

# Thorn Key's Silent Gate

Black

## The Silent Gate

In the dim light of dusk, Kael Varn navigated the winding streets of Ashen Roads. Webs of twilight glistened on the cobblestones, reflecting his approach like a mirror. His boots made soft crunching sounds on the uneven pavement as he walked toward Thorn Key's gates.

Passersby averted their eyes or quickened their pace upon seeing him. Some whispered to one another, fingers crossed in silent gestures against bad luck. Rumors spoke of Kael's skill: that with but a single glance, he knew hearts and secrets alike. This was not the first time he'd walked into the heart of Thorn Key uninvited.

At the Silent Gate's entrance stood two Black Rose Order guards. Their cloaks were clasped with the emblem of House Veylan, woven silver intertwined with what appeared to be night sky's dark blues. "Kael," one said quietly as he approached.

He acknowledged them with a nod and proceeded past them into Thorn Key's inner courtyards. Lanterns lit his path but did not illuminate everything: shadows pooled like deep waters in every corner, dark alcoves hiding stories untold.

Inside the central hub of the castle, an open area where sunlight could have streamed if the day had been clear, Kael spotted Lord Roven of House Veylan standing before a small group. He recognized the subject of their discussion – Thalos Nightforge, once a brilliant mind and the only known Curator to ever truly understand Melosdra's intent.

As he watched from across the room, Lord Roven gestured with his hands while speaking in hushed tones, his voice rising in intensity as if hoping Thalos might hear him where others wouldn't. There was desperation etched on his face that Kael recognized – a price of power always exacted at some point.

Thalos Nightforge remained silent, still and unwavering like the stone statues lining the periphery of the courtyard. It pained Lord Roven, yet not in a way that concerned him: this man had known suffering in his years within the Broken Writ, though now he walked in silence, bound by the very Order he once helped create. The reason for their meeting, Kael knew, was rooted deeper than simple respect.

"Kael Varn," Lord Roven called, a mixture of relief and worry in his voice as he noticed him standing there.

"I'm here," Kael replied quietly, approaching without any haste. "Why did you need me?"

Lord Roven hesitated before speaking, though his words came as if to be heard only by Kael: "Nightforge's silence has become a problem. We've managed for decades with his counsel, but times have changed and it's no longer enough."

Thalos didn't react. Silence was all he had left, or so they thought.

"The Silent Gate," Lord Roven continued, his eyes locked onto Kael's face as if seeking understanding, "it holds the past within its walls. Perhaps...there is more to Thalos than we've given him credit for."

A single glance at the silent Curator was all Kael needed – into hearts and secrets he had walked so often that even in dim light, in a moment not his own, the truth shone clear as ever: Thalos Nightforge held within him an unspoken history, perhaps one of balance.

As Kael's gaze met Thalos', he sensed a flicker, almost imperceptible as the gentle stir of autumn leaves on the wind. It was enough to give him pause, though he'd been trained to discern such subtleties in the whispers of men and women who'd sought his expertise in the shadows. He took a step closer, his eyes never leaving Thalos', and spoke softly, "Lord Roven has asked you here for something specific. You must be prepared to give us...something."

Thalos' face remained an impassive mask, yet Kael detected the faintest tremble of a muscle beneath his skin, like the reverberations of a harp string plucked too softly. His heart rate quickened ever so slightly as well, though the man's eyes gave away nothing – not even to those with such intimate familiarity. The weight of unspoken words hung between them like an unseen web, and Kael knew that here, in this moment, he stood at the threshold of a door that had long been locked and hidden from view.

"Lord Roven," Thalos spoke suddenly, his voice as dry as parched earth, "I fear we may not be speaking of the same silence." The room seemed to grow still, the only sound the soft creaking of the lanterns' chains as they swayed in the gentle breeze. Lord Roven's face tightened into a thin-lipped line, his eyes flicking toward Thalos before returning to Kael's face with an unspoken plea. "Tell me," he said then, his voice firm but not unyielding, "what do you mean?"

The air seemed to thicken as Kael met Lord Roven's gaze, weighing the truth that hung in the balance between them – the delicate dance of trust and power. He chose his words with care, aware that to misstep here would be to disrupt a carefully constructed facade: "I believe, my lord, that Thalos Nightforge knows far more than he lets on." The silence that followed was a heavy blanket, wrapping the courtyard in its

somber folds, as if it too sensed the weight of what Kael had just said.

Lord Roven's face reddened, a flush creeping up his neck like a rising storm. He clenched his jaw, the muscles working beneath his skin as he fought to maintain control. "Explain yourself," he demanded, his voice low but strained.

Thalos Nightforge's silence was a fortress that Kael had learned to navigate in the past. He took another step closer, his eyes never leaving Thalos', and spoke softly, his words barely audible over the soft creaking of the lanterns. "I've seen it, my lord – the weight he carries, the burden of knowledge that silences him." A flicker of recognition danced across Lord Roven's face, but Kael pressed on, knowing he had to tread carefully. "I believe there's something he's willing to share, if only you understand how to ask."

The courtyard seemed to hold its breath as Thalos' eyes locked onto Kael's, the silence between them a palpable thing that Lord Roven's rising anger couldn't dispel. "What do you propose we offer him?" Lord Roven asked, his voice laced with a mixture of frustration and desperation.

Kael's gaze never wavered from Thalos', and he spoke slowly, as if choosing each word with precision. "A key, my lord – not just any key, but one that could unlock the gates of balance itself." A whispered gasp escaped Lord Roven's lips, his eyes snapping to Kael's face in a mix of shock and curiosity.

Thalos' face remained impassive, yet Kael sensed a shift within him, like the quiet rustling of dry leaves. He took another step closer, his voice dropping to a whisper as he continued, "I believe Thalos knows the location of an ancient text – one said to hold the secrets of balance, the key to restoring equilibrium to our fractured world."

The flicker in Thalos' eyes, almost imperceptible as a candle's flame dancing in the breeze, was all the answer Kael needed. He knew that look, one that hinted at secrets hidden behind masks, and he pressed on with caution. "My lord," he continued, "if we can find this text, it could change everything – our understanding of the world, our place within it." Lord Roven's eyes had never left Thalos', his face a mixture of desperation and skepticism.

Thalos Nightforge shifted ever so slightly, his shoulders easing as if he'd finally found some small measure of comfort. For an instant, Kael thought he saw something like hope dance in those dark pools, but it was swiftly extinguished by the stony expression that took its place. Lord Roven's hand shot out, grasping for Thalos' arm, his voice tight with urgency as he said, "Tell us, Nightforge. Where is this text?"

Kael anticipated a refusal, but Thalos merely gazed at Lord Roven's hand on his arm, and for a moment, the only sound was the gentle creaking of the lanterns. Then, in a voice that sent shivers down Kael's spine, Thalos spoke, "The Wraith's Hollow." His

words hung in the air like a challenge, leaving Kael wondering if he'd heard correctly.

Lord Roven's face paled, and for an instant, his mask slipped to reveal the fear beneath. "The Wraith's Hollow," he repeated, as if trying to reassure himself it was real. He took a step back, releasing Thalos' arm, and turned to Kael with a look that begged understanding. "It's said to be cursed, a place where balance is an illusion - no light can pierce the darkness." The words hung in the air as Kael processed them, his mind racing with implications.

"We'll need more than just Thalos' words to navigate such a place," Kael said finally, his eyes locked onto Lord Roven's. "We need a guide, someone who knows the Wraith's Hollow - its paths, its traps." A faint flicker in Lord Roven's eyes told him he'd thought of someone, and Kael knew he would not be happy about it.

"Arin Vex," Lord Roven said, the name hanging like a challenge. "I've heard she's returned to the city."

Kael's gaze narrowed as he processed the mention of Arin Vex, her name a whispered rumor in dark alleys and smoke-filled taverns. A skilled huntress with an affinity for the shadows and an eerie ability to track the forgotten, she was said to be drawn to places where balance faltered - and yet, she was also rumored to crave the very darkness she navigated with such ease.

Lord Roven's face pinched into a mixture of concern and resolve as he continued, "I've sent word for her to meet us at the old windmill on the outskirts of town.

She's...understanding." Kael raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite himself - understanding was not a word one often associated with Arin Vex. Thalos Nightforge watched Lord Roven with a quiet intensity, as if measuring the man's commitment to the venture.

The night air was heavy with unspoken questions and hidden histories as they stood there, the flickering lanterns casting eerie shadows on the stone walls. Kael sensed that this was only the beginning - the delicate dance of trust and power would need to shift significantly for them to unlock the secrets of the Wraith's Hollow. He broke the silence, his voice measured, "We'll leave immediately, my lord. The sooner we find this text, the sooner balance might be restored." Lord Roven nodded curtly, his eyes still fixed on Thalos', as if waiting for some hidden signal to proceed.

The air grew heavy with anticipation as they broke into motion, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls of the courtyard. Kael fell in step beside Thalos Nightforge, who walked with a quiet purpose that spoke of secrets kept and promises made. They passed through the shadows of the keep, moving toward the darkness beyond - the unknown paths they would soon tread held more than just peril.

As they walked, Kael noticed that Thalos Nightforge's stride was economical, his movements a testament to the discipline he'd honed over years of navigating the shadows. They moved in silence, the only sound their footsteps echoing off the stone walls of the keep, until they reached the gates and stepped into the cool night air. The city beyond was alive with whispers – hushed conversations that carried on the wind, accompanied by the distant clang of hammer on anvil from the forges that lined the city's outskirts.

Kael's eyes scanned the darkness, his gaze lingering on the shadowy figures that darted between the buildings, their faces hidden in the darkness. He knew many of them to be members of the Silent Hand – a group of assassins and spies rumored to report directly to Lord Roven himself. Rumor had it they were responsible for eliminating anyone deemed a threat to the balance. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as he turned back to Thalos, who watched him with an unreadable expression.

"What's wrong?" Kael asked softly, though he knew the answer lay in the quiet tension that emanated from Thalos like a palpable aura.

Thalos' eyes flicked to the shadows beyond the city walls, his gaze lingering on something only he could see. "We're being watched," he said finally, his voice low and measured. Kael's hand instinctively went to the dagger at his waist, the familiar weight a comfort in this uncertain moment.

Lord Roven's pace quickened as they left the city behind, moving toward the old windmill on the outskirts where Arin Vex would meet them. The silence was oppressive, heavy with unspoken tensions – Kael sensed that Thalos' revelation had disturbed the delicate balance of their little group. He glanced over at Lord Roven, who walked with a tight jaw and an air of anticipation.

The windmill loomed ahead, its weathered sails a skeletal silhouette against the moon's pale light. A figure stood in front of it – Arin Vex, her dark hair blowing in the gentle breeze as she watched their approach with an unblinking gaze. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine at the sight of her – there was something unsettling about those eyes, like the calm surface of a still pond concealing secrets beneath.

As they drew closer, Arin Vex's expression softened into a faint smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. She held out a hand to Lord Roven, her long fingers curled over his as she leaned forward, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's been too long, my lord." The tension between them was palpable – Kael sensed the history they shared, though he couldn't quite discern its nature.

"Arin," Lord Roven said, his tone reserved but with a hint of warmth beneath. He straightened, his eyes scanning the surrounding area as if searching for any sign of danger. "We don't have much time. The Wraith's Hollow is not a place to be trifled

with." Arin Vex nodded, her smile still held in place, and turned to Thalos Nightforge with an unreadable expression.

"We'll need more than just talk," she said finally, her voice like the quiet rustling of dry leaves. "We'll need maps, documents – anything that might guide us through the Hollow." Lord Roven nodded curtly, his hand still clasped around hers as he led them toward the windmill's entrance.

Kael followed closely behind, his mind racing with possibilities and questions. What secrets lay hidden in Arin Vex's past? What exactly did she know about the Wraith's Hollow? The windmill's creaking door swung open, revealing a dimly lit interior that seemed to swallow them whole. As they stepped inside, Kael felt a shiver run down his spine – he sensed they were walking into more than just darkness; they were entering a realm where secrets whispered truths in the silence.

The air inside was thick with dust and the scent of old grain, the creaking of the windmill's mechanism above them a steady heartbeat that seemed to match the one Kael felt pounding within his chest. Arin Vex led them deeper into the mill, her movements lithe and silent as she navigated the narrow passages between stacks of old crates and sacks. She paused at the foot of a rickety staircase, the wooden treads creaking underfoot like an ancient crone's groans.

"Here," she said finally, her voice low and measured, "is where we'll start." Kael peered up into the darkness above, sensing that this was only the beginning – that they were stepping onto a path from which there was no turning back.

As they ascended the creaking staircase, Kael's eyes adjusted to the dim light above. The air grew thick with an otherworldly scent – something like ozone and decay that sent a shiver down his spine. Arin Vex led them to a cramped room tucked away in the windmill's eaves, its walls lined with dusty bookshelves that seemed to stretch up to the rafters.

Thalos Nightforge moved with a quiet reverence, his eyes scanning the shelves as if searching for something specific. Lord Roven leaned against the windowsill, his gaze sweeping over the room with a practiced air of command. Kael wandered between the shelves, running his fingers over the spines of the ancient tomes – leather-bound volumes adorned with symbols that seemed to writhe in the dim light like living serpents. Arin Vex moved to stand beside him, her voice barely above a whisper as she began to speak.

"The Hollow's secrets are not for the faint of heart," she said, her words drawing Kael's attention back to her face. "The Wraiths that dwell within are ancient and unforgiving – they'll not be swayed by promises or gifts." Thalos Nightforge straightened from his examination of a shelf, his eyes narrowing as he watched Arin Vex with an unblinking gaze.

"Tell us what you know," Lord Roven said finally, his voice firm but tinged with a hint of unease. Arin Vex took a slow breath before answering, her words dripping like honeyed poison into the air. "The Wraith's Hollow is a place of transition – where the veil between worlds grows thin." She paused, her eyes glinting in the dim light as she turned to face them.

"What lies within is not for me to say," she continued, her voice rising like a sigh from the very darkness itself. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he met Thalos Nightforge's gaze – the man's expression was unreadable, but something about it seemed to hint at knowledge they didn't share.

Arin Vex moved to stand before a shelf, running her fingers over the spines of the books with a quiet reverence. "But I can show you the path," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. As she spoke, a tome bound in dark leather slid from its place on the shelf, opening itself like a trapdoor in the darkness.

The pages of the tome crackled with an otherworldly energy as Arin Vex lifted it from the shelf, holding it at arm's length like a fragile egg. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched her, sensing that this was more than just a book – it was a key to unlocking secrets best left forgotten. Thalos Nightforge took a step closer, his eyes locked on the tome with an unnerving intensity, while Lord Roven shifted away from the window, his gaze flicking between Arin Vex and the open pages.

The air inside the room seemed to thicken as they gathered around her, their shadows cast like dark specters across the dusty shelves. Kael peered into the tome's depths, his mind struggling to comprehend the arcane symbols that danced upon its pages – they seemed to writhe and twist in ways that defied understanding, speaking a language that echoed through his mind like the howling wind on a stormy night. Arin Vex's fingers moved with an eerie precision as she turned the pages, revealing passages illustrated with images of twisted landscapes and hulking monoliths.

"Here," she said, her voice barely above a whisper as she indicated a section highlighted in a faint, ethereal glow. "This is the way into the Hollow." Kael felt his heart quicken as he leaned closer, his eyes drinking in the sight of ancient cityscapes that seemed to defy the very fabric of reality. Thalos Nightforge's hand closed around his wrist, holding him back as he took another step forward – a low growl rumbled from the man's throat, his grip like a vice as he whispered, "Don't touch it."

Lord Roven stepped forward, his eyes scanning the pages with an air of practiced command. "Tell us what we're looking at," he said, his voice firm but laced with a hint of trepidation. Arin Vex's fingers hovered over the page, her gaze tracing the twisted symbols as if recalling memories long buried. "The Hollow is not just a place – it's a threshold, a doorway between worlds." Her words dripped like poison into the air, each one carrying a weight that seemed to press upon Kael's chest.

"We've been led astray," Thalos Nightforge muttered, his voice low and husky as he turned away from the page. "This isn't what we were promised - it's something more." His eyes locked onto Arin Vex, their intensity making her flinch back, like a bird startled by a predator's sudden movement. "What else are you keeping from us, Arin?"

Tags: Secrecy, Balance, Unspoken