

A SHADOW IN THE MIRROR

Black

The Shadow in the Mirror

I slipped into the narrow alleyway, dodging a group of market-goers hurrying to their day's work. My task was to meet Elwynn Veylan, Curator of House Veylan, at the designated hour. The flickering torches cast eerie shadows on the walls as I navigated the winding passageway. At a discreet hand gesture from the guard stationed outside the entrance, I continued toward the rear exit.

The dimly lit courtyard beyond was bathed in the soft glow of candles within the nearby fountains. The air reeked of damp earth and the distant tang of coal smoke. Elwynn waited near a fountain's edge, eyes fixed on me with an unreadable expression. We exchanged a measured nod; no words were necessary.

He handed me a small box made from dark wood, adorned with an intricate silver pin in the shape of two linked serpents. The device contained a mirror, one that had been passed through generations within House Veylan. "Tonight's objective is to retrieve a package," he stated simply.

In a city where whispers often spoke louder than words, this was as much guidance as I could expect. Our paths merged with the crowded streets of Nightforge as we wove between people and stalls, ever mindful of passersby. We navigated into the poorer districts, the air thickening with smoke and desperation. With every step, my senses grew on edge.

My hand reached instinctively for the small vial at my belt—magic's cost would be mine to bear, not hers. In a moment, our eyes locked; he acknowledged my silent question before we separated, leaving me to track him through the throngs. At a small apothecary, its sign bearing the image of a crescent moon, I waited as instructed.

Elwynn appeared at the door's edge, his gaze flicking toward the sign as if affirming an unspoken signal. The apothecary vanished for a moment; when he returned, it was with a satchel slung over his shoulder. We moved swiftly, merging into the night once more.

A series of quick hand signals led me through alleys until we reached the edge of the city, where the shadows deepened into darkness. Beyond the flickering torches, a figure in a hooded cloak waited beside the Ashen Roads' main thoroughfare. In this place of balance, all secrets are met with silence and death. The weight of our task

hung as palpably as the night air.

Our target was an individual known to possess a piece of sensitive information—something both the Queen and those in shadow were interested in acquiring. "If you don't return with it," Elwynn's voice barely above a whisper, "your obligations will be reevaluated." My gaze met his once more; a silent understanding underscored our mission.

As we closed in on our quarry, I detected whispers of the Black Rose Order at play. It was said they could summon power from the depths of their silence, exacting a toll that few understood or acknowledged. The shadows before us shrouded the hooded figure further into mystery.

The air grew colder; the weight of consequence hung heavy as our task reached its zenith. In one swift motion, we disarmed and bound the package's owner, taking him into custody with swift efficiency. Among the discarded tools and bloodied earth, the true prize was not what he carried but what it represented: a thread to unravel in the tapestry of Nightforge.

In the silence that followed, I reached for the small box still in my hand. The mirror, once a simple glass surface, now displayed an image—a reflection where one should have been absent. My eyes widened as Elwynn stepped closer, a flicker of something akin to satisfaction crossing his face before the moment was gone.

Our paths diverged with the return journey; we met briefly at our starting point before I took my leave, the small box now in my possession. In the darkness beyond, Elwynn's final glance weighed upon me—a reflection on both sides of loyalty and balance within a city that cherished secrecy above all else.

In my small apartment above the stables, I opened the box for the first time since receiving it. The mirror's surface reflected back an image that was mine, yet... incomplete. It would be my burden to reconcile what was shown me tonight—a reminder of the true price of our craft.

I lay the box on my bedside table, the small space beyond the mirror's reflection still echoing within me. My gaze drifted to the faint scarring above Elwynn's left eyebrow, a souvenir from his early days in the Order. His eyes told stories I couldn't quite decipher; they were as much of a puzzle as the device itself. The memory of our shared task and its potential implications lingered, refusing to be set aside.

In the hours that followed, sleep proved elusive, weighed down by the mirror's silent whisper: _incomplete_. What it meant, I couldn't fathom. The city outside my window stirred; Nightforge was always alive, but tonight felt different. A sense of unease crept in with the first light of dawn, an itch at the base of my spine that threatened to unravel me. I rose from bed and made for the small washbasin in the corner of the

room, splashing water on my face to try and shake off the feeling.

Dressed and ready to face whatever the day brought, I descended into the stables below. The smell of fresh hay and leather greeted me like a familiar friend. My eyes roved over the stalls, where the mares and foals stirred from their slumber. A faint cry caught my attention: Eira, a yearling mare with a spirited temperament, had escaped her stall during the night. I breathed a sigh, grateful for the distraction from the night's events.

The sun climbed higher, casting shadows that danced across the courtyard as I chased after Eira, attempting to herd her back into her enclosure. Her frantic movements were almost comical; almost. As she danced around me, an idea struck, and with a chuckle, I took off my cloak and, using it as a makeshift lasso, managed to coax her back inside. The satisfaction of successfully corralling the uncooperative foal lifted my spirits.

The day moved on in fits and starts: helping with stable duties, tending to the other animals, checking on a few orders for the nearby markets. Night's chill had given way to an afternoon sun warm enough to coax scents from the earth. My mind continued to wander back to the mirror, the reflection it showed me—where I was missing something. It weighed upon me, but like a dull ache, its significance remained elusive.

By sundown, shadows were once again creeping across the stable yard, and I had all but put the mirror's mystery aside, focusing on the practical tasks at hand: preparing for an evening of delivering fresh produce to a local merchant. The routine brought some sense of normalcy back to my life, even as my thoughts still turned toward the task we'd undertaken with Elwynn.

The shadows deepened, darkness gathering in the corners as I loaded the last crates onto the cart. With a final check on the mares and foals, I set off into Nightforge's twilight streets once more. My path took me through familiar alleys, past huddled figures huddled around flickering fires or the soft glow of lanterns within shops and homes.

I navigated through the crowded streets, my cart's wheels creaking in rhythm with the night's whispers. Lanterns cast a golden glow on the cobblestones ahead, their soft light drawing me toward the warm smell of baking bread wafting from the merchant's premises. The evening was a time for renewal, when shadows retreated and people's faces relaxed into smiles. I knew the merchant by name, Gorin, his reputation for fairness and quality products spreading through the city like a trusted rumor.

As I loaded the produce onto his counter, our conversation turned to the latest batch of winter apples from the north, their tart sweetness prized among locals and travelers alike. He chatted on about market trends while I listened with half an ear, my gaze wandering over the crowded stalls outside. The hum of Nightforge's evening

throng never wavered; people moved through life like leaves on a river, unaware of the currents beneath the surface.

A flicker at the edge of my vision caught my attention. Elwynn stood watching from across the market square, his presence unobtrusive as a shadow. His gaze met mine for a fleeting moment before he vanished into the crowd, leaving behind an itch that I couldn't scratch with a simple response. The transaction completed, and I bid Gorin farewell, the weight of my task lingering as I continued through the night.

I made my way back to the stables, the silence now punctuated by the sound of Eira's restless pacing in her stall. Elwynn reappeared an hour later, his footsteps quiet as a ghost's, and with a nod, we left together into the night. Without a word, he guided me to a new location, one I'd never been to before—a secluded courtyard surrounded by buildings whose facades seemed to have swallowed the starlight.

The air was heavy with the scent of blooming flowers, their petals folded closed for the night like secret lips. In the center stood a figure, hood up against the evening chill, a small, ornate box at his feet. Elwynn's hand signaled me forward; I recognized the person beneath the hood – our quarry from earlier in the day.

I approached cautiously, hand resting on the small of my back, where my dagger hung in its sheath. The air in the courtyard was heavy with an otherworldly scent, the kind that clung to places once consecrated for rituals long past. Our quarry, a hooded figure, didn't flinch as I drew near, their gaze locked on the box at Elwynn's feet.

"It seems we have another puzzle piece," Elwynn said softly, his voice carrying across the quiet space. The hooded figure slowly raised its head, revealing a face both gaunt and striking in its beauty. It was she who had been seen near the ancient catacombs earlier, her features etched with an air of otherworldliness.

"Who are you?" I asked, but my voice caught on the question. She turned to me then, her eyes locking onto mine with a sharp intensity. For a moment, we merely regarded each other, and in that look, I sensed the presence of something old and forgotten, something that had lain dormant for centuries.

"Someone who holds more than you might guess," Elwynn interjected smoothly, his eyes flicking between us as he stepped forward. The hooded figure inclined its head toward him, a small, wry smile playing on its lips. Elwynn continued, "She's been searching for something lost in these streets for a long time."

I watched the exchange, my mind spinning with connections I couldn't quite grasp. This mysterious figure and our task were tied together by threads I didn't understand, but they seemed crucial to unraveling the mysteries of Nightforge. The box between Elwynn's feet lay unremarkable save for its small, ornate lock. It felt like a key turned in my mind—a realization dawned.

"We've found what we needed," Elwynn said, his voice low and steady, "a piece of the whole." He stooped to pick up the box, and as he did, I noticed the way the hooded figure's gaze lingered on me. There was something there, a glimmer of recognition or memory that sparked in her eyes before she hid it behind an enigmatic smile.

Elwynn straightened with the box, turning it over in his hands. The lid creaked open to reveal a small, intricately carved mirror inside. It was its twin, identical to the one I'd found earlier that day. In the quiet of the courtyard, surrounded by these shadows and the secrets they kept, I felt my grip on reality slip a fraction.

"What does it mean?" I asked, but Elwynn's expression was unreadable as he passed me the box. "You'll understand in time," was all he said before turning to the hooded figure, who nodded once and turned to leave. As they disappeared into the night, I found myself alone with Elwynn, the mirror a heavy, unyielding presence between us.

"Elwynn?" I said softly, my eyes on him, but he merely glanced at me before moving toward the courtyard's gate. I followed him, the box still clutched in my hand, my mind racing to catch up with the night's events. Elwynn led me back through the winding streets of Nightforge, into alleys and passageways that seemed increasingly familiar.

We walked for a while without speaking, the only sound our footsteps echoing off the buildings. Finally, we stopped before a nondescript door tucked between two larger structures. The sign above it read "Cantora's Apothecary" in faded letters. Elwynn glanced at me and nodded toward the door. Without another word, he stepped forward and vanished inside.

I stood there for a moment, wondering what secrets lay within that apothecary, what mysteries we were closing in on with each step into Nightforge's night. The box still clutched tightly in my hand felt like a tangible manifestation of our journey—a thread tied to something far larger than myself.

I pushed open the door, stepping into a dimly lit shop thick with the scent of dried herbs and sandalwood. The air inside was heavy, weighed down by the accumulation of countless secrets. I closed the door behind me, my eyes adjusting to the warm glow of candles that cast flickering shadows on the walls. Elwynn had already begun sorting through shelves stacked with jars and vials of various sizes, his movements precise as he searched for something.

A figure emerged from the shadows near the back of the shop, her hair tied up in a loose braid and a look of quiet focus etched on her face. Cantora. I'd heard stories about her, how she wove potions and remedies that could cure even the most stubborn afflictions, but at a steep price. Her eyes met mine, and for an instant, I sensed a flicker of unease beneath her calm demeanor.

"You've brought it," she said, her voice husky, as Elwynn held up the box. "I see you've found the other." Cantora's gaze drifted to me, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. She seemed to know something about the mirror, something I was still struggling to understand.

The air in the apothecary was thick with scents that seemed to cling to my skin like a shroud, weighing me down. I felt a step behind Cantora as she moved towards Elwynn, her movements economical, practiced. "You've done well," she said, her voice even, but with a hint of tension seeping into the words. The box still clutched in his hand, Elwynn inclined his head slightly, acknowledging her praise.

Cantora reached out and took the box from him, her fingers brushing against his, and for an instant, I saw a flicker of something between them – not quite anger, but a strain that made me think they were long acquaintances rather than allies. She opened the lid of the box, revealing the mirror's glassy surface to the dim light of the shop. A soft gasp escaped her lips as she lifted out the mirror, holding it like a precious artifact.

"Where did you find this?" she asked Elwynn, her eyes fixed on him, her tone now tinged with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. The question hung in the air for an instant before he replied, his voice steady, "The same place as the other." Cantora's gaze narrowed slightly, and I sensed a thread of unease in her demeanor. She seemed to be weighing something, her eyes darting between Elwynn and me.

I took a step forward, trying to close the distance between us. "What does this mean?" I asked, my voice firm, trying to cut through the tension that had begun to build. Cantora's eyes met mine, and for an instant, I thought she would answer me directly. But instead, she turned back to Elwynn, her expression unreadable. "You know as much as we do," she said dryly.

Elwynn's eyes flicked to me, a silent understanding passing between us – that we were getting close to the heart of whatever mysteries lay hidden in Nightforge. Cantora took another step back, the mirror held up like an offering, and I sensed that this was the moment of truth, when everything might unravel before our very eyes.

I stepped forward, trying to keep the conversation moving, but Cantora's gaze still lingered on Elwynn, her eyes a mask of calm while her voice remained low and steady. "We need to understand what we're dealing with," I pressed on, my words meeting with a faint hint of urgency.

Cantora nodded slightly, turning back to me as if acknowledging the unspoken thread that connected us – a sense of purpose, perhaps even urgency. She carefully set the mirror down on a nearby shelf, her movements deliberate and precise, as if she were handling something both precious and delicate. Elwynn watched her, his eyes narrowed slightly, his expression unreadable.

"We don't have much time," Cantora said finally, her voice low, though not quite firm. "The mirrors, they're tied to the Order's ancient power, a relic from when Nightforge was born. If we're to unlock what's inside them, it will require...costs."

Elwynn shifted slightly, his eyes flicking toward me as if gauging my reaction, though I remained still, trying to process the revelation. Costs? What kind of costs could Cantora possibly mean? Elwynn nodded once, a small movement, and Cantora's gaze drifted to him before refocusing on me.

"The memories we keep hidden," she said softly, her voice holding a weight that made my mind recoil instinctively. "The shadows we cast upon ourselves. Those are the prices we pay for power."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, making me feel like I'd been walking blind through Nightforge's shadows all this time. Memories we keep hidden? Shadows we cast upon ourselves? I thought back to my life before the Order, my family, my past. Were those the secrets Cantora spoke of?

Cantora's eyes were fixed on me now, her gaze unyielding as she waited for a response, or perhaps, an understanding. The mirror on the shelf seemed to mock me, its glassy surface reflecting nothing and everything all at once. I felt like I was staring into the heart of Nightforge itself - dark, mysterious, and unforgiving.

"What kind of costs?" I asked finally, my voice barely above a whisper. Elwynn shifted beside me, his eyes never leaving Cantora's face, as if he were searching for something there - answers, reassurance, or perhaps even permission to continue on this path. Cantora's expression remained unreadable, but a hint of something like regret flickered across her features before she pushed it back.

"The mirrors have...seen things," she said slowly, choosing each word with care. "Sights and sounds that we cannot stomach, can't bear to confront. They keep these memories, locked deep within their glass, waiting for us to unlock them." Her hands drifted to the small of her back, a gesture so fluid it seemed almost involuntary. I sensed a memory stirring, a memory she wished to remain hidden.

I thought about my mother, the stories I'd heard about the Black Rose Order and its members' secrets. It was as if Cantora was telling me that every time we used these mirrors, we risked losing ourselves further in the shadows. The realization sent a shiver down my spine, making me wonder how many secrets lay hidden behind the eyes of Elwynn, of Cantora herself, and even mine.

Tags: Era of Order, Secrecy as Virtue, Hidden Truths