

Ghosts in the Night, Forgotten Injustice, Silent Vigil

Black

Echoes in the Ashen Roads

The air was heavy with rain as I navigated the winding alleys of Everia's lower districts. My boots splashed through puddles reflecting flickering torches from beneath awnings above, casting eerie shadows on the wet cobblestones. The city's Nightwatch patrols had long since given up trying to keep pace with the endless night, leaving us to our own devices.

As a member of House Veylan, I'd grown accustomed to moving unseen in the darkness, where only the faintest whispers of my presence echoed off the stone walls. Tonight was no different; I kept close to the shadows as I made my way toward the appointed meeting spot. The message had been delivered under the same moon, by a Curator's hand – brief and enigmatic: 'Gather at the forgotten fountain in the lower quarter. Come alone.'

I arrived to find a hooded figure waiting beside the fountain, its stone basin cracked and dry since time immemorial. Water no longer flowed from its mouth, but the once-bustling central square had become an informal gathering place for those who navigated the hidden paths of Everia's night – those like myself.

'You're late,' a low voice said, not unkindly. It belonged to Eryndor Thorne, my contact within the Knighthood. I stepped closer, careful not to break the silence, yet unwilling to remain shrouded in mystery. 'Apologies, Thorne. The rain.'

He nodded curtly and offered a small pouch of worn leather. Inside, a tiny note on parchment read: 'The Writ will not be broken again.' A message from Kael Varn himself, delivered through Eryndor's channels – no doubt at great cost to the sender. Its significance was clear: justice had been done, but perhaps too quietly.

I recalled the case of Amaranthia Lyrax, accused of defaming the Queen herself and forced into a hasty execution under the dubious circumstances I'd uncovered in The Broken Writ, years past. Yet, now it seemed Kael's subtle correction may have changed the course of history. His favor was both blessing and burden – each favor purchased with a piece of oneself.

Eryndor watched me, eyes narrowed beneath his hood, weighing my reaction. 'The weight of that choice is yours to bear,' he said finally. 'Your order will not be pleased.'

Silence settled between us like the night itself, broken only by the faint patter of rain on stone and the soft creaking of old wood from nearby buildings. In this moment, it was as if we were not merely representatives of our respective orders but fellow travelers in a world where shadows danced and truth remained hidden.

I took a slow breath, feeling the damp air fill my lungs, and made a silent promise to Kael Varn: that his correction would be honored – for now. Eryndor's parting words hung with me as I left into the rain-soaked night: 'Your conscience will guide you, or your shadow.'

I turned onto the narrow street, disappearing into the darkness as Eryndor remained by the fountain, his eyes still fixed on me. The hood's folds hid his face, but I sensed a flicker of unease in his stance – not at my delayed response, but something deeper, a concern that had nothing to do with punctuality. I wondered what unseen forces Kael's intervention might have set into motion.

The rain soaked through the worn leather of my cloak, seeping into my shirt as I walked. My route led me past the old orphanage on the corner, its windows dark and shuttered like empty eyes. Beyond the building, a cluster of crumbling tenements stretched toward the city's limits – places where hope went to die, hidden behind walls that seemed stronger than those that kept the night at bay. I navigated these alleys with a practiced air, my footsteps quiet on the slick cobblestones.

At the corner of Ashen Road and Blackstone Way, I stopped in front of a small, run-down bookshop. The sign above its door creaked in the rain, reading 'Mael's Tomes' in faded letters. A faint light flickered from within, casting eerie shadows on the walls. I pushed open the door, letting it swing shut behind me. The air inside was stale and thick with dust, heavy with the scent of old parchment and forgotten knowledge.

The proprietor, an elderly man named Mael, looked up from behind the counter as I entered. His eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep or perhaps exhaustion, narrowed in a mixture of curiosity and wariness. 'Vedrik,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper. 'What brings you out tonight?'

I nodded toward the stacks in the corner, where I'd often sought refuge from the world's noise – and sometimes from my own. Mael's expression softened, and he gestured for me to precede him into the back room. The air beyond the counter was thick with books, their leather covers creaking as the wind outside found its way through gaps in the walls.

I navigated through the narrow aisles, running my fingers over the spines of the tomes as I made my way toward a section of forgotten lore – texts that held secrets

the world was better off without, but which some couldn't help devouring. Mael followed closely behind me, his footsteps quiet on the creaky floorboards.

The back room was cramped, with shelves that seemed to lean in on each other, threatening to topple under their burden of knowledge. In here, it was easier to breathe, surrounded by the musty smell of old pages and the weight of what they contained. I felt a sense of peace settle over me as Mael lit a small lantern, its flame casting flickering shadows across the walls. He settled into a creaking chair, watching me with an air of patience I rarely saw from those who knew me well.

'Kael Varn's message,' he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper, 'it's not just about the weight of what was done. There are threads, Vedrik - threads you should cut before they bind you.' Mael's eyes seemed to cloud over, as if the mere mention of Kael's name had awakened memories best left buried. I recognized the look; it was one I'd seen on those who'd spent too long in the presence of power.

I leaned against a shelf, running my hand over the worn covers of books, feeling the smooth wood beneath. 'What do you know?' The words slipped out before I could censor them, but Mael only nodded - as if it was what he'd been waiting for. His eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that made me shift uncomfortably under his gaze.

'The Queen's justice may have been altered,' he said slowly, 'but the cost of that correction will be counted in more than coin or blood.' He paused, letting the words sink into me like a cold draft on a winter night. 'There are those who fear they've lost their edge - their power to bend and shape the world to their will.'

The lantern's flame danced higher as Mael leaned forward, his eyes burning with an intensity I hadn't seen in him before. His voice dropped lower, taking on a conspiratorial tone. 'They'll move against Kael Varn, Vedrik. And through him, you.'

I straightened, my fingers stilled on the spines of the books as Mael's words hung in the air like a challenge. A flicker of unease danced in my chest, though I couldn't quite place why - was it Kael Varn's favor now putting him in danger? Or something more complex, hidden beneath the surface? The old man's gaze seemed to hold secrets, but I'd long since learned not to push for answers. Not here. Not with Mael.

"You're telling me," I said finally, trying to keep my tone light, "they think he's a threat?" Mael nodded once, his expression somber. The shadows cast by the lantern seemed to deepen around us, making the room feel smaller, more oppressive. "Who is 'they'?" I pressed on, but Mael's lips clamped shut as if warning me not to pry further.

I turned away from him, letting my gaze wander over the shelves. We'd always been careful about such things - whispers, rumors, and half-truths - here in this hidden place. Secrets were currency, traded with a heavy hand, and those who hoarded them too openly often found themselves at the wrong end of a blade. But what Mael had

just hinted at... it felt different. It felt like the first tremors of an earthquake yet to come.

I ran my fingers over the spines again, searching for something – anything – that would give me a lead on who these 'they' were and what they wanted from Kael. The books seemed to whisper secrets back to me, but none of them made sense in this context. I felt trapped, hemmed in by shadows that didn't quite move or speak but still managed to exert pressure. I turned back to Mael, who watched me with a look of quiet calculation.

"Eryndor," I said, the name slipping out without thought. "Is he involved?" Mael's eyes narrowed, and for an instant, I saw something like fear flicker behind his gaze – or was it respect? He leaned forward, his voice barely above a whisper. "He's caught in the undertow, Vedrik. And those who've been waiting to see him pulled under."

I'd seen that look on people before – the mix of fear and respect when they spoke about Eryndor, like they were navigating a riptide they couldn't quite understand. Mael's eyes seemed to cloud over again, his gaze drifting away from mine as he leaned back in his chair.

"Eryndor?" I repeated, trying to get him to stay on topic. "What do you mean by 'those who've been waiting'?" The question hung in the air like a challenge, but Mael's expression remained somber, his eyes fixed on some point beyond me. The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with unspoken truths.

The lantern's flame danced higher, casting eerie shadows on the walls as I waited for him to continue. The old man's silence only seemed to grow thicker, weighing upon me like the dust that coated every surface in this cramped room. Finally, he spoke up, his voice barely audible over the sound of the rain outside.

"Vedrik, you don't understand," Mael said, his words dripping with a weariness I'd not seen before. "You think you know what's at stake, but... Kael Varn's influence is like a storm that rages on, far beyond your sight." He leaned forward again, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made me shift in my seat.

"You must be careful," he urged, his voice still low. "These are not petty factions or thieves' guilds. They have resources, Vedrik – and patience. They'll wait for the perfect moment to strike." Mael's gaze flickered toward the window, as if he expected to see something there – a signal, perhaps, or a sign of what was to come.

I straightened from my slouch against the shelf, feeling a shiver run down my spine. The weight of his words hung heavy in the air, making the room feel even smaller than it was. I knew Mael wasn't one for hyperbole – if he spoke this way, there must be something serious at play.

The lantern's flame cast an eerie glow on the walls as I turned to him, my voice measured. "What about Eryndor?" I pressed on, needing to know how deep into this mire we both were. Mael's eyes snapped back to mine, and for a moment, I thought he might tell me everything – but then his expression smoothed over, like the surface of a still pond.

"The less you know, Vedrik," he said softly, "the better." His words hung in the air, like a veiled threat or a promise. I felt a spark of unease ignite within me, and for an instant, I was tempted to push him – to force him into telling me what he knew. But something held me back. Maybe it was the look in his eyes, or perhaps it was the weight of secrets shared in this very room before.

I turned from him, my fingers trailing over the spines of the books once more, searching for some hint of a lead – anything that would give me a grasp on what was happening. The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with unspoken truths and half-remembered fears. And then, without warning, Mael spoke up again.

"Be careful, Vedrik," he repeated, his voice barely audible over the sound of the rain outside. I turned back to him, meeting his gaze, but he just nodded toward the door. "You need to leave now."

The room's shadows seemed to deepen as I stood, my movements instinctive in response to Mael's instruction. I grabbed my cloak, shaking out the dust that had accumulated on its hem, and tied it around my shoulders with a practiced hand. My eyes met Mael's one last time before I turned toward the door, but he said nothing else, his gaze drifting back into the depths of the room as if he'd already dismissed me.

I stepped out into the rain-soaked night, the cold air biting at my face like a slap in the ribs. The narrow alley was deserted, the only sound the steady patter of droplets on the cobblestones beneath my feet. I breathed in deeply, feeling the chill air fill my lungs, and began to walk. Mael's words still lingered inside me – what had Eryndor gotten himself mixed up with? And who were these shadowy figures, patiently waiting for their moment to strike?

As I turned a corner, the city's night life sprang into view: taverns, brothels, and gaming dens that thrived in the dark. The sounds of laughter, music, and clinking glasses drifted out onto the streets, mingling with the rain. I wove through the crowds, trying to lose myself in the anonymity of the night. My eyes scanned the faces around me, searching for any sign of Kael Varn or his retinue – but they seemed to blend seamlessly into the crowd.

A figure detached itself from a nearby tavern and caught my eye. It was Althor, one of Kael's guards, his features stern as he watched me approach. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword, a habitual gesture that spoke more of habit than intent. I slowed to a

stop before him, raising an eyebrow in inquiry. "You're not out hunting for trouble," I said, trying to keep my tone light. Althor's gaze flicked around us, taking in the surrounding crowd, before he leaned in close.

"Word is, Kael Varn wants a word with you," he said quietly, his voice low enough that only I could hear it over the din of the taverns. "He's been looking for you, Vedrik."

The rain-soaked streets seemed to close in around me as I considered Althor's words. What could Kael Varn possibly want with me now? I'd thought we were done, that our little arrangement had been settled for good. But Althor's gaze told me nothing - his expression neutral, his eyes betraying no hint of the man he truly was. I nodded curtly and turned to continue on my way, trying to seem nonchalant despite the unease spreading through my chest.

Althor fell into step beside me, his long strides matching mine as we wove through the crowded streets. We walked in silence for a time, the only sound the patter of raindrops and the murmur of the city's nightlife. I couldn't help but think about Mael's words - what did he mean by 'the undertow'? Was it some sort of metaphor? Or was there something more sinister at play? The questions swirled in my mind, refusing to settle.

As we approached Kael Varn's manor, the grandeur of the building loomed above us. Torches flickered on either side of the entrance, casting eerie shadows on the walls. Althor pushed open the heavy door and gestured for me to precede him inside. I hesitated for a moment, my hand on the doorframe, but something propelled me forward - perhaps it was curiosity, or maybe it was just habit. I stepped into the foyer, the warmth of the hearth enveloping me like a shroud.

Inside, the manor's halls were aglow with candles and lanterns, casting an otherworldly light on the lavish tapestries that adorned the walls. Kael Varn stood at the far end of the hall, his back to me as he gazed out into the night through one of the tall windows. Althor nudged me forward, guiding me toward the lord's chambers. I felt a thrill of trepidation as I approached - what did Kael want? And was it worth the cost?

Kael turned as we entered his study, his eyes narrowing slightly as he took in my appearance. His gaze flickered to Althor and back to me, a hint of curiosity dancing across his features. "Vedrik," he said, his voice like silk over steel. "I see you received Mael's message." He nodded curtly toward the chair beside him, inviting me to sit. I hesitated for a moment before lowering myself into the offered seat, my eyes locked on Kael's as he resumed his own.

"What do you want?" I asked bluntly, cutting through the pleasantries. Kael leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers together as he regarded me with an unnerving intensity. "I think it's time we discussed your... extracurricular activities," he said, a

smile playing on his lips. My gut twisted into knots – what did he know? And how much was I willing to reveal in return for whatever favor he might grant?

The flames in the fireplace cast a warm glow on Kael's face, but his eyes remained cold as he leaned forward, his voice taking on a low, urgent tone. "I know what you've been doing, Vedrik. I know about your little... arrangements with Mael." He paused, studying me intently, and for an instant, I wondered if I'd misread the situation entirely – perhaps Kael was here to expose my involvement with the Red Vipers, to use it as leverage against me.

But something in his expression told me otherwise. This was personal. "I've made my own arrangements, Vedrik," he said quietly. "Arrangements that require your... particular set of skills." His eyes seemed to bore into mine, searching for any sign of hesitation or doubt, but I held firm, my face impassive. Kael's gaze flickered with a hint of curiosity, as if he were weighing the worth of using me against my own interests. Althor shifted his weight, his hand on the hilt of his sword – a subtle reminder that I was trapped in this room, subject to Kael's whims.

The silence between us grew heavy, weighed down by the unspoken terms of whatever bargain Kael proposed. I sensed there was more at play here than mere convenience or mutual benefit; this was a transaction of favors and debts, each of us aware of the hidden costs. "Tell me, Vedrik," Kael said, his voice softening into a purr, "are you willing to learn what I have in mind?" The words hung in the air like a promise or a threat – both enticing and repellent at the same time.

Tags: Unseen Tides, Weight of Sins, The Broken Writ