

The Silent Blade of Ashen Roads

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Kael Varn stepped off the Nightforge cart, his boots sinking into the fine dust of Everia's main thoroughfare. The waning sun cast long shadows across the cobblestones as he made for the Black Rose Order headquarters. This was a visit he'd delayed far too long.

Inside, Melosdra's chambers were dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of old parchment and the faint tang of incense from the nearby altar. She greeted him with a measured welcome. "Kael Varn. It's been some time."

"Three years, I reckon," he said. "Long enough for dust to gather on more than just the manuscripts in the library." He made his way to the central table, running a hand over the maps and scrolls scattered across its surface.

Melosdra followed him, her eyes flicking between Kael's face and the documents. "You've come about something specific, I take it?"

Kael settled into a chair, letting his gaze wander over the layout of Ashen Roads. "The last contract I took from House Veylan was to keep an ear to the ground for anything hinting at the return of the Broken Writ. Silence was my guarantee: no whispers, no rumors, no hints."

"Did you find any?" Melosdra asked.

"A whispered rumor in a tavern," Kael said. "Enough to make me curious. I think I know what it might mean."

The silence between them lengthened as Melosdra's expression turned thoughtful. "I see. And do you believe the contract is compromised, then?"

"I do."

"Go on," she said.

Kael took a slow breath. "House Veylan has... mislaid something. Something that might yet cause damage if it's not kept under their control." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "It's time to take a more direct hand in the matter, I think."

As he spoke, the silence between them deepened, until Melosdra nodded almost imperceptibly. "Do what is necessary, Kael Varn."

Outside, the city gates creaked shut as night fell over Everia. Kael walked back into the shadows, his purpose clear and unspoken.

The Nightforge cart was still parked outside, its driver waiting for his return with a patient air. Kael nodded to him as he passed, but his mind was elsewhere, already tracing out the possibilities of what he'd uncovered in Melosdra's chambers. The whispered rumor had been about a small group of travelers on the Ashen Road, fleeing from something or someone. He'd tracked them for days, following the faint trail left behind until it vanished into thin air near the old windmill on the outskirts of town.

Kael Varn stood in front of the abandoned mill now, its windows shattered, the door hanging crookedly from hinges. Wind whistled through the gaps, carrying the scent of decay and rot. He stepped inside cautiously, calling out to see if anyone – or anything – would answer. His words were swallowed by the silence as he moved deeper into the musty darkness.

He found a makeshift campsite in the center of the room: a fire pit with cold ashes, a pile of discarded rags, and a single, worn leather satchel lying open on the ground. Kael recognized the emblem embroidered on its flap: House Veylan's crescent moon. It was as if they'd used this place to send their message, leaving behind a marker for him to follow. He picked up the satchel, his fingers brushing against something hard and smooth inside – a small box with an intricate lock on it.

The lock clicked open at his touch, but he hesitated before lifting the lid. Inside lay a note, folded in half and sealed with a tiny glob of crimson wax that looked disturbingly like human blood.

The note was addressed to him, the handwriting awkward but unmistakably a member of House Veylan's entourage. Kael recognized the spidery script from their last contract. He unfolded the paper, his eyes scanning the message scrawled within:

Meet me at the old windmill on the outskirts of Ashen Roads. Come alone.

A single sentence, devoid of warmth or welcome. The crimson wax seemed to mock him, a cruel joke about the nature of House Veylan's business. Kael's gaze lingered on the mark, wondering what kind of desperation or fear could have driven someone to use such a potent symbol of power.

He tucked the note into his belt and turned away from the campsite, surveying the windmill one last time. The silence outside was oppressive, weighing on him like a physical presence. The Nightforge cart was still waiting patiently outside, its driver

watching him with an expression that bordered on concern. Kael nodded to him before disappearing back into the darkness, following a route he knew all too well.

The night air carried the scent of rain, heavy and foreboding. Everia's streets were almost empty now, only the occasional torch flickering in a window breaking the darkness. Kael navigated the alleys with practiced ease, avoiding the main roads until he reached the edge of town. Here, the buildings thinned out, and the night sounds grew more distant. He quickened his pace, his senses heightened as he approached the abandoned windmill.

The door hung crookedly on its hinges, just as it had when he'd left it earlier that evening. Kael stepped inside, his eyes adjusting to the dim interior. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay. He moved cautiously, calling out into the darkness once more. This time, a response came – faint and hesitant – from deeper within the windmill.

He followed the sound, his footsteps echoing off the walls as he made his way down to the lower levels. A figure sat huddled in the corner, hood up and face obscured by shadows. The air around them seemed to vibrate with tension, like a drawn bowstring waiting to snap. Kael's hand rested on the hilt of his blade, his senses alert for any sign of treachery.

"I'm here," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "What is it that you need from me?"

The figure slowly rose to its feet, their movements stiff and uncoordinated. As they stepped into the dim light, Kael's eyes widened in surprise – this was not who he had expected.

The figure pushed back its hood, revealing a young woman with an angular face and eyes that seemed to hold a deep sadness. She regarded Kael for a moment before speaking in a voice barely above a whisper. "You're late." Her gaze darted around the room as if searching for potential eavesdroppers.

Kael's grip on his blade eased slightly, his mind racing with the implications of this unexpected visitor. He took a step forward, trying to place her accent. "Who are you? And what's going on?" The woman's eyes flickered back to him, her expression unreadable behind a mask of calm. She didn't seem afraid, but there was an undercurrent of tension in her posture that suggested she might be holding something back.

She took a deep breath, the sound almost lost in the creaking of the windmill's wooden beams. "My name is Elara Vex," she said finally. "I'm a messenger from House Veylan." Kael's mind connected the dots – Vex was one of the lower-ranking members, often overlooked by the more prominent Houses. He narrowed his eyes,

studying her for any sign of deception.

A faint scent wafted through the air, and Kael's stomach growled in response – the woman must have brought food or something to eat. The wind outside picked up, making the creaking sounds louder as Elara took a step closer to him. "We need to talk about the Broken Writ," she said, her voice still low but firmer now. Kael's grip on his blade tightened reflexively – this was what he'd been waiting for.

The woman seemed to sense his unease and paused, her eyes locking onto his. For a moment, they stood there in silence, the only sound the creaking of the windmill and the distant rumble of thunder outside. Kael's thoughts whirled with possibilities – betrayal, information, or something more sinister? He couldn't quite read Elara Vex yet.

"What do you know about it?" he asked finally, his voice firm but controlled. Elara Vex took another step closer, her movements economical and purposeful. "Enough to know that we can't stop it on our own," she said, her words barely above a whisper now. Kael's eyes narrowed – what was this supposed to mean? And how did House Veylan fit into the larger picture?

The rain outside intensified, drumming against the windmill's wooden walls in a staccato beat. Elara's gaze drifted towards the door, as if searching for an escape route or some other means of release. Kael's instincts screamed at him to trust his blade – this was not what he'd been expecting from House Veylan's messenger.

"We should get out of here," Elara said suddenly, her voice sharp with a mix of fear and urgency. "We can talk more elsewhere." She turned towards the door, but Kael caught her by the arm, halting her. The woman's eyes flashed up to his, her face alight with a mixture of emotions – anxiety, wariness, and something almost like hope.

"Tell me what you know," he said, his grip firm but not unkind. For a moment, they locked gazes, the only sound the rain pounding against the windmill. Then, Elara Vex nodded once, as if accepting some unseen decision, and began to speak in a low, urgent tone.

"I've seen things... things that shouldn't be. In the old places where we send our people, I saw... echoes. Flickers of power, like candles burning bright and then dying out. It's been happening more often lately – I've been tracking it for weeks now." Her words spilled out in a rush, as if she feared not being believed or interrupted.

"Echoes," Kael repeated, his mind racing with the implications. "What kind of echoes?" Elara's eyes darted around the room again before settling back on him, her voice barely above a whisper. "Things from the past... whispers of what's been lost."