

# The Weight of History

Black

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Kael Varn stood before the flickering torches that lined the Black Rose Order's headquarters in Everia. The air was heavy with the scent of old stone, oil, and something else: the faint tang of ash from the Ashen Roads. He'd walked those roads countless times, but the smell remained a constant reminder of what lay beyond the walls of this place.

"Kael Varn," Lady Arachne's voice echoed through the corridors as he made his way to her chambers. Her words preceded him like a herald, announcing his presence to the entire Order.

Inside, she stood by the window, her dark hair pulled back in a severe bun, revealing the sharp lines of her face. "I've been expecting you," she said, not looking up from the parchment spread on her desk.

Kael took his place before her, hands clasped behind his back. "The matter I came for?"

"The Broken Writ." Her eyes flickered up to meet his. "A message has arrived from House Veylan. They've unearthed an... irregularity."

"Explain."

"In the records of their 14th century expedition to Nightforge, there's a notation -"

"A notation?"

"About a person, a woman named Elara who vanished during the campaign," Lady Arachne continued. "They're requesting our assistance in locating her remains and closing the matter."

"Request or directive?" Kael asked.

"It's... complicated." Her eyes clouded, as if something weighed heavily on them. "The expedition leader has ties to a high-ranking Curator. His family would benefit from having this anomaly resolved."

Kael raised an eyebrow. "As I said, complicated."

Lady Arachne nodded, her voice taking on a measured tone. "This involves the Weight of History, Kael Varn. We must tread carefully."

He knew what she meant – that every action had consequences, and inaction did too. He'd seen it in the scars that crisscrossed his own back, the price he paid for each use of his... particular talents.

"I'll look into it," he said finally.

As he left Lady Arachne's chambers, the weight of history pressed upon him like a physical force. Elara's name echoed through his mind: a thread waiting to be pulled, unraveling secrets and perhaps truths he'd rather not confront.

In the corridor outside, Kael paused before a fresco depicting the Great Sovereigns. His hand brushed against the stone image of Melosdra – another reminder of the weight that bore down on him with each step forward.

Kael made his way to the Order's library, searching for any information about Elara and her disappearance. The shelves stretched out like sentinels, rows upon rows of dusty tomes bound in worn leather. He navigated the narrow aisles with ease, drawn to a section on Nightforge expeditions.

As he opened a particularly old book, his eyes scanned the yellowed pages, searching for any mention of Elara. The parchment crackled beneath his fingers as he turned the pages, releasing whispers of forgotten knowledge into the air.

At last, a notation caught his eye:

"...Elara of House Vexan: missing during 14th century campaign. Last seen near Thalos' Gate in Nightforge's lower ruins."

Kael closed the book, a decision forming in his mind like an unspoken oath. He would walk those roads again, into secrets and hearts and judgment unspoken.

Outside, the night had deepened, casting the Ashen Roads in shadows that seemed to writhe and twist like living things. Kael took his first step forward, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls of the Black Rose Order's headquarters – a reminder that some paths lead back to where they started, while others walk further into darkness.

The night swallowed him whole as he vanished into the unknown, leaving behind only the faintest hint of ash on the wind.

As Kael walked the Ashen Roads, the silence was a palpable thing, heavy with secrets. The streets of Everia were empty, save for the few scattered torches that cast flickering shadows on the walls. He navigated through the darkness, his footsteps echoing off the buildings as he made his way towards the lower ruins of Nightforge.

The air grew thick with an otherworldly energy as he approached Thalos' Gate, a massive stone structure that loomed over the surrounding streets like a monolith. The weight of history pressed down upon him, the whispers of the past seeming to seep from the very stones themselves. Kael felt the familiar tingle in his fingers, the one that signaled his connection to the world's ancient magic was stirring.

He approached the entrance to the lower ruins, where a figure stood waiting – a hooded woman with eyes that seemed to absorb the light around her. "Kael Varn," she said, her voice low and husky, like the rustle of dry leaves. "I've been expecting you."

Kael's hand instinctively went to the dagger at his belt, but he didn't draw it. Something in her demeanor told him this wasn't a fight he wanted to pick. "What do you want?" he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"I have information about Elara," she said, her eyes glinting like dark gemstones in the torchlight. "A message from someone who claims to know what happened to her." She held out a small piece of parchment, yellowed with age and bearing a single line of script: "Follow the path of the setting sun."

Kael took the parchment, feeling the familiar tremor run through his fingers as he touched the ink. Something about it felt... off, like the message was trying to convey more than just words. He looked up at the woman, searching for any hint of what this might mean.

The wind picked up, sending dust swirling around their feet as they stood there. "Who is your source?" Kael asked, his mind already racing ahead, trying to piece together the mystery that was unfolding before him.

The hooded woman smiled, a cold, mirthless smile. "You'll see," she said, turning to disappear into the shadows as quickly as she had appeared.

He stood there for a moment, watching her vanish into the darkness, his mind reeling with possibilities. The parchment felt heavy in his hand, as if it weighed more than its size or material should have allowed. The message on it seemed deliberately cryptic, designed to test his wits rather than provide a clear lead. Kael's eyes narrowed, studying every inch of the paper, searching for any hidden meaning that might escape him.

He tucked the parchment into his belt pouch, a habit born of years spent deciphering messages from unknown sources. His thoughts returned to Elara and her disappearance, the more he learned about this case, the more questions it raised. What had happened in Nightforge's lower ruins? Was she taken or did she go willingly? And what lay beyond Thalos' Gate, that monolith of ancient stone?

With these questions echoing through his mind, Kael pushed forward, into the shadows cast by the flickering torches. He navigated the narrow alleys and passageways, following the scent of smoke and decay until he emerged at the edge of the lower ruins. The air was heavy with the stench of char and burning, a constant reminder that Nightforge's depths hid secrets far from the reaches of daylight.

In the distance, the sound of pickaxes striking stone echoed through the air, a steady rhythm punctuated by the muffled voice of a single overseer. Kael made his way towards the noise, hand on the hilt of his dagger as he navigated through the debris-filled streets. He didn't draw it yet; something about this place still felt...off.

As he crested a small hill, the remnants of an ancient structure came into view: a sprawling compound of broken walls and crumbled stonework, surrounded by what appeared to be makeshift shelters. A group of workers labored beneath the watchful eye of their overseer, extracting ore from the ruins with primitive tools. It seemed they had no interest in anything more than the riches buried beneath their feet.

Kael watched them for a while, trying to discern if any were out of place or whether something else was brewing beneath the surface. He couldn't shake the feeling that this was just one layer on top of a far more complex web - and he needed to uncover it before the Order's weight bore down further.

The sun began its slow descent in the sky, casting long shadows across the lower ruins. The setting sun seemed to be at the center of everything now - the mysterious message, the strange woman, even his own journey here. He tucked this aside for now; first things first: find out what these workers knew about Elara.

The overseer, a grizzled old man with a face like worn leather, caught Kael's eye as he watched the workers labor. He was a Vaynar, one of the House that had ruled Nightforge before its downfall. There was something about him that didn't quite add up, a tension in his movements that suggested more to the story than met the eye.

Kael made his way down into the compound, his footsteps quiet on the dusty ground. The overseer's gaze locked onto him, and he raised a meaty hand in greeting. "What brings you to our neck of the woods?" he asked, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his arm.

Kael flashed a brief smile, showing just enough camaraderie to put the man at ease. "Just looking for some information," he said. "You folks been working here long?"

The overseer snorted. "Years. Since before the Order took over. We're just trying to dig out what's left of Nightforge's riches."

Kael nodded sympathetically, his eyes scanning the workers. They were all Vaynars, with a mix of ages and abilities. Some were seasoned diggers, while others looked barely old enough to be out of their apprenticeship. "I see," he said. "And have you

heard anything... unusual? Anything that might've happened in the lower ruins?"

The overseer's expression darkened, and he leaned in close. "Nowhere else to talk but here," he muttered, his voice barely audible over the pickaxes striking stone. "You're looking for Elara Vexan, ain't you?"

The overseer's words hung in the air like a challenge, as if daring Kael to deny his suspicions. He hesitated for a moment before answering, choosing his words carefully. "What do you know about Elara?" he asked, trying to gauge the overseer's reaction.

The old man's face twisted into a scowl, and he spat on the ground beside him. "She was here, two days ago," he said. "Came in with some... associates. We don't get many visitors, let alone strangers. They spent hours talking with our foreman, Argent, and then they left together." He nodded towards a figure standing at the edge of the group, watching the conversation with an air of quiet intensity.

Kael's eyes followed the overseer's nod, locking onto Argent, who met his gaze for a moment before looking away. The overseer continued, "They said something about 'excavating', and our foreman seemed... invested. But when they left, we never saw them again." His tone turned guarded, and he glanced around the group of workers as if fearful of being overheard.

Kael's eyes lingered on Argent for a moment longer before turning back to the overseer. "What do you think happened to her?" he asked, his tone neutral. The overseer snorted, shaking his head. "Don't know and don't care," he said, but the tension in his voice belied his words.

The setting sun cast long shadows across the compound, making it seem as though the very darkness itself was growing longer. Kael's thoughts turned to Elara and her involvement with the mysterious woman who had handed him the parchment. He needed to know more about this excavation and what it might have to do with Nightforge's history.

"Tell me more about your foreman, Argent," he said, his eyes drifting back to the figure in question. The overseer nodded, seeming to relax a little at the change of subject. "Good man, been working here for years. Knows the ruins like the back of his hand. Always seemed... curious, though." His voice trailed off, and Kael detected a flicker of unease in his expression.

"I see," he said, his mind racing ahead to the next question. What secrets lay hidden beneath their feet? And what role did Elara play in all this? He glanced at Argent once more, wondering if he might be able to draw out more information from him.

The overseer's eyes narrowed, and he nodded towards the darkness beyond the compound. "Be careful, Kael Varn," he said quietly, his voice barely audible over the sound of pickaxes striking stone. "There's things moving in the shadows that don't

take kindly to strangers."

As the overseer's words hung in the air, Kael's gaze lingered on Argent, who remained motionless at the edge of the group. The man's expression was a mask, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of tension, as if he knew something more than he was letting on. Kael's instincts prickled, urging him to press for answers, but he chose instead to observe Argent from afar.

He watched as the foreman surveyed the workers, his gaze lingering on each face before moving on, his expression unreadable. There was a sense of detachment about him, as if he were merely managing a team rather than leading them in their excavations. Kael's curiosity piqued, he wondered what had driven Argent to take such an interest in Elara and this supposed excavation.

The sun continued its descent, casting the lower ruins in a deepening twilight. The workers began to wind down, dropping their tools as the overseer gave them permission to leave for the night. Kael followed at a distance, his eyes never leaving Argent as he fell into step behind him. They walked through the winding streets of Nightforge's lower ruins, passing by makeshift shelters and crumbling buildings until they reached a small, nondescript cottage.

The door creaked open with a soft push from Argent, and Kael hesitated for a moment before stepping inside. The air within was thick with dust and the scent of old parchment. Shelves lined the walls, filled with texts bound in worn leather, their pages yellowed with age. A single candle cast flickering shadows on the walls as Argent moved deeper into the room, gesturing for Kael to follow.

The cottage seemed out of place among the ruins, a testament to the quiet dedication of its occupant. Kael's eyes scanned the shelves, noticing texts on alchemy, ancient lore, and forgotten histories. Some volumes seemed to be translations from a language he didn't recognize, their text written in a script that looked almost...alien. He wondered what secrets Argent might uncover through his studies.

Argent moved behind a small wooden desk, its surface cluttered with papers and quills. "Please, have a seat," he said, his tone polite but strained. Kael sat down, his eyes scanning the room as he waited for Argent to speak again. The foreman's hands trembled ever so slightly as he picked up a pen, his eyes avoiding Kael's gaze.

"I...I think I know why Elara was here," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "She was searching for something specific, and she believed it was hidden in the lower ruins." He paused, collecting his thoughts before continuing. "Something that predates even Nightforge itself, something tied to the ancient ones who built this city."

As Argent spoke, the shadows on the walls seemed to deepen, as if darkness itself was leaning in to listen. Kael's grip on the hilt of his dagger tightened instinctively, a nagging sense of foreboding building in the pit of his stomach. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on Argent, and asked, "What did she believe this thing was?"

Argent's eyes darted around the room, as if he feared being overheard by some unseen presence. His voice dropped to a whisper, "A relic from the First Stratum, something the ancient ones used to bind the city to the earth." He paused, his gaze drifting to the shelf behind Kael, where a text bound in black leather seemed to lean out at him like a skeletal finger.

Kael's interest piqued, he turned to see what Argent was looking at, but the foreman quickly looked away. "What do you know of this relic?" he asked, trying to keep his tone even, though his mind was racing ahead to Elara and her involvement. Argent's eyes flickered back to his, a hint of fear creeping into their depths.

"I...I've read about it," he said slowly, his voice barely audible over the creaking of the old cottage. "A relic known as the Kyrekeia Stone, said to be able to stabilize the ley lines and prevent the city from shifting." He paused again, glancing around the room before leaning in closer to Kael. "But I think there's more to it than that."

As Argent spoke, the candle on the desk seemed to flicker brighter, casting eerie shadows on the walls. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he leaned forward, his eyes locked on the foreman. "Go on," he urged, his voice low and even.

Argent's voice barely rose above a whisper as he spoke, his words spilling out in a rush. "I think Elara believed the Kyrekeia Stone was more than just a relic - I think she thought it was the key to something greater. Something that could change the course of Nightforge's history." He paused, glancing around the room once more as if fearful of being overheard.

Kael's eyes narrowed, his mind racing with possibilities. The Kyrekeia Stone, a relic from the First Stratum? It sounded like myth and legend. Yet Elara had been so convinced it was real... He leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting to the black leather-bound text on the shelf behind him. Argent's eyes followed, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a flicker of recognition in the foreman's expression.

"What do you think she found?" Kael asked, his voice low and even. Argent's eyes darted back to his face, and he shook his head. "I don't know. She was always careful, kept her researches private. But I did see her arguing with one of the other foremen... a man named Thorold. He's been working here for years, just as I have." A faint scent of smoke wafted through the air as Argent's hands trembled, causing the candle to flicker.

The shadows on the walls seemed to deepen, as if darkness itself was listening in on their conversation. Kael leaned forward again, his eyes locked on Argent. "What about Thorold? Do you think he might know more?" The foreman's expression twisted into a mixture of fear and determination. "He...he would have taken the parchment from Elara," Argent said, his voice barely audible over the creaking of the old cottage.

Kael's mind was racing ahead to Elara's involvement with Thorold, but before he could ask another question, a faint noise echoed outside – the sound of footsteps crunching on gravel. The air seemed to grow colder as Argent's eyes flickered towards the door, his expression tense. Kael rose from his chair, his hand instinctively drifting to the hilt of his dagger.

The door creaked open, and a figure loomed in the entrance, backlit by the fading light of day. Argent's tension eased slightly as he recognized the visitor – Thorold, the foreman Kael had just been discussing. The older man's eyes flickered between Argent and Kael, a hint of wariness in his expression.

"Ah, Thorold," Argent said, rising from his chair to greet him. "I wasn't expecting you." Thorold's gaze lingered on Kael before he nodded curtly. "Needed to speak with you, Argent. In private."

Argent hesitated for a moment, exchanging a glance with Kael before stepping aside to allow Thorold into the cottage. The air seemed to thicken as the two men stepped inside, their conversation hushed and urgent. Kael watched them, his mind racing ahead to Elara's involvement with Thorold and the mysterious Kyrekeia Stone.

As he waited, Argent's words from earlier echoed in his mind – Elara had been searching for a relic tied to the First Stratum, something that could change the course of Nightforge's history. Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, a growing sense of unease building within him. He wondered what other secrets lay hidden beneath the city, waiting to be uncovered.

Thorold's voice rose, his words hushed but laced with an undercurrent of anger as he spoke with Argent. The foreman's responses were brief, his eyes darting towards Kael before he nodded curtly in agreement. Whatever was being discussed, it seemed it wasn't pleasant.

The candle on the desk cast eerie shadows on the walls as the men continued to talk, their words indistinguishable over the creaking of the old cottage. Kael's patience wore thin – he had more questions for Argent, and Thorold's arrival seemed to be shutting off any possibility of answers. He decided to intervene, pushing back his chair and standing up.

"Perhaps I should leave," he said, his voice low but firm. Argent's eyes flickered towards him, a hint of relief in their depths as he nodded. "Yes, maybe that would be

best." Thorold's gaze followed Kael, a cold glint in his eye before he turned back to Argent. The air seemed to grow colder, as if the tension between them was palpable.

Kael made for the door, his hand on the hilt of his dagger still. As he stepped out into the fading light, the temperature dropped further, and a chill ran down his spine. He glanced over his shoulder, catching Argent's eyes locked on him before the foreman spoke with Thorold in urgent tones.

The darkness seemed to deepen as Kael walked away from the cottage, the silence of the night swallowing all sound but his footsteps crunching on gravel. He wondered what secrets lay hidden beneath Nightforge, and whether Elara had stumbled upon something that threatened to upend everything they thought they knew about their city.

Tags: House Veylan, Expansion, Consequences