

# The Bodiless Shadow

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Avrin is a city held together by a precarious web of magical threads, but its foundation is fraying. Kaira Vellen, a private investigator who is blind to magical resonance, is a perpetual outsider to the ruling Inquisition mages. Yet, this limitation provides her with a lethal advantage: she perceives the bare, structural reality that others ignore. When the Inquisition's most powerful architect is found dead in a magically sealed Archive without a single trace of magical interference, Kaira is pulled into the investigation. Partnered with the meticulous archivist Soaren Darr, she begins to uncover a conspiracy reaching back a decade to the city's Great Rift. In a world built on illusions, where an unknown enemy is methodically erasing history, Kaira must race to identify the killer before the city's foundation collapses entirely. As she navigates the divide between the rotting slums and the sterile Upper City, she discovers that in Avrin, the truth is the most dangerous artifact of all.

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# The Bodiless Shadow

## Prologue

The fog in the port city of Avrin didn't just hide the streets—it deadened sounds, devoured the light of the gas lamps, and left a bitter taste of salt and iron on the lips.

Inside the Main Magical Archive of the Inquisition, it was quiet. And absolutely safe. At least, that was what Councilor Vael believed. The heavy oak door was bolted from the inside with a massive deadbolt. The windows were sealed shut with latches. Sleepy paper dust hung in the air, and all around, they softly pulsated—the threads.

The Councilor saw them clearly: golden, azure, and crimson strings of energy tightly entwining the ancient tomes and slumbering artifacts on the shelves. He himself was woven from the same threads—thick, strong, brimming with life and power. Magic sang within him, granting the pleasant illusion of his own invulnerability.

But in Avrin, illusions are short-lived.

He heard no footsteps. There was no creak of old floorboards, no shatter of broken glass. Just at some point, one of the magical threads in the far dark corner of the room twitched. Then another. As if someone unseen was plucking them like the strings of an out-of-tune harpsichord, shattering the harmony.

Cold slithered down his spine like a clammy snake. Vael slowly turned around.

There were no monsters in the deep shadows between the tall bookshelves. Only silence, which had suddenly become thick and suffocating.

"Who is there?" his voice sounded pathetic and dissolved almost instantly into the gloom.

No one answered. Only a slight, barely perceptible movement of air.

And then came the pain.

It wasn't a knife in the back or a noose around the neck. It was something much deeper, unnatural, and terrifying. Vael's eyes flew open, staring in horror at his own chest. The internal threads—the foundation of his life, the vessels of his magic—suddenly pulled taut to their limit, ringing from the tension.

The one standing in the shadows didn't approach, didn't utter incantations, didn't touch him physically. He was simply watching.

*Snap.*

The sound was silent, but in the Councilor's head, it echoed with a deafening crack. The first thread inside his body snapped, curling up like a singed hair. Then the second. The third.

Vael tried to scream, but his lungs failed him. His body was paralyzed by shock. The unknown figure was methodically, cold-bloodedly, and terrifyingly cleanly carving out his essence from the inside, severing the connections one by one.

The last thing the Councilor saw before collapsing dead onto the oak parquet was the calm, indifferent gloom between the bookshelves. There wasn't a drop of rage or hatred in it. Only icy inevitability.

Dead silence reigned once again in the locked room of the Archive. Outside, somewhere high above the unseen port, a night airship let out a drawn-out hum. Tomorrow, Avrin would wake up in fear.

### Chapter 1: Silent Threads

The sea fog pressed down on the port districts of Avrin like a heavy, wet blanket. It smelled of salt, rotting wood, and rancid whale oil. In the lower city, which the locals simply called Nutra,

the fog wasn't just a weather phenomenon—it was a habitat. It obscured the outlines of the crooked streets, muffled footsteps, and hid other people's secrets.

Kaira Vellen stood on the wooden pier, her back leaning against the chilled brick of a warehouse, smoking. The glowing cherry of her cigarette was the only warm spot in the gray gloom.

She looked at the water, but that wasn't all she saw. Above the black surface of the canal, pale, bluish lines flickered faintly—the protective weaves of the port customs. For ordinary, un-Initiated people, they didn't exist. For the Inquisition mages, they sounded like the low hum of a cello, warning of the boundary.

Kaira heard nothing. To her, the threads of Avrin had always remained absolutely mute. She saw magic as a complex, cold blueprint, devoid of emotion and sound. This made her an outsider among the inquisitors, but it was exactly this flaw that made her the best private hound in the city. Where others were blinded by magical resonance or deafened by foreign power, Kaira saw only bare structural connections.

She took one last drag just as a silhouette emerged from the fog.

The footsteps were heavy, measured, shod with military iron. But Kaira recognized their owner not by sound. A veritable golden storm seethed around the approaching figure. Thick, aggressive threads of magic coiled around broad shoulders, betraying irritation and hidden power.

"Your office is locked, Vellen," Magnus Trey's voice matched his aura: rough, low, accustomed to giving orders rather than asking questions.

Kaira flicked her cigarette butt into the water. It hissed softly and went out.

"My office opens at eight in the morning, Handler. It's a little after three a.m. Normal people are sleeping."

"No one in this city sleeps normally anymore," Magnus stopped two steps away from her. Beneath the folds of his heavy leather duster, one could guess the outline of a holster and the official silver badge of the Inquisition. His face was gray with exhaustion, and deep shadows lay at the corners of his hard mouth. "We have a body in the Upper City."

"The Inquisition investigates Upper City cases itself," Kaira replied calmly, burying her chilled hands in her coat pockets. "Unless one of your own got drunk and fell out of a brothel window."

"It's Councilor Vael. And he didn't fall out of a window."

Kaira froze. The name hit her like a gust of icy wind. Vael wasn't just a Councilor. He was one of the architects of the modern Inquisition. A man whose power stretched from the port customs to the spires of the Cathedral.

"Gear up," Magnus threw out curtly, turning around. "The airship is waiting at Pier Five. I need your eyes, Vellen. Mine... aren't cutting it there."

The flight on the *Shadow's Herald* passed in silence.

The Inquisition's police airship, smelling of machine oil and expensive tobacco, rose slowly above Nutra, piercing through layers of fog. Kaira looked out the porthole. From this height, Avrin seemed split in two. Below reigned a gloom cut only by dim gas lamps. Above, beyond the invisible barrier of the climate shields, the Upper City glowed. The spires of mansions and the domes of administrative buildings were entwined in a dense web of shimmering threads. There, magic flowed through the streets like water, heating the squares, lighting the parks, and guarding the peace of the aristocracy.

"How did it happen?" Kaira finally asked, her eyes fixed on the golden radiance beyond the glass.

Magnus sat opposite her, leaning heavily with his elbows on his knees.

"Vael was working in the Main Archive. At night. He locked himself in the reading room of the 'Special Records' sector. The guards at the doors were external. The spells on the windows were internal. No one entered. No one left."

"A magical surge?"

"That's the thing—there was none." Magnus rubbed the bridge of his nose in irritation. His golden threads twitched nervously. "It's as quiet as a crypt in there. No signs of a struggle, no residual background. My men went in this morning when he didn't answer a knock. He was just sitting in his chair. Dead."

Kaira frowned. The death of a mage of Vael's caliber should have caused a resonance felt by half the Cathedral. Severed threads of such power always left behind an ethereal burn—like the smell of gunpowder after a shot in a cramped room. If Magnus felt nothing, then something had occurred beyond the understanding of the standard Inquisitorial school.

The airship moored softly to the docking mast on the roof of the Main Archive. The building was a colossal fortress of dark granite, devoid of windows on its lower tiers. Around it shimmered a containment cocoon—a tangle of protective spells so dense that Kaira's eyes momentarily watered as she tried to decipher their structure.

They descended a spiral staircase into the depths of the building. Here, away from the city's bustle, a very particular scent reigned: dry paper, beeswax, and old, settled magic. The air was cool and surprisingly clean.

At the massive double doors of the "Special Records" sector stood two pale guards with halberds laced with power circuits. And between them, holding a small kerosene lamp, stood a man in an impeccably pressed gray frock coat.

He did not possess Magnus's intimidating aura. The threads around him were thin, pale, almost transparent, pressed tightly to his body—the mark of a man accustomed to conserving energy and avoiding attention. He had fair hair neatly combed back and thin-rimmed glasses that concealed watchful, gray eyes.

"Handler Trey," he said. His voice was quiet but very steady, without the slight tremor usually present in civilians when facing the Inquisition.

"Darr," Magnus nodded, making no effort to hide his annoyance. He hated being in the Archive, where his brute force was useless. "This is Ms. Vellen. Private consultant. Open the doors."

Soaren Darr turned his gaze to Kaira. In his eyes, there was neither the condescension nor the distaste with which Inquisitors usually viewed "mute" mages. Only a calm, professional recognition of her presence.

"Good night, Ms. Vellen," the archivist said politely. He pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, each one a complex runic weave. "I've lowered the external circuits as the Handler requested. We haven't touched anything inside. Be careful; it's... rather cold in there."

He inserted a key into the lock. It clicked softly, and the heavy door swung open silently. Soaren stepped aside, clearing their path, and lowered the lamp as if marking a boundary he had no intention of crossing himself.

Kaira stepped into the room first.

The spacious reading room was paneled in dark oak. Bookshelves stretched to the ceiling along the walls, filled with books, scrolls, and sealed tubes. A dormant magical lamp sat upon a massive mahogany table.

And in a high-backed leather chair sat Councilor Vael.

Kaira slowly approached, feeling a chill creep beneath her coat. But it wasn't a physical cold. It was the absence of life.

Vael looked as if he had fallen asleep at his work. His hands rested calmly on the armrests; his head was tilted slightly back. His face bore no mask of horror, no traces of pain.

But when Kaira switched her vision to the ethereal layer, she nearly recoiled.

A person was woven from threads—physical, mental, magical. Death usually looked like their fading, a decay, the turning of bright strings into gray dust. Murder via magic looked like a violent rupture—melted ends, tangled knots, chaos.

But here, there was neither fading nor chaos. Vael's threads had been cut.

Perfectly, methodically, with frightening surgical precision. Whoever had done this hadn't just killed the Councilor. They had neatly extracted his life from the fabric of existence without disturbing a single neighboring fiber. It explained why Magnus felt nothing. There had been no blow. There had only been an excision.

"Well?" Magnus barked impatiently from the doorway. He hesitated to approach the body, instinctively sensing the "dead zone." "What do you see, Vellen?"

"Exquisite craftsmanship," Kaira replied quietly, crouching by the chair.

She began to examine the floor, millimeter by millimeter. Her gaze slid over the patterns of the Persian rug, the legs of the table, the bottom shelves of the nearest rack. The killer had to have stood here. He had to have been in this room to accomplish such a feat.

Kaira squinted. At the very edge of the rug, where the pile met the polished parquet, lay a tiny, barely visible smudge of gray substance. Ash. But not from a cigarette or paper. It was too fine, almost like pollen.

She didn't touch it. Instead, she traced the trajectory from the ash stain to the bookshelf.

The shelves were packed with perfectly even rows of reference books and ledgers in identical leather bindings. Soaren Darr, it seemed, kept his archive in a state of frightening order. But on the very bottom shelf, at knee level, one of the massive volumes sat differently. It wasn't pulled out or knocked over. It simply sat at a two-degree angle, barely breaking the flawless line of its neighbors.

Kaira slowly stood up. The room had been empty. The doors locked. Magic had recorded no intrusion.

But someone had flicked ash onto the rug and placed a book unevenly on the shelf before erasing Councilor Vael from this room.

Kaira turned back to the doors. Magnus watched her gloomily, waiting for answers. Behind his shoulder, in the dim light of the corridor, Soaren Darr stood quietly, waiting for them to finish their work in his archive.

The question wasn't how Vael was killed. The question was what he had managed to read before they came for him.

## **Chapter 2: Ash and Ink**

Kaira returned to her office just as the night began to reluctantly give way to a gray, sickly dawn. Nutra woke up hard, with the hacking cough of factory chimneys and the clatter of the first steam-powered trams.

After the ringing, sterile silence of the Upper City and the dry air of the Main Archive, the dampness of the lower quarters felt almost tangible. It settled on the wool of her coat, seeped into her boots, and left a taste of coal soot on her lips.

Kaira's office was located on the second floor above a hardware store. There was no magical heating here—the kind that made the lives of aristocrats so carefree. There was only a potbellied cast-iron stove in the corner, an old leather sofa with a slumped back, and a massive desk cluttered with files.

Kaira didn't bother lighting the gas jet. The pale light bleeding through the unwashed window was enough. She tossed her coat onto the sofa, shivered in the stale air, and, striking a match, lit the burner under a dented coffee pot. Only when the bitter aroma of cheap beans drifted through the room did she allow herself to exhale.

The silence of the Archive still rang in her ears.

Kaira sat at the desk, pulled a tattered, black-covered notebook toward her, and opened it to a clean page. Her fingers, accustomed to the weight of a revolver, gripped the pencil with ease and confidence.

*"Councilor Vael. Main Archive. Special Records Sector,"* she wrote in a steady hand.

She closed her eyes, mentally retreating to that oak-paneled room. Before her mind's eye, the perfect, chilling geometry of death emerged once again. The threads hadn't been torn to shreds, the way they usually were in a clash between combat mages. They had been sliced clean.

Kaira opened her eyes and jotted down: "*Surgical precision. No residual background. No evidence of a breach in the external circuits.*"

The killer hadn't just bypassed the security—he'd ignored it.

This narrowed the field of suspects to a chilling minimum. To pull off a feat like this, one had to either possess the keys to the Archive or be capable of slicing the protective weaves as delicately as the threads of a human life.

Kaira drew a thick line with her pencil and began to draft a list.

1) *Magnus Trey and the Inquisition*. Could the Handler have murdered his own superior? Magnus was crude, blunt, and solved problems with the finesse of a sledgehammer. A surgical incision was not his style. His aura screamed of kinetic force, not precision. But Magnus had people. And he could have motives. Lately, rumors of corruption in the upper echelons had been rippling through Nutra—whispers that certain patrols were turning a blind eye to artifact smuggling for a hefty cut. Vael was exactly the type to have launched an internal audit.

2) *The Carvers*. A radical order that views magic as a curse distorting the natural order of things. They loathed the Inquisition and everything it stood for. Severing a Councilor from the fabric of existence would be right up their alley—a loud political statement. But Kaira was skeptical. The Carvers were zealots. Zealots love leaving a message: symbols carved into the walls, manifestos, blood. Here, everything was too quiet. Too clinical.

3) *Internal Archive Staff*. She recalled the meticulous archivist in the gray frock coat. Soaren Darr. He had access. He had the keys. He was in the building. Kaira hovered her pencil over the paper for a moment, remembering his calm gray eyes and the pale threads of his aura.

"*Too obvious,*" she thought, shaking her head. People like Darr—pedantic keepers of dust—don't kill Councilors. They live by the clock and are afraid of drafts. He had no motive, no fitting psychological profile. If he wanted to kill Vael, he'd sooner slip poison into his tea than erase him from reality with such a complex magical intervention. Darr was just a useful witness, nothing more.

Kaira crossed Darr off the list and returned to the only two leads she had carried away from the crime scene in her memory.

*The Ash*. A pinch of gray dust at the edge of the rug. It could have been cigarette ash, but Vael didn't smoke, and open flames were strictly forbidden within the Archive. That meant the killer had brought it in. On the soles of his boots? Or was it the residue of a burnt-out spell?

*The book. The bottom shelf*. A tome, shifted by a mere two degrees. Kaira rubbed her temples in frustration. Why would a killer capable of the impossible bother digging around on the bottom shelf? Unless he was looking for something. Or... putting something back.

Vael had been reading something right before he died. Something that got him killed. And the evidence had been neatly slipped back into its orderly row to hide the very fact that he'd been interested in it.

The coffee pot hissed, sputtering dark foam onto the hot metal. Kaira set her pencil aside, poured herself a mug of the scalding, bitter brew, and walked over to the window.

Outside, dawn had finally broken. Merchants were already laying out dull cod on wet stalls, and newsboys ran past, shouting headlines about evening galas in the Upper City. The rumors of the dead Councilor hadn't reached them yet. When they did, the city would shudder.

She needed official access to the case. Magnus had dragged her in off the books last night, like a hunting dog to pick up a scent. But to ask questions on the streets, she needed a piece of paper with a seal.

The wait dragged on until noon. Kaira had managed to doze off right on the sofa, boots still on, when a sharp knock at the door made her startle and instinctively reach for her holster.

A messenger in the gray uniform of the Inquisition's postal service stood on the threshold. He looked incongruously clean in the grimy hallway outside her office.

"Ms. Vellen?" The boy held out a thick envelope with a wax seal and a small cardboard box tied with twine. "Sign here."

Kaira scrawled her signature on the manifest, took the delivery, and shut the door.

Inside the envelope was the expected order, signed by Magnus Trey. The dry bureaucratic language granted "civilian consultant K. Vellen" the authority to request information from individuals lacking the highest magical clearance. No "pleases" or "counting on yous." Just a tool receiving its authorization to work.

Kaira set the order aside and looked at the cardboard box. Pinned to the twine on top was a small note, written in a steady, elegant hand with a slight leftward slant. The ink was dark blue.

*"Ms. Vellen. Handler Trey mentioned that you have been tasked with the official investigation. Given the dampness in your district, I felt that an additional visit to the Archive might prove tiresome for you. I have taken the liberty of making copies of the checkout registries from the Special Records sector for the past month, as well as a list of individuals who requested the blueprints for the Archive's lower levels. I hope this saves you time. Sincerely, S. Darr.*

*P.S. Your coat was soaked through yesterday. There is also a small herbal blend in the box. If steeped with black tea, it is excellent for driving out a port cold."*

Kaira blinked, re-reading the note a second time.

She sliced through the twine with a penknife. Inside the box lay a neat stack of heavy paper, covered in that same impeccable handwriting. Soaren hadn't just copied the registry—he'd grouped the names by date and highlighted in red those whose requests deviated from standard protocol. It was the kind of analytical work that would have cost Kaira at least three days of legwork and wrangling with bureaucrats.

At the very bottom of the box was a small linen pouch that smelled of thyme, dried ginger, and something else—pungent and warm.

Kaira felt a strange prickle of irritation mingled with a begrudging sense of gratitude. She wasn't used to people intruding on her personal space, even with good intentions. The people in her life usually demanded results, made threats, or told lies. No one sent her data summaries to save her time, and certainly, no one ever noticed that she was cold.

*"A quiet, pedantic archivist,"* she thought, tossing the herbal pouch in her palm.

She dropped the pouch onto the desk, beside the cold coffee pot, deciding there was no way she'd be brewing that tea. It would be a sign of weakness.

But she slid the registry sheets closer.

Kaira buried herself in the pages. Most of the names were unfamiliar—junior researchers, historians, clerks. But on the third page, her gaze snagged on a recognizable surname.

Three days ago, according to Soaren's summary, a certain individual had requested access to the old municipal utility blueprints and the port's magical distribution schematics. The request was filed by the book, but the "Purpose" column held a blurry justification: *"Wear and tear assessment."*

The man who had filed the request was named Einar Larsen. And the man who had officially countersigned and approved it was Councilor Vael.

Kaira tapped her pencil against the desk. Artifact dealers were often interested in old nodes, hoping to find decommissioned or lost junk. But for Vael himself to sign off on a request from a common scavenger? That broke protocol.

She snapped the folder shut and stood up. She had a name and a direction. She needed to hit the streets and find out who this Einar Larsen was and why one of the most powerful men in Avrin was taking an interest in his business.

Kaira pulled on her still-damp coat, cast a glance at the desk, and after a second's hesitation, shoved Darr's herbal pouch into her deep pocket. Just in case the city decided to rain.

### **Chapter 3: The First Guest**

At noon, Avrin resembled a weary beast trying to shake off its nocturnal torpor. A heavy cargo airship drifted above the rooftops of Nutra with a strained drone, drenching the street in a cloud of steam and the stench of scorched oil. Kaira walked with her collar turned up, weaving through stevedores and street vendors whose voices drowned out the clatter of the trams.

Einar Larsen lived where the solid pavement ended and the rickety footbridges of the "Rusty Belt" began—a district built on old barges and stilts directly over the silty channels. Here, the magic of threads was a rarity. Kaira found the address she was looking for: an old cutter moored to a half-rotted pier, converted into an antiquity shop. Above the door, a sign creaked: "*Larsen. Buying. Selling. Memory Repair.*"

Kaira pushed the door open. The bell overhead answered with a dry, cracked jangle. Inside, it smelled of dust, old copper, and something sickly sweet, like the scent of rotting molasses. Shelves crowded the walls, cluttered with broken gramophones, telescope lenses, and the empty shells of magical capacitors. No one answered.

In the back of the shop, behind a heavy curtain of yellowed beads, something was rhythmically dripping. The sound was too heavy, too thick for simple water. She slowly drew her revolver, feeling the familiar weight of the grip steady her pulse. The beads clinked softly as she pushed them aside with the barrel of her weapon.

Einar Larsen was in the small workshop. He sat in his work chair, slumped over the workbench as if he had fallen asleep while repairing a complex clockwork mechanism. Kaira stepped closer, and a chill crawled up the nape of her neck. Larsen was dead. Around the scavenger's body hung that same familiar, terrifying pattern. His magical threads—the dim, barely perceptible strands of an ordinary man—hadn't been torn; they had been neatly excised from his chest.

Death had been instantaneous. The killer had worked just as cleanly as in the Archive: no signs of a struggle, not a single shattered lens on the table.

But there was one detail that hadn't been present with Councilor Vael. On the workbench, directly in front of the dead man's face, lay an open brass box. Inside, nestled in a bed of red velvet, shimmered a tiny needle no larger than a fingernail. It was forged from a strange black metal that didn't reflect light, but seemed to swallow it.

The old man's gray head rested upon splayed blueprints. Kaira peered cautiously over his shoulder. It was a resonance map. Three points were marked with red crosses on the port's layout. One was Pumping Station No. 4. The second was the Cathedral cellars. The third was heavily smeared with Larsen's blood.

Suddenly, the sharp shriek of an Inquisition steam whistle erupted from the street, followed by the heavy clatter of hobnailed boots on the wooden footbridges. Someone had called a patrol before she arrived. She couldn't afford to be caught here next to a second corpse—the Inquisition didn't believe in coincidences.

Kaira shot a quick glance at the workbench, yanked a yellowed slip of paper from under the dead man's elbow, and lunged for the narrow back door leading to the cutter's stern. She slipped into the gray fog a split second before the guards kicked in the front door with a crash.

### **Chapter 4: Magnus Under Suspicion**

The rain came after all. It brought no freshness, only beating the coal dust into the cobblestones and turning the familiar harbor fog into a gray, sticky suspension. Water poured from the sky in a solid sheet, washing the grime from the warehouse roofs straight into the overflowing canals.

Kaira stood in the deep shadow of a rusted harbor crane, wedged between two abandoned crates, and watched. The forces of the Inquisition were converging on Einar Larsen's barge. Blue and toxic-white reflections of magical lanterns darted across the filthy, trash-strewn water, snatching the scurrying guards from the darkness. Their heavy, iron-shod boots thudded hollowly against the wooden footbridges. The air trembled from an overabundance of raw, poorly controlled magic—the patrolmen were nervous, generously casting search nets around the barge.

She instinctively pulled her coat tighter, even though it was already soaked through. In her inner pocket, closer to her body, lay the quarter-folded sheet of paper she had managed to pull from under the dead man's elbow mere seconds before the Inquisition appeared.

Kaira knew what was written there by heart. It wasn't a blueprint or a sewer schematic. It was a promissory note—old, brittle, yellowed at the edges from time and dampness. The sum indicated was staggering even by Upper City standards, but it wasn't the number of zeroes that had Kaira's attention deadlocked.

At the very bottom of the document, where the paper had already begun to peel apart, sat the seal of a personal guarantor. Three intertwined swords enclosed in a perfect circle. The personal heraldic mark of Magnus Trey. Date of issue: exactly ten years ago.

Kaira adjusted her collar, peeled herself away from the cold steel support of the crane, and strode away from the cordon. Water squelched in her boots with every step, icy drops sliding down her neck, but she paid it no mind. A single thought ticked in her head, rhythmic as a pendulum.

A Handler of the Inquisition. The embodiment of the law. A man whose golden aura suppressed anyone within a ten-meter radius. Magnus Trey was connected to a fence and the murdered Councilor Vael by a shared, carefully concealed financial secret. And this secret traced its roots back to the year of the "Great Rift"—a time when Avrin nearly choked on its own magic due to massive riots in the lower districts.

The journey to the Upper City took about an hour. Kaira had to use the funicular: rising through the layers of fog, she watched the dirty drizzle of Nutra gradually give way to the clean, almost crystalline rain of the aristocratic quarters. Here, climate shields were active, diverting excess moisture and soot.

In the Main Archive, it was just as dry, quiet, and smelling of eternity. Kaira's footsteps sank into the thick carpet runners. The guards at the entrance gave her disdainful looks—dirty water was dripping from the hem of her coat onto the flawlessly polished parquet—but the sealed mandate forced them to keep their mouths shut.

Soaren Darr was found not in the reading room, but in the restoration workshop on the first subterranean level. The light was softer here, and the air was warmer. The archivist sat at a wide oak table beneath a low-hanging lamp. Armed with fine surgical tweezers and a massive magnifying glass on a brass stand, he was painstakingly, millimeter by millimeter, gluing together a torn page of some ancient folio.

The smell of bone glue, beeswax, and old leather was so thick here it felt tangible. On the edge of his table, among jars of solvents and brushes, Kaira noticed a simple ceramic cup. A barely visible trail of steam curled above it, and the familiar, tart aroma of thyme and dried ginger hung in the air. That exact same blend. He was drinking the same thing he had sent her.

"You returned surprisingly quickly," Soaren said quietly, not even lifting his gaze from the magnifying glass. His hand holding the tweezers didn't waver. "I hope you made it home before the fog turned into this monstrous downpour?"

"As you can see, no," Kaira stepped closer, stopping a few paces from the table so as not to drip water onto the papers. "I need a case file from ten years ago. A joint project between the Inquisition and the Ministry of Communications. The reconstruction of the magical nodes in the 'Rusty Belt.'"

Soaren slowly set down the tweezers, carefully removed the magnifying glass from the stand, and only then looked up at her. The yellow light of the lamp reflected in his glasses, making his eyes invisible for a moment.

"Reconstruction of the nodes? That is a very deep clearance level, Kaira. Category 'A' documents. Even with your civilian consultant mandate, I will have to file an official request through the chancellery. And that means—across Handler Trey's desk."

"No need to go through Magnus," she reached inside her coat, pulled out the folded note, and placed it on the table, covering it with her hand. "Look at this off the record."

Soaren frowned slightly. He leaned forward, and Kaira removed her hand. The archivist carefully studied the yellowed document. His face, as always, remained impassive, but Kaira, accustomed to reading people by their involuntary reactions, noticed how his fingers, stained with dry glue, twitched barely perceptibly before clenching into a fist.

"Handler Trey's mark," he stated in a level voice. "The sum is... extraordinary. You found this at Larsen's on the barge?"

"Yes. Under the desk where he was killed. And before he died, he was scared to death of something he was looking for in the old sewers. Listen, Darr... If Magnus was taking bribes or paying for Larsen and Vael's silence ten years ago, and now they are both dead within twenty-four hours..."

"Then Handler Magnus Trey is the most logical candidate for the role of someone urgently covering his tracks," Soaren finished for her quietly.

He sighed heavily, took off his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Without the lenses, he suddenly looked like a very tired man to Kaira.

"Wait here," he stood up, walked around the table, and headed toward a massive filing cabinet built right into the wall. "I will try to find the necessary records bypassing the main registry. The storage system during the year of the Rift was... chaotic. Perhaps something remains in the draft archives."

While he vanished into the labyrinth of the adjacent vault, Kaira remained alone in the workshop. The ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the corner seemed deafening. She warmed her chilled hands in her pockets and examined the tools on Soaren's table: scalpels, wooden spatulas, jars of pigments—everything was arranged by size, by degree of wear, with a manic yet cozy neatness.

"Have you always been like this?" his voice rang out right beside her.

Kaira flinched and turned around. Soaren stood in the doorway, holding a thin folder with a gray, unmarked cover. His footsteps on the carpet had been absolutely soundless.

"Like what?"

"Wary," he approached the table and set the folder down, but was in no rush to open it. "You stand as if you're expecting a stab in the back even in an empty room. As if the whole world is an ambush that's about to snap shut. How did you even decide to become a seeker, Kaira? A girl with... your gift. Usually, the 'mutes' become acolytes to the priests. Or they work at customs as living detectors, sorting contraband."

Kaira felt the familiar, prickly sting of irritation. People loved to remind her of what she was deprived of. But there was no condescension or pity in Soaren's voice. Only genuine interest.

"The priests sing too much about the greater good, and customs stinks of rotten fish," she replied sharply, looking him in the eye. "I prefer the kind of dirt that can be washed off with hot water, not the kind covered in gold and holy texts."

She expected him to get flustered or apologize for his tactlessness, as many did. But Soaren didn't take offense. He simply nodded slowly, accepting her sharpness as a matter of course.

"I understand," he said softly. "Justice is generally a job for those who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. It's a rare quality, Kaira. Most of my colleagues in this building prefer to think the world consists only of clean ink and white paper."

He opened the gray folder and turned it toward Kaira. Inside were blueprints, very similar to the ones she had seen on Larsen's blood-soaked table, but much older and more detailed. Yellowed reports were pinned to them.

"Here, take a look," Soaren pointed a long finger at a line of text. "Exactly ten years ago, Magnus Trey, then still a young captain, led a purge of the port's lower levels against so-called 'ethereal parasites.' Einar Larsen was listed in the reports as his civilian guide. Councilor Vael acted as the financial controller of the operation. It states here that during the work deep underground, an 'unauthorized altar' was discovered and destroyed. But there are no technical details or descriptions of what happened there."

Kaira traced the jagged line of the sewer on the map with her finger.

"An altar of the 'Carvers'? The order was just gaining power in the slums back then."

"Quite possibly," Soaren turned the page. "But look at the final expense report. The Inquisition paid Larsen a simply astronomical bonus. And the phrasing: 'for silence in the interest of public safety and the preservation of state secrets.'"

"Silence about what? About what they found there? Or about what they did there?"

"That isn't in the archive," Soaren closed the folder and looked straight into her eyes. A quiet, serious alarm read in the gaze of his gray eyes. "Kaira... be very careful with Magnus. He is a man of action. A man of power. If you come at him head-on with this promissory note, he won't play riddles with you."

"I know how to talk to him," Kaira took the folder and pressed it tightly to her chest. "Thank you, Soaren. For everything."

"Take care of yourself," he called after her as she was already stepping out into the corridor. "The city needs those who see the structure, even if they cannot hear the music."

The Inquisition headquarters, located in the adjacent wing of the complex, greeted Kaira with a ringing, oppressive tension. Guards gathered in small groups in the corridors, whispering quietly; the magical lamps beneath the vaulted ceilings hummed louder than usual, flickering from power surges. Larsen's death had already become public knowledge, and the atmosphere in the building was steeped in caustic paranoia.

Magnus was found in his office on the third floor. He stood by the massive window, hands clasped behind his back, staring out at the rain-drenched, twilight-drowning Avrin. His golden aura was currently blazing so fiercely that Kaira had to instinctively squint. The threads of power around the handler weren't smooth as usual, but ragged. They twitched and writhed, flaring with sharp bursts that looked like sparks from a welding torch.

"You're three hours late, Vellen," he rumbled, not even turning at the sound of the opening door. The reflection of his stern face trembled in the wet glass. "I already sent a patrol to your office. Where the hell have you been?"

"I was on Larsen's barge. In the Rusty Belt. Right before your boys came howling in and trampled all the evidence," Kaira walked up to his massive oak desk and slammed the folder and the promissory note down onto it. The papers slapped with a dry, sharp smack. "Shall we talk about old debts, Magnus? Or maybe about why your old friends have suddenly started dying one after another?"

Magnus slowly, very slowly, turned around. His face was ashen-pale, his eyes threaded with a red net of broken vessels from insomnia and nervous strain. He lowered his gaze to the note with his seal, then shifted it to Kaira. For one endless second, his mighty aura completely collapsed, vanishing as if blown out by the wind, and then exploded in a new, scorching wave of heat.

"You are meddling in things that don't concern you, girl," his voice dropped to a dangerous, growling whisper.

"My concern is finding Vael's killer," Kaira planted her hands on the edge of the desk, leaning forward. "And the killer is using the exact same technique, the exact same twisted surgery that was used ten years ago when you ran the port 'purge'. Larsen knew your secret. Vael knew this secret."

You're the last one on the list, Magnus. And you have the strongest possible motive of all—to hide exactly what you've been paying the scavenger Inquisition money for all these years."

Magnus stepped toward her. Kaira physically felt the pressure of his magic—the air in the office instantly became dry and hot, smelling of thunderstorms and burnt dust.

"You think it's me?" he hissed through clenched teeth, looming over her. "Do you really think I would slaughter Vael like a sheep at the slaughterhouse in our own Archive?!"

"I think you're afraid," Kaira didn't back down a single millimeter, even though the skin on her arms broke out in goosebumps from the alien energy. "Afraid that someone is finally going to find out the truth about what really happened in those sewers."

Magnus swung abruptly, his hand clenching into a massive fist. For a split second, Kaira thought he was going to hit her, but at the last moment, the handler brought his fist down hard on the desktop. A heavy crystal inkwell jumped and overturned, flooding the fresh reports with a thick black stain.

"Get out, Vellen!" he barked, his voice rattling the glass in the windows. "Get out before I revoke your mandate and throw you into the dungeons with the 'Carvers' for aiding and sabotaging an investigation! You understand nothing. You see the bare threads, but you are absolutely blind to the weight they hold!"

"I see a frightened killer, Magnus," Kaira spun on her heels and marched toward the exit. "And right now, he's looking at me from your mirror."

She stepped into the corridor, forcefully slamming the heavy door behind her. Her heart was pounding somewhere in her throat, her hands betraying her with a tremor from the adrenaline overload, but inside boiled a dark, cold certainty. Magnus hadn't confessed. He hadn't answered a single question. But his reaction was more eloquent than any frank confession. He was backed into a corner. And he was definitely hiding something.

Returning late in the evening to her thoroughly frozen office in Nutra, Kaira slumped wearily onto the old sofa without turning on the lights. The silence of the empty room pressed against her temples, mingling with the sound of the rain outside the window. The cardboard box from the Archive still sat on the desk, and beside it—the small canvas pouch.

Sighing, she rubbed her stinging eyes and gave in. Kaira walked over to the stove, struck a match, and lit a fire under the soot-stained coffee pot, but instead of her usual bitter beans, she tossed a pinch of the archivist's blend into the boiling water.

When the tea had brewed, she sat at the desk, wrapping both chilled hands around the hot mug, and took a sip. The tart, spicy taste of thyme and ginger rolled down her throat, spreading a long-awaited warmth inside. Kaira watched the dancing shadows on the ceiling and thought about how Soaren Darr, with his glue, his glasses, and his quiet voice, currently remained the only island of normalcy in this city that was rapidly losing its mind.

### **Chapter 5: Blind Needle**

The rain didn't stop for two days. In times like these, Avrin seemed less like a city and more like an old, breached ship slowly but surely going to the bottom. The network of harbor canals overflowed with murky, foul-smelling water that now splashed onto Nutra's cobblestones, bringing debris of rotten planks, dead fish, and oil slicks to the surface.

Kaira walked ankle-deep in icy mud, pulling the brim of her hat lower over her eyes to shield herself from the biting wind. Her path led to the "Blind Kettle"—the grimmest district of the Lower City, where Inquisition patrols didn't venture even during the day. There were no glowing protective threads here, no magical lanterns or climate control units. Only the soot of factory chimneys, the desperate crampedness of leaning brick shacks, and people who had grown accustomed to surviving in spite of the system.

She knew: if Magnus Trey was doing everything in his power to hide the truth about the bloody purges of ten years ago, then the answers were to be sought not in the sterile offices of the Cathedral, but from those he had hunted back then. From the "Carvers."

The denizens of the Upper City called them mad fanatics and ruthless terrorists. But Kaira, having grown up on these streets, knew the underside. Most of the Carvers were simply broken, desperate people—those whom Avrin's magic had bypassed since birth, whom the Inquisition had written off, leaving them to rot in the damp for the sake of maintaining the capital's "golden balance."

She stopped at the warped, bottom-rotted door of a semi-basement tavern. There was neither a sign nor a lantern above it—only a symbol roughly and hastily carved into the oak doorframe: a crossed-out spiral. The sign of the Severed Thread.

Kaira knocked twice with her knuckles, waited a second, and struck once more, harder. A small peephole creaked open. In the slit, a bloodshot, dull eye flickered. The invisible sentry grunted, rattled the bolts, and the door yielded heavily inward, admitting her into the thick gloom.

Inside, there was a heavy, stagnant stench of sour ale, wet wool, and cheap, acrid tobacco. At the farthest, darkest table, away from prying ears, sat a massive man with a thick beard touched by ashen gray. An old, hideous scar crossed his face diagonally, pulling his left cheek into a permanent, crooked smirk.

This was Balthazar—the unspoken leader of the few who still believed in the ideals of the Carvers and tried to preserve the remnants of the order in the Lower City.

Kaira approached his table, pulled off her wet gloves, and silently laid two heavy silver coins on the sticky, knife-scarred wood. Balthazar didn't even move. He continued to slowly sip beer from a clay mug.

"Inquisition hounds, even former ones, aren't served here, Vellen," his voice sounded like the scraping of a crowbar against granite.

"I'm not working for the Inquisition. I'm working for myself," Kaira pulled out a chair and sat opposite him, looking directly into his heavy, dark eyes. "Two bodies in two days, Balthazar. First Councilor Vael in his office, then the scavenger Larsen on the barge. And both were cut from the ether as cleanly as if they'd never existed. Magnus Trey is on the warpath. He's certain it's your work."

Balthazar gave a grim smirk, revealing an incomplete row of yellow teeth. The scar on his cheek twitched.

"Magnus Trey is a rabid watchdog barking at every shadow in the alleyway. We don't cut people, Kaira. We cut artifacts. We sever the parasitic threads that drink the power from our land just to heat the mansions of the bloated pigs in the Upper City. But to take a life? No. That is their prerogative—to kill for the sake of a sham order."

"Someone left a black needle right on the workbench, next to Larsen's body. A needle forged from metal that absorbs all light. That is your tool, Balthazar. An instrument of the Carvers."

The leader of the order tensed. His broad shoulders gave a barely perceptible lean forward, and the hand resting on the table clenched into a massive fist.

"A blind needle..." he repeated hollowly. "None of those have been forged in Avrin for ten years. Not since the Inquisition hounds burned our smithies and drove us into these rat holes."

"Ten years ago, Magnus led the port purge. Larsen was his personal guide. Vael paid the bills from the treasury," Kaira leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Who did you lose back then, Balthazar? Who among your people could have gone to ground, kept their needle, and returned now to take revenge?"

The old rebel remained silent for a long time, staring unblinkingly at the dimly glittering silver coins. The flickering flame of the single candle on the table reflected in his pupils.

"We lost more than just a man, Vellen. We lost our voice," he finally said, and a carefully hidden pain flickered in his rasping bass. "Einar. Our first leader. Our brother. He was the only one who believed we could make the Inquisition listen. He wanted to negotiate, to show them the maps, to prove how the fabric of the city was thinning because of their greed. He went to meet them, down there, in the sewers. Alone. Unarmed."

Balthazar drew in a sharp breath.

"The Inquisition killed him. No trial, no questions, not the slightest chance. They just lured him into a trap and put him down like a rabid dog at the slaughterhouse. And then they paid generously in silver to everyone who agreed to look away and keep their mouths shut. Larsen sold his route. Vael paid for the blood. Magnus struck the blow."

"Einar..." Kaira echoed, her voice quiet, almost soundless.

The name lashed her from within, resonating with a sudden, sharp pain in the darkest corners of her own memory. Before her mind's eye, something dark flashed for a split second—a jagged, icy image from a time she had long buried under a layer of years and false names. Cold, a straining, snapping sound, and the sensation of a sticky weight she still sometimes felt in her dreams. Kaira blinked, forcing the shadow back into the black abyss of her subconscious with a sharp effort of will. Not the time. Not here.

"Did he have followers?" she asked, striving to keep her voice level. "Family? Someone who could have sworn revenge and waited for the right moment all these years?"

"We were all his followers," Balthazar replied bitterly, pushing away the empty mug. "But after Einar died, the order shattered into pieces. Most gave up, drank themselves to death, or fled Avrin for the continent forever. The scraps that remain... look around, Vellen. We're just trying to survive in this filth. If someone is avenging Einar now, they are doing it in absolute solitude. And they are simply using our name and old symbols to hide their true trail from the Inquisition."

Kaira nodded slowly. There was a harsh, flawless logic in this. Vael's killer wasn't a public fanatic with a placard. They were a calculating, icy surgeon who masterfully used the old mythology of a defeated order as a convenient screen.

She rose, adjusted her hat, and buttoned her collar. The coins remained on the sticky table.

"Be very careful, Balthazar. If Magnus finally decides this is the work of a reborn Carvers, he won't bother with the nuances. He'll just unleash his hounds on Nutra again. And this time, they won't leave anyone alive."

"Let him," Balthazar muttered indifferently, turning toward the wall. "We've been at the bottom for a long time. There's nowhere left to fall."

Kaira stepped out of the tavern and back into the rainy, wind-howling gloom.

The meeting hadn't given her the killer's name, but it had given her something much more important: a motive. Ten years ago, Magnus and Vael had cold-bloodedly eliminated a man who had tried to reason with them. And now someone very patient, possessing terrifying magical power, had begun to collect old, overdue debts.

She walked along the slippery wooden footbridges, her tired feet moving mechanically. Dozens of questions swarmed in her head. Where were Einar's own old reports? Who had access to them? And how did the quiet archivist Soaren Darr—who had so conveniently slipped her the right papers—fit into all this?

Kaira was angry at Magnus, irritated by the weather, and exhausted by insomnia. She stubbornly told herself she needed to get back to her office, dry her boots, and map out a new investigation scheme on the slate board. She replayed Balthazar's words in her head, planning the next day, and only after twenty minutes did she suddenly realize the fog around her had thinned, and under her feet, instead of Nutra's rickety boards, smooth cobblestones thudded evenly.

She lifted her head.

Ahead, through the veil of rain, the gas lanterns of the bridge leading to the granite mass of the Main Archive glowed softly. Her feet, bypassing iron logic and fatigue, had led her to the Upper City. To the man with gray eyes, whose workshop smelled of old paper and warm tea.

Kaira froze in the middle of the street. The rain drummed against the brim of her hat. She stared at the glowing windows of the Archive for a long, long time. Then she pressed her lips together,

spun sharply on her heels, and strode back into the darkness of the Lower City, feeling something very fragile and frighteningly unfamiliar stir inside her, against her will.

### **Chapter 6: Resonance of Silence**

Evening Avrin didn't sleep; it simply shed its skin. The fog in the Upper City turned pearlescent, illuminated by the golden lights of the mansions, while in Nutra, it congealed into heavy lead. Kaira stood on the border of the districts, feeling the cold moisture soaking even through the thick leather of her boots.

She should have gone home. Locked the door with all three bolts, cleaned her revolver, and lost herself in a heavy, dreamless sleep. But instead, she found her feet carrying her once again toward the wide staircase of the Main Archive. She was angry at herself, calling herself weak-willed, but the image of the dry warmth of Soaren's workshop and the smell of thyme stood before her eyes as the only salvation from the encroaching darkness.

This time, the guards at the entrance didn't even ask for her mandate. They simply stepped aside in silence, watching her pass with strange, almost wary looks. Rumors were already crawling through the Archive: the "mute" seeker was frequenting the archivist, and Handler Trey, it seemed, was in no hurry to lash her for it.

The door to the restoration workshop was ajar. A soft, steady light from magical lamps tuned to a warm spectrum spilled through the narrow crack—Soaren clearly disliked harsh lighting. Kaira stopped at the threshold, hesitating to knock.

He was there. He sat in the same posture, hunched over the table, but this time he wasn't wearing his frock coat—only a white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His hands, usually hidden by cuffs, proved to be unexpectedly strong, with long fingers and thin scars on the knuckles—the marks of years of working with paper, chemicals, and sharp scalpels.

"You came after all," he said, without turning around.

Kaira flinched. "How do you know it's me? Do you have mirrors on the back of your head?"

Soaren finally set down his pen and turned. In the warm light, his face seemed softer, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deeper.

"Every person has their own rhythm of footsteps, Kaira. Your gait is that of a predator trying to pass as prey. A very distinctive sound. Come in, I've just put the water on."

She entered, feeling the room envelop her in its stillness. There were no screaming Inquisition auras here, no stench of the sewers. Only the smell of old parchment and the faint aroma of fresh tea.

"I was at Balthazar's," she said, sitting on the edge of a heavy chair and laying the folder he had given her earlier on the table. "You were right. The Carvers have nothing to do with this. Or rather, someone very much wants us to think they do. Balthazar told me about Einar. About what happened ten years ago."

Soaren froze with the kettle in his hand. His gaze became vacant for a moment, as if he were turning the pages of an invisible book in his head.

"Balthazar... an old idealist. He still believes in a justice that can be forged from iron. And what did he say?"

"That the Inquisition killed Einar when he came to negotiate. And that Larsen and Vael were part of the deal."

Kaira pulled the blueprints she had managed to take from the dead scavenger from her pocket. She spread them on the table next to the documents from the Archive.

"Look at these red dots. Larsen marked them. These are resonance points. And one of them is right here, directly under the Cathedral. Ho there's a third point... it's soaked in blood. I can't make out the coordinates."

Soaren stepped closer. He didn't take the map in his hands but simply leaned over it, his shoulder almost touching Kaira's. He smelled of dust and something intangibly domestic, a scent Kaira never carried.

"Let me see," he pulled a magnifying glass in a silver frame from a desk drawer. "If we overlay this plan with the schematic of the old city sewers..."

They worked together for over two hours. A special kind of "working silence" settled in the workshop, the kind that only exists between people who understand each other without unnecessary words. Kaira dictated sparse data from the reports; Soaren cross-referenced them with ancient land registry books. Several times their hands accidentally brushed over the papers, and Kaira found herself no longer pulling her fingers away as she would have with Magnus or anyone else from the Inquisition.

She watched him surreptitiously. Soaren worked with the documents as if they were living beings. He touched the yellowed pages carefully, almost tenderly, smoothing out folded corners with his long, ink-stained fingers.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked suddenly, just as they finished verifying the fifth sector. "You realize that if Magnus finds out you're digging through 'closed' funds without an order, your career as an archivist will end tonight. In the best-case scenario, you'll just be thrown out."

Soaren set down the magnifying glass and looked at his hands. His face in the warm lamp light seemed calm, almost serene.

"My career, Kaira, is a service to the truth. It sounds pretentious, I know. But in this city, where everything is woven from lies and magical illusions, paper is the only thing that doesn't know how to lie. If there is a black hole in history, it means someone cut it out. And I... I really dislike it when books are missing pages."

He raised his eyes to her.

"Besides, you are the first person in years who looks at these archives not as a wastepaper warehouse, but as a key to life. That... is winning."

Kaira looked away, feeling a strange lump form in her throat. She wasn't used to hearing such words. In the world of the Inquisition, she was valued for her utility; in the world of Nutra, she was feared for her origins. But no one had ever said that her interest in a case could be "winning" to them.

"The third point..." Soaren leaned over Larsen's map again, frowning. "It's the Old Port district. The very edge of Avrin, where the city walls meet the sea. But the coordinates... The blood soaked too deep into the parchment. See? The stain covers the numbers themselves."

Kaira leaned in. The brown crust on the paper was thick. The killer (or Larsen himself in his death throes) seemed to have deliberately erased the most important part.

"Is there any way to restore it?"

"Possibly," Soaren rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I have chemical reagents that can bleach the blood without damaging the ink. But it's a painstaking process; it will take time. I doubt I'll manage before tomorrow evening."

Kaira nodded, gathering her things. Inside her, disappointment and a strange relief fought for dominance—she had a legitimate reason to return here again.

"I'll go there tomorrow anyway. Look around the sector. The Old Port is large, but if something is resonating there, I... I'll see it. In my own way."

She stood up, putting on her hat and checking if her revolver slid easily from its holster. A familiar ritual that brought her back to reality.

"I'm used to a cruel city, Soaren. We're old acquaintances."

She had already taken hold of the doorknob when his voice made her turn back.

"You know..." Soaren stood by his table, gathering the tea things. "I finished reading that fragment you brought me today. Larsen wrote that in silence, there is sometimes more meaning than in the loudest song."

He looked at her—openly, without a shadow of fear or professional curiosity.

"You aren't 'mute,' Kaira. You simply speak a language that this city has forgotten how to understand. Don't let them convince you otherwise."

Kaira said nothing in response. She simply nodded and stepped out into the dark corridor. But as she descended the wide staircase, as she walked through the pouring rain toward her office in Nutra, those simple, human words of Soaren's warmed her better than the strongest tea.

*"You aren't mute... You simply speak a different language."*

She locked the office door, brewed herself another cup of thyme tea, and sat in the darkness for a long time. She didn't yet know exactly where she needed to go in the Old Port tomorrow. She only knew that she absolutely had to find answers—for the sake of the city, for the sake of the dead, and perhaps, for the sake of seeing the archivist's gray eyes again.

### **Chapter 7: Tower of Silence**

Avrin's Old Port was a place the city would have preferred to forget. If Nutra was its festering womb, then the port was a withered, dead limb. Once, before the Great Rupture, life had teemed here: heavy merchant galleons from the continent crowded the docks, and magical beacons pierced the fog with beams of pure, blindingly white ether. Now, however, it was the territory of the "Dead Zone." Magic didn't flow here—it stood still like stagnant water in a ditch, filmed over with slime and exhaling the scent of decay.

Kaira walked along the embankment, where the hulls of abandoned ships jutted out of the shallows like the ribs of prehistoric monsters. The rain here didn't smell of soot, as it did in the central quarters, but of salt, rust, and something intangibly metallic. The wind from the bay was prickly; it unceremoniously crept under the hem of her coat, bit at her chilled fingers, and hurled icy drizzle into her face.

Her search had been going on for four hours. Without exact coordinates, the Old Port turned into an endless, maddening labyrinth of collapsed warehouses, stacks of rotting crates, and abandoned docks slowly sliding into the sea. Kaira tried to "switch on" her vision to full power, searching for the very resonance Larsen had written about, but the sector remained stubbornly silent. To her senses, this district was gray, flat, and absolutely empty.

She stopped at the edge of a crumbled pier to catch her breath. She pulled out her pocket watch—the second hand jerked and stopped. In the Dead Zone, mechanical devices, even the simplest ones, often acted up. Time itself seemed to mottle in an invisible molasses here.

"She doesn't like being watched."

The voice was quiet, whispering, like the sound of dry leaves driven by the wind over stones. Kaira spun around instantly, her hand habitually falling to the grip of her revolver, but she didn't pull it out.

In the shadow of an overturned boat encrusted with barnacles sat a teenager. Thin, in rags that might have once been a cabin boy's uniform. His eyes were strange—too large, almost transparent, devoid of pupils. In his aura, which Kaira saw with her "special" vision, there wasn't a single whole thread. Only torn, charred edges that fluttered feebly in the wind. "Burned." A victim of a magical discharge so powerful it had seared away his very ability to perceive the ether.

"What am I looking for?" Kaira asked, her hand still on her weapon.

The boy slowly raised a hand and pointed somewhere toward a foggy spit stretching far into the bay.

"What hums in the silence. Everyone says there's nothing there. Even the rats have left. But she sings, mistress. Every night, when the tide reaches the old supports, she begins to sing her song. Only there are no words in it, just the cold."

Kaira looked in the direction he pointed. Through the thick, almost palpable veil of fog, a tall, thin silhouette was barely discernible. A lonely tower standing on the very edge of a rocky outcrop.

"A lighthouse tower?"

"It was a lighthouse," the boy wrapped his thin shoulders in his arms, rocking from side to side. "Now it is a needle's eye. The wind from another world passes through it. Go there if you must. But don't listen to her for too long. Or you'll become like me... seeing only ash."

Kaira tossed him a small coin. He caught it in mid-air but didn't hide it; he simply squeezed it in his fist, continuing to look through Kaira with his transparent eyes. She didn't ask anything more. In this district, words meant less than premonitions.

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