himself, a figure in the crowd, face obscured by a hood.

The weight of this place settled onto Eira like a shroud. She knew what he did: the quiet whispering, the silencing. He walked where armies couldn't, judging those who'd

overstepped. Her role was different; her talents honed for the exact opposite – making others walk into the light, no matter how painful.

"Eira." A low voice cut through the air, and she turned to find Kael Varn standing beside her, eyes gleaming like black obsidian in the fading light. "You're not here to claim light. Yet."

Their meeting was brief; Eira didn't need an introduction. He knew what she did – the cost, the toll of magic on her mind and body. Melosdra had once been a place of vibrant energy, but now it hung heavy with the weight of secrets kept, the burden of restraint.

In the stillness before Nightforge's walls, Eira spoke the words that needed saying. "We've taken what we could; there's nothing left to claim."

Kael Varn nodded once, a rare gesture. "Then you're free to go, Eira. You may not find solace in the light, but in shadows... perhaps you'll find redemption."

As she departed Nightforge with Jaxen at her side, Eira noticed something – a flicker of movement on the periphery, a woman watching from the crowd. She didn't recognize her face, yet the feeling of being weighed and found wanting lingered.

In that moment, in the absence of light, Eira realized balance wasn't about claiming what was left; it was acknowledging what had been taken – and living with the cost.

Jaxen steered the carriage down a narrow alleyway, away from the bustle of Nightforge's main square. Eira's eyes remained fixed on the woman she'd seen watching her – a fleeting glance, yet the impression lingered. The driver fell silent as they navigated the winding streets, navigating by habit more than sight.

The carriage slowed before a wooden door, unadorned and unremarkable in the sea of Nightforge's grand architecture. Jaxen handed Eira down from the carriage, gesturing for her to precede him into the darkness within. She took a step back, but her vision was already adjusting – pinpricks of luminescent light dancing across walls, faint symbols that whispered their own language.

"Eira?" Kael Varn's voice called out, echoing off the cold stone. "You're here. I suppose it's not every day we get... curators from the Black Rose Order." His footsteps drew closer, accompanied by the rustle of fabric. Eira turned to face him, sensing the weight of his words – an unspoken question.

"You asked why you were sent," he said, leading her deeper into the house. "It's not about what's left; it's about what others have taken." Kael Varn paused before a door hidden behind a tapestry, the air within thick with incense and smoke. He turned to her with an unwavering gaze. "The Queen's... talents don't come without cost. I'm told she's been using you as a catalyst, pushing your limits to break through the veil." His

eyes narrowed, darkening like the stone above them.

Eira's hand instinctively went to the small pouch at her waist, where the weight of her duty pressed against her skin. Kael Varn continued, unyielding, "I'm not here to judge, Eira - I'm here to offer a... trade."

"What kind of trade?" Eira asked, her voice steady despite the unease growing in her chest.

"A debt, of sorts," Kael Varn replied, his gaze lingering on hers before he stepped aside, revealing a narrow room with walls lined with ancient tomes and shelves that seemed to stretch into the darkness. The air inside was heavy with dust and the scent of parchment. "The Queen's... experiments have left her with a problem. One she can't solve on her own." He gestured to a large, ornate box in the center of the room, its surface etched with symbols that seemed to shimmer in the faint light.

Eira approached the box cautiously, sensing a resonance within it - a hum of power, muted but unmistakable. Kael Varn's words trailed off, lost in the silence as she examined the markings on the box. Her fingers twitched, drawn to the intricate etchings, and for an instant, she felt the familiar tug of magic, responding to her presence. The sensation was fleeting, but it left her with a faint sense of unease - Kael Varn's trade wasn't just about exchanging favors; he was offering her something that could rekindle the flame within.

"You're saying this is what she's been using me for?" Eira turned back to Kael Varn, her voice measured. "To access this... box?"

Kael Varn nodded once, his eyes narrowing slightly as if gauging her reaction. "The Queen believes it's a key to breaking through the veil, into the hidden places where the light still lingers. But at what cost?" He paused, letting the question hang in the air before continuing, "Her methods have left... consequences. The people are beginning to whisper of an imbalance, and I fear she'll pay for her ambition."

Eira's mind reeled as she pieced together the Queen's actions - using her for her unique gifts to access the box, without regard for the cost to herself or those around her. Kael Varn's trade offered a different kind of debt: one she might be able to pay in full. The prospect was both terrifying and tempting.

"You want me to help you find another way," Eira said finally, a slow comprehension dawning on her. "One that doesn't involve pushing my limits, or paying the cost."

Kael Varn's expression remained inscrutable, but his voice was low and measured. "I want us to balance the scales, Eira. The light may be failing, but in shadows, there are still choices to be made." He paused, studying her intently, as if searching for something hidden within.

As Eira stood before the box, her fingers twitching with an aching to touch its surface, Kael Varn's words hung in the air like a challenge. She felt the weight of her duty, the expectation that had driven her to Nightforge and beyond – the need to bring light into darkness, no matter the cost. But now, faced with this box and its secrets, she wondered if she'd been blind to the true nature of her work.

"You're asking me to betray my oath," Eira said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael Varn's expression didn't change, but his eyes seemed to darken further, as if the shadows themselves were deepening within him.

"I'm offering you a choice, Eira," he countered, his voice low and even. "The Queen's actions have left her isolated, surrounded by those who fear her power or seek to exploit it. I can help you navigate this world, teach you how to wield your... talents without destroying yourself in the process."

Eira's thoughts reeled as she tried to understand the scope of Kael Varn's words – his willingness to help her find an alternative to the Queen's methods, and the secrets he seemed to carry within himself. The air in the room was heavy with unspoken truths, and for a moment, Eira felt like she was drowning in them.

She took a step back from the box, her eyes never leaving Kael Varn's face as she tried to process this new information. "What's in the box?" she asked finally, her voice firm despite the turmoil within her. The weight of Kael Varn's secrets pressed down on her like a physical force, and for an instant, she wondered if she was making a terrible mistake.

Kael Varn's gaze narrowed, his eyes glinting with a hint of amusement in the dim light. "The box contains something the Queen believes can restore balance to the world," he said, his voice measured and calculated. "But I think it's more than that – it's a key to understanding what's been lost, and perhaps even reclaiming some of it."

Eira's heart skipped a beat as she heard the weight of Kael Varn's words – a promise, or perhaps a warning. She felt the box calling to her, its power resonating deep within her mind like a siren's song. The air seemed to vibrate with tension, and for a moment, Eira wondered if she was standing at a crossroads, staring into an abyss of unknown consequence.

The silence that followed was oppressive, filled with the weight of unspoken choices and unseen paths. Eira's eyes lingered on Kael Varn, searching for answers in his face, but he offered none – only a steady gaze that seemed to hold the secrets of the world within its depths.

Kael Varn's words hung in the air, a promise and a warning tangled together like the threads of an ancient tapestry. Eira felt herself drawn to the box, her fingers twitching with an aching desire to touch its surface, to feel the power that hummed within it.

She took another step back, trying to clear her mind of the Queen's ambitions, of Kael Varn's words, and focus on the task at hand: understanding the secrets hidden in this small, dimly lit room.

The air was heavy with dust, and the scent of old parchment clung to Eira like a shroud. She raised her eyes from the box to meet Kael Varn's gaze, searching for any sign of what lay beyond the surface level. His expression remained impassive, but his eyes seemed to hold a depth she couldn't quite reach, like the dark waters of a wellspring that waited to be plumbed.

"What do you know about this?" Eira asked finally, her voice firm despite the turmoil within her. Kael Varn's gaze narrowed, and he stepped closer, his movements economical as he began to pace before her. "The Queen believes it's a relic from the Time of the Ancients," he said, his words measured. "A key, of sorts, to unlock the secrets of what was lost." He paused in front of her, his eyes glinting with a hint of calculation. "But I think she's been mistaken."

Eira's mind reeled as Kael Varn's words unfolded like a tapestry before her. She felt a shiver run down her spine as he reached out to brush aside the folds of his cloak, revealing a slender chain at his neck, a small, ornate box hanging from it. "I've seen such relics before," he said, his voice low and measured. "They're not what they seem." The box on his chest seemed to throb with a power that sent shivers down Eira's spine, drawing her attention away from the larger box in the center of the room.

"The Queen believes this relic can restore balance to the world," Kael Varn continued, his voice growing more urgent. "But I think it's more than that - it's a key to understanding what's been lost." He paused, his eyes meeting hers with an unyielding intensity. "I think she's been using you, Eira, as a catalyst to break through the veil without understanding the true cost of her actions." His words hit like a blow, making Eira stumble backward, away from the box and its secrets.

Kael Varn's pace quickened, his movements economical as he began to stride around the room. "The light is failing," he said, his voice low and measured. "But in shadows, there are still choices to be made." The air seemed to vibrate with tension as Eira tried to process Kael Varn's words - a promise, or perhaps a warning. She felt herself at a crossroads, staring into an abyss of unknown consequence.

The room seemed to narrow around her, the walls closing in as she tried to comprehend the magnitude of what was unfolding before her. "What choice do you propose I make?" Eira asked finally, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael Varn's expression remained inscrutable, but his eyes held a depth that made her shiver, like the darkness at the edge of the forest.

Kael Varn's words still echoed in her mind as he stopped pacing, his eyes locked onto hers with an unyielding intensity. "I want you to find a way to use this relic without

letting your power consume you," he said, his voice measured and calculated. Eira felt a shiver run down her spine as she met his gaze, searching for any sign of what lay beyond the surface level. His expression remained impassive, but his eyes seemed to hold a depth that made her stomach twist with unease.

"I can help you," he continued, his pace slowing as he approached her once more. "Teach you how to wield your talents without losing yourself in the process." Eira's mind reeled as she tried to grasp the scope of what he was offering – an alternative to the Queen's methods, and a chance to find a way out of the darkness that had consumed her. But at what cost? She thought of the weight of her duty, the expectations of those who had entrusted her with this mission, and wondered if she could abandon it for Kael Varn's vision.

The air in the room seemed to grow heavier, filled with the weight of unspoken choices and unseen paths. Eira felt like she was drowning in them, struggling to keep her head above water as Kael Varn's words swirled around her like a maelstrom. She glanced at the box on his chest, feeling an overwhelming urge to touch it, to understand its secrets. But something about Kael Varn's words made her hesitate – a warning, or perhaps a promise. The choice was hers alone, and Eira felt the weight of that responsibility bearing down upon her like a physical force.

Kael Varn's eyes seemed to bore into her very soul as he awaited her response. Eira took a deep breath, trying to clear the turmoil from her mind and focus on the task at hand – understanding the secrets hidden in this small, dimly lit room. She felt the weight of the box, its power resonating within her like a siren's song, but now she was aware of another presence lurking just beneath the surface. A choice loomed before her, one that threatened to upend everything she thought she knew about her mission and her duty.

Eira's eyes lingered on Kael Varn, her mind racing with the implications of his words. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she thought about the weight of her duty, the expectations of those who had entrusted her with this mission. Could she truly abandon it for Kael Varn's vision? The thought sent a spark of rebellion through her veins, but caution held her back.

"What makes you think I'm not in control?" Eira asked finally, trying to keep her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. Kael Varn's expression remained impassive, his eyes glinting with an unyielding intensity. "You're a novice," he said, his voice measured and calculated. "The power of the box is seductive, but it can also consume you. I've seen it happen to others." His words struck a chord within her, making Eira wonder if she had been so blinded by ambition that she'd lost sight of what was truly important.

Eira's gaze drifted back to the box on Kael Varn's chest, its power still humming within her like a siren's song. She felt an overwhelming urge to touch it, to understand its secrets and unlock its true potential. But something about Kael Varn's words stayed her hand – a warning, or perhaps a promise. The choice was hers alone, and Eira knew that the path she chose would have far-reaching consequences.

The room seemed to grow smaller as Eira tried to grasp the scope of what Kael Varn was offering – an alternative to the Queen's methods, and a chance to find a way out of the darkness that had consumed her. But at what cost? She thought of the weight of her duty, the expectations of those who had entrusted her with this mission, and wondered if she could abandon it for Kael Varn's vision.

A cold breeze wafted through the room, carrying the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. Eira's eyes snapped back to Kael Varn's face, his expression unreadable as he awaited her response. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she met his gaze, searching for any sign of what lay beyond the surface level. His eyes seemed to hold a depth that made her stomach twist with unease.

"I have questions," Eira said finally, trying to keep her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. "What do you propose I do with this relic? How will we even begin?" Kael Varn's expression remained inscrutable as he began to pace before her once more. "The first step is to understand what it is," he said, his voice measured and calculated. "We'll need to study the box, learn how to harness its power without losing ourselves in the process."

Eira felt a spark of determination ignite within her as Kael Varn's words sparked a glimmer of hope. She could do this – she could find a way to use the relic without letting her power consume her. But at what cost? The thought sent a ripple of unease through her, and Eira wondered if she was truly ready for what lay ahead.

The silence between them grew thick with unspoken choices and unseen paths. Eira felt like she was walking a tightrope, balancing on the edge of two worlds – one where she obeyed the Queen's orders, and another where she followed Kael Varn's guidance. The choice before her loomed large, its weight bearing down upon her like a physical force.

As the tension hung between them, Eira felt the box on Kael Varn's chest seem to throb with power, drawing her attention away from the larger box in the center of the room. She took a step forward, her hand reaching out as if drawn by an unseen force. But something stayed her hand – a warning, or perhaps a promise.

Kael Varn's eyes narrowed, his gaze snapping back to hers with an unyielding intensity. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice low and measured. Eira hesitated, her hand hovering above the box as if waiting for some unseen signal. The air seemed to vibrate with tension, filled with the weight of unspoken choices and

unseen paths.

"I... I don't know," Eira admitted finally, feeling a shiver run down her spine. Kael Varn's expression remained impassive, but his eyes seemed to hold a depth that made her stomach twist with unease. "Perhaps it's time you did," he said, his voice measured and calculated.

Tags: Dimming Age, Shadowlands Claimed