

A Silent Disappearance in the Ashen Roads

Black

The Whispered Reckoning

Kael Varn moved with purpose through the Ashen Roads, his boots scuffing against the worn cobblestones. He navigated by the pale glow of lanterns casting long shadows on either side of him. The wind carried whispers, and Kael's trained ear picked out snippets: a mention of the Black Rose Order's resurgence, murmurs about a missing Curator. His pace quickened.

In an age where loyalty was currency, and information a precious resource, Kael had made his reputation on handling the less...visible aspects of balance. He didn't ask questions; he delivered results. A whispered correction here, a silent disappearance there—these were the instruments of his trade.

He stopped before a nondescript door, a symbol of House Veylan etched into the lintel. A servant, eyes downcast, opened the door for Kael. Inside, the dimly lit chamber reeked of incense and desperation. A hooded figure stood by the window, back to him.

"Kael Varn," the figure said without turning. "We've heard you're efficient."

"Eager to please, I trust," Kael replied, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. He recognized the voice: Sir Arin of House Veylan.

"You have a job for me," Kael stated, his tone devoid of question or emotion.

Sir Arin stepped back from the window, revealing a small table with a map spread upon it. "We've had a... situation develop in our trade network. A merchant, Elwynn Lyrax, has gone missing. We suspect foul play."

Kael's gaze swept over the map, taking in the location—deep into the Ashen Roads, near the Nightforge trade post. He spotted symbols etched into the margins: a mark for a known smuggler, another for a recently activated Thalos node.

"How long has he been missing?"

"Three days," Sir Arin replied, his eyes never leaving Kael's face. "We've received no word, nor any signs of struggle. The people are getting restless; we cannot afford to

be seen as...uninvolved."

Kael nodded, already planning the sequence of events: tracking Elwynn Lyrax, uncovering the players involved, and extracting a balance for the disturbance. He'd have to be careful; in this era, every move was watched, weighed.

"I'll need access to the Ashen Roads," Kael said, meeting Sir Arin's gaze. "And your authorization with the Curators' Guild."

Sir Arin handed him a small note. "This will grant you an audience. Be discreet, Kael Varn. We have little patience for... distractions."

As Kael took the note, he felt it—a faint tickle of resistance from his left arm, a sign his borrowed power still lingered. He'd used it to correct a minor imbalance not two days prior, and now paid the price: memory loss. Details of the previous job—faces, conversations, locations—remained shrouded in mist.

He tucked the note into his belt, the weight of it, like the memory debt, an unspoken promise he'd repay when the time came.

With a nod, Kael Varn stepped back out into the Ashen Roads, into the darkness and secrets that hid their true form.

He navigated the narrow streets, his eyes scanning the crowds for any sign of Elwynn Lyrax's disappearance being more than just a rumor. Night was falling fast, casting long shadows that stretched between the buildings like grasping fingers. Kael spotted a figure waiting in the alleyway adjacent to the market square: a hooded woman with skin as pale as alabaster. Her eyes, however, burned like embers in the dark.

"Kael Varn," she said, voice barely audible over the rustling of leaves above.

"Ashera," he replied, his gaze lingering on her face, searching for any sign of the exhaustion or desperation he'd seen on her before. But her expression remained tranquil as she stepped closer. "What information do you have about Elwynn Lyrax?"

"Whispers," Ashera whispered, her hands sliding into the folds of her cloak. "The merchant was last seen in a tavern on the edge of town, by the Nightforge trade post. Talked to a local smuggler, rumors spread...about someone with an interest in his wares."

Kael's grip tightened on the hilt of his dagger as he processed Ashera's words. He knew the tavern she spoke of; it was one of the few places where you could find genuine, uncolored ale and the company that came with it. The Nightforge trade post wasn't far from there, a hub for goods exchanged across the vast expanse of the Ashen Roads.

"I'll need to speak with this smuggler," Kael said, already turning towards the tavern.

Ashera's grip on his arm was a cold shock, her voice low and urgent. "Be careful, Kael. There are eyes watching him."

He glanced back at her, searching for an explanation in those burning eyes but found only a warning. "Who?" he asked, but Ashera vanished into the crowd before she could answer.

Kael's heart rate picked up as he continued towards the tavern, his hand instinctively resting on the note in his belt. The weight of the memory debt felt heavier now, like an anchor he couldn't shake.

He pushed open the creaky door of the tavern, the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses enveloping him like a warm blanket. The air inside was thick with the smell of roasting meat and something pungent that made his nose wrinkle in distaste. Kael scanned the room, his gaze settling on a figure huddled in the corner, hood up to conceal their face.

The figure beckoned him over, and Kael recognized the smuggler's mark from the map Sir Arin had given him. He wove through the tables, drawing attention from several patrons, but none seemed particularly interested in him. The smuggler pushed his cup away as Kael approached. "You're the one they sent," he said, voice low.

"Kael Varn, at your service," he replied, taking a seat across from the smuggler. "I'm looking for information on Elwynn Lyrax." The smuggler's eyes darted around the room before fixing on Kael's face. "What makes you think I'd know anything about him?" he asked, his tone neutral.

Kael leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers together. "Let's just say we have mutual interests, you and I. And Sir Arin of House Veylan would be...irritated if he knew you'd withheld information." The smuggler's eyes flickered towards the entrance before returning to Kael's face. "Fine," he said. "I spoke with Elwynn a few days ago. He was nervous, talked about someone following him."

Kael's grip on his chair tightened as he leaned forward. "What did he say exactly?" The smuggler hesitated, glancing around the room once more before leaning in close. "He mentioned a figure in black, eyes like lanterns in the dark. Said they'd been tracking him for weeks." Kael's mind whirred with possibilities, the name of a Thalos node coming to the forefront.

As he left the tavern, the cool night air was a welcome respite from the tension inside. He navigated through the winding streets, his thoughts consumed by the figure in black and the mention of Elwynn Lyrax's nervous behavior. Ashera's parting warning echoed in his mind: There are eyes watching him. His gaze swept over the rooftops and alleys, half-expecting to see figures lurking in the shadows.

Kael approached the Nightforge trade post under a crescent moon, its gates closed for the night but a lone figure pacing outside. "Can I help you?" the guard asked as Kael drew closer, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. "I'm looking for Elwynn Lyrax's caravan," he said, showing the guard his note from Sir Arin.

The guard's eyes widened as he took in the symbol on the parchment, and he nodded hastily. "They were here three days ago, but they left in a hurry. Some trouble with their goods, I think." Kael's grip on his dagger tightened at the mention of trouble, his mind racing with possibilities. The figure in black, the Thalos node, Elwynn's nervous behavior - it was all connected.

The guard handed him a rough map with the route Elwynn Lyrax had taken, and Kael committed it to memory before tucking it into his belt. He made his way back through the Ashen Roads, his eyes scanning the rooftops for any sign of pursuit. The air was heavy with an unspoken understanding: that in this world of whispered secrets and hidden dangers, one wrong move could unravel the fragile balance of power.

He walked for what felt like hours, the darkness of the Ashen Roads swallowing him whole as he navigated the narrow alleys and backstreets. The weight of his memory debt pressed upon him, fragments of Elwynn's disappearance, the smuggler's words, and Ashera's warning swirling in his mind like a maelstrom. Kael's eyes darted between the rooftops, searching for any sign of pursuit or surveillance. He'd grown accustomed to the feeling of being watched, but this time it felt different. This time, the weight of his responsibility as a collector hung heavy on his shoulders.

The wind picked up, carrying with it the acrid scent of smoke and the distant clang of hammers on metal. Kael's gaze fell upon a cluster of warehouses, their walls bearing the emblem of the Nightforge clan. He'd heard rumors of their involvement in the Thalos node trade, whispers of a secret pact between them and the merchant guilds. The likelihood of Elwynn Lyrax getting entangled in such politics was high; his family's reputation for trading in rare artifacts would make him an attractive mark for those seeking power.

As Kael turned down a narrow street, he spotted a figure huddled against a nearby wall, eyes fixed on the Nightforge warehouses. Ashera's warning echoed in his mind once more: There are eyes watching him. He approached the figure cautiously, hand resting on his dagger. "Ashera?" The figure slowly rose to their feet, revealing a young woman with sun-kissed skin and hair as dark as the night sky. Her gaze flickered towards Kael's face before returning to the warehouses.

"The merchant," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the wind. "He was last seen near the Nightforge trade post, but I've been watching him from afar. Someone follows him, always lurking in the shadows." The woman's eyes darted towards the alleys, a mixture of fear and urgency etched on her face. "I don't know what they

want with Elwynn Lyrax, but I think it has something to do with the Nightforge clan's latest shipment."

Kael's mind was already racing ahead, piecing together the fragments Ashera's words had provided. A figure in black, eyes like lanterns in the dark; Elwynn's nervous behavior; the Nightforge trade post... He'd known that the merchant guilds were involved in more than just trade, but this web of intrigue threatened to engulf him. The young woman, still watching the warehouses with a mixture of fear and fascination, nudged Kael towards his destination.

Kael's hand brushed against the note from Sir Arin, now crumpled and worn from hours of being carried in his pocket. He recognized the symbol embossed on its corner: a mark associated with the Veylan family, one of the most influential guilds in the Ashen Roads. The weight of his responsibility as a collector grew, weighed down by the secrets he kept hidden beneath the surface.

He followed the woman's gaze back to the warehouses, his eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of the figure in black. The air was heavy with an unspoken understanding, the weight of hidden agendas bearing down on him like a physical force.

"Let's get out of here," he said, his voice low and urgent, as he pulled Ashera by the arm. "I need you to take me to Elwynn Lyrax's last known location." The woman nodded, her eyes never leaving the warehouses as they moved through the winding alleys. Kael couldn't shake the feeling that he was being led further into the heart of a maelstrom, but he had no choice; the threads of intrigue were tangled around him like a noose.

They navigated the narrow streets, dodging vendors and merchants hawking their wares under the flickering torchlight. Kael's hand rested on the hilt of his dagger, a habit born from years of walking these roads. He'd always been aware of the risks, but never had he felt so exposed as he did now, with the weight of his responsibility bearing down on him.

As they turned onto a narrow street lined with warehouses and trade posts, Kael spotted a group of guardsmen gathered outside one of the larger structures. Their eyes scanned the crowd, their expressions grim, and Kael's gut twisted with foreboding. "What is it?" he asked Ashera, but she just shook her head, her eyes fixed on the guards.

Kael pushed through the crowd, his face set in a determined line as he approached the guards. They parted to let him pass, their faces hard and unyielding. Inside the warehouse, Kael was met with a scene of chaos: crates were smashed open, goods spilled across the floor, and the air reeked of smoke and char. A figure huddled in the corner, bound by rope and gagged.

"Elwynn Lyrax?" Kael asked, his voice carrying across the warehouse. The figure slowly looked up, their eyes sunken and haunted. "Get me out of here," they spat, struggling against the ropes.

Kael rushed to Elwynn's side, cutting through the ropes with a swift motion. "What happened?" he asked, helping the merchant to their feet. Elwynn's eyes darted wildly around the warehouse, as if searching for an escape route.

"We were ambushed," they spat, their voice still hoarse from the gag. "They came in under cover of night, caught us off guard. I managed to fend them off, but...but there was something else." Elwynn's eyes locked onto Kael's, a mixture of fear and desperation etched on their face. "I think they were looking for something specific. They tore open every crate, searching for a particular item."

Kael's mind worked rapidly, piecing together the clues. The Nightforge clan's involvement, the figure in black, Elwynn's nervous behavior...it was all connected to this shipment. He looked around the warehouse, his eyes settling on a nearby crate with its contents spilled onto the floor. Among the scattered items, he spotted a small, intricately carved box with a symbol etched onto its lid.

"What is that?" Kael asked, pointing to the box. Elwynn's gaze followed, and their face paled. "That's...that's one of the artifacts we were transporting," they stammered. "It's a Veylan relic, rumored to hold great power. I was supposed to deliver it to the Nightforge clan, but..." Their voice trailed off as they looked around the warehouse once more.

A faint rustling sound caught Kael's attention, and he turned to see Ashera slipping out of the shadows, her eyes fixed on the box. "We need to get out of here," she whispered, tugging on Kael's arm. "Now."

Kael hesitated, his eyes flicking between Ashera and Elwynn. The merchant's fear was palpable, and Kael knew they had to get out of there before things escalated further. He nodded at Ashera, and together they led Elwynn out of the warehouse, the young woman glancing back over her shoulder as if expecting pursuit.

They emerged into the cool night air, the sounds of the city momentarily muted as they stepped into a narrow alleyway. Ashera leaned against the wall, her chest heaving with exertion. "We need to get you somewhere safe," Kael said, his eyes scanning the rooftops for any sign of the figure in black.

Elwynn nodded, their face pale and drawn. "I think they're after more than just the artifact," they whispered, glancing at Kael with a hint of accusation. "This is bigger than I thought." Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, his mind racing with possibilities. A secret pact between the Nightforge clan and the merchant guilds; the Veylan relic's immense power; the figure in black...the web of intrigue was becoming increasingly

complex.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," Kael promised, his voice low and even. Ashera nodded in agreement, her eyes never leaving the rooftops as if waiting for an attack. "We need a safehouse," Kael continued, thinking aloud. "Somewhere we can lay low and sort through the threads."

He glanced at Elwynn, who shook their head, eyes scanning the surrounding buildings. "I have nowhere to go," they admitted, a thread of desperation creeping into their voice. Kael's grip on his dagger relaxed as he thought back to the merchant guilds' various hideaways and safehouses. One name came to mind - a small tavern on the outskirts of the city, known for its connections to the Nightwatchers.

They navigated the narrow alleys, their footsteps echoing off the stone buildings as they made their way towards the tavern. The sign creaked in the gentle breeze, bearing the image of a winged lion. Kael pushed open the door, stepping into the warm glow of firelight and the murmur of hushed conversations.

Inside, the patrons were an eclectic mix: travelers, locals, and Nightwatchers, their black uniforms standing out like dark shadows among the crowd. Kael scanned the room for a familiar face, his eyes locking onto a hooded figure sitting in the corner. The figure raised a hand in a brief nod before returning to their drink.

Ashera led them to a secluded table near the fire, and Elwynn collapsed into a chair as if exhausted. "Aren't we pushing our luck?" Ashera asked under her breath, her eyes scanning the room. Kael leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting over the crowd as he replied, "We have no choice. The Nightwatchers have connections to this tavern; it's one of their safehouses."

Elwynn spoke up from the corner, their voice low and urgent. "I think they're after more than just the artifact," they repeated, glancing around the room with a mixture of fear and unease. Kael leaned forward, his hands cradling his cup as he replied, "We'll find out what's going on, Elwynn. I promise." The merchant's eyes searched his face for reassurance before falling back into a troubled reverie.

The night wore on, with the tavern growing busier and noisier. Kael leaned against the bar, nursing a mug of ale while observing the crowd. He noticed a group of hooded figures slipping in through the side door, their eyes scanning the room with an air of quiet purpose. They moved with a calculated precision, drawing attention to themselves as little as possible.

As they approached the corner where Elwynn sat, Kael's instincts flared into high alert. He pushed away from the bar, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. The hooded figures slid into the shadows, their faces obscured in darkness. One of them stepped forward, a lean figure with eyes that glinted like stars in the dim light.

"You're one of the Veylan's collectors, I presume?" the figure asked, its voice low and smooth as silk. Kael inclined his head, his expression neutral. The figure continued, "We've been searching for you, collector. You have something we want."

The figure's eyes flicked to Elwynn, then back to Kael, their gaze lingering on his hand resting on the dagger hilt. "I think you'll find that the collector is not so easily intimidated," Ashera said, her voice a low growl from behind him. The hooded figure's expression remained serene, but its voice took on a hint of curiosity. "Ah, a protector, how...quaint."

Kael's grip on his dagger relaxed as he stood, a small smile twisting his lips. "We're not collectors," he said, the word dripping with disdain. "You want something from Elwynn, but you're too cowardly to ask for it directly." The figure's eyes narrowed, its star-like gaze flashing with irritation, before they nodded curtly. "Very well, let us be clear: we seek the Veylan relic. We will not be denied."

The figure stepped back, a subtle signal to its companions, who emerged from the shadows like specters. Kael's hand tightened on his dagger as he assessed their numbers – three of them, each with an air of quiet menace about them. Ashera moved closer, her eyes fixed on the hooded figures, and Elwynn shrank back in their chair, a frightened glimmer in their eyes.

"We'll never give it to you," Kael said, his voice firm. "The Nightforge clan can rot for all I care." The figure's expression twisted into a wry smile. "Ah, but the Nightwatchers are not what concern me, nor is the clan's reputation. What matters is the relic. And if you refuse to hand it over...other arrangements will be made."

Kael's mind racing with the implications, he glanced at Elwynn, who looked like a trapped animal ready to bolt. He needed to get them out of there – but how? The tavern seemed less safe by the minute. His eyes met Ashera's, and she gave a barely perceptible nod before edging closer to the hooded figures.

The leader's voice dropped to a growl. "You have a choice: hand over the relic or leave with us now. We will not be denied." Kael's grip on his dagger shifted, the weight of it a reminder that sometimes, the most powerful tool is the one at your side – not the blade in your hand.

A commotion erupted near the tavern entrance as a group of Nightwatchers burst in, their black uniforms drawing attention to themselves like a beacon. The hooded figures tensed, their leader's gaze flicking between Kael and the new arrivals before returning to Elwynn, whose eyes were fixed on the door, hope flickering in their expression.

One of the Nightwatchers pushed through the crowd, its face illuminated by the firelight – a familiar face, with an air of quiet competence about it. "Ah, Captain Eriol,"

Kael said, relief washing over him as he stepped aside to make room for the captain's imposing figure.

"Kael," Captain Eriol said, his voice firm and authoritative. "What seems to be the issue here?" The hooded figures exchanged uneasy glances before their leader spoke up, its voice dripping with disdain. "We will return, collector. And next time...you will not be so fortunate." With that, they turned and melted into the night, leaving the tavern's patrons to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Captain Eriol stepped closer, his eyes scanning the room before landing on Elwynn. "Time for you to go," he said, his voice low but firm. Kael nodded in agreement, knowing that with the Nightwatchers involved, they had a temporary reprieve - but for how long?

Tags: Vengeance, Betrayal, Balance