

GHOSTS IN THE WALLS OF THORN KEY

Black

Ghosts in the Walls of Thorn Key

Kael Varn's boots scraped against the cold stone floor as he climbed the narrow stairway, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. The air was heavy with the scent of old incense and damp earth. He had been summoned by the High Curator of Thorn Key, and the summons carried weight - even for someone like Kael.

Upon reaching the designated landing, a young Knight of the Order stood guard outside a door adorned with the symbol of House Veylan. The emblem depicted an eagle in flight, its talons grasping a rose. "You're cleared to enter," the knight said, voice firm but eyes flicking towards the surrounding shadows.

Kael pushed open the door and stepped into a spacious chamber filled with rows of ancient shelves and the soft hum of whispering orbs. The High Curator sat behind a polished wooden desk, an elegant woman with skin as pale as the stone walls and hair like black silk. She rose to greet him.

"Kael Varn," she said, her voice laced with warmth but firm as steel. "I've brought you here for...a particular concern."

A small girl, no more than ten winters old, stood beside her, eyes wide and frightened. The child's presence was the first indication that this meeting would not be about politics or diplomacy.

"A soul is lost," the High Curator continued. "One of our own, a novice in training within Thorn Key. Her name is Eliana, and she has been seen entering the walls of the manor - alone."

Kael's expression turned grim; he had dealt with such instances before. "Show me."

The girl led him through winding corridors and narrow stairways that twisted into the depths of the manor, her small hand clasped tightly in Kael's. They passed beneath ornate tapestries depicting scenes from the stories of old: battles won, heroes fallen.

As they walked, the air thickened with the stench of decay and rot. A faint whispering - a keening presence - echoed through the walls. It pulled at Kael like a call to something deep within him. His fingers instinctively rose to the silver pendant at his throat; an unspoken reminder that this was not his first dance with the restless dead.

They stopped before a door hidden behind an intricately carved wooden panel, adorned with small, rusted hinges shaped like serpents. Eliana hesitated, then nodded, and Kael pushed open the door.

Inside, the air clung to him like a damp shroud. A lone figure sat cross-legged on the stone floor, surrounded by candlelight that seemed reluctant to touch her face. Her eyes were dark pits where life had been extinguished – or perhaps snuffed out before it could bloom. Kael's gut twisted with the familiar weight of loss.

"Who is she?" he asked softly.

The High Curator replied from behind him, "One of our students. She died a fortnight ago, but her spirit...refuses to leave."

Eliana slipped closer, eyes wide with wonder and fear. Kael sensed the presence coalescing around them – whispers growing louder, a tide of forgotten memories that sought release.

Kael closed his eyes, focusing on the threads of memory and energy he had learned to track in such situations. He took a deep breath, letting the stench of decay fill him as he reached out with a tentative probe. The cost was immediate: his mind reeled with images from Eliana's short life – a bright smile, playing in sunlight, chasing after a ball.

A whisper echoed through the walls, like a sigh. Kael focused harder, pouring himself into the threads of sorrow and rage that had bound Eliana to this place. Slowly, he began to unravel them, carefully plucking at memories until they were no longer held by her presence in the manor.

The whispers ceased; the candlelight on the floor seemed brighter now. The girl who sat cross-legged slumped forward, limp. Kael reached out and gently brushed back a strand of hair from her forehead. She was cold to the touch.

"We should return her," he suggested quietly.

As they walked back through the corridors, Eliana did not look up, but her pace increased, as if drawn by an unseen force. The High Curator nodded once in approval; for some time, none spoke a word.

At the door of Thorn Key, the High Curator offered Kael a small box from her desk drawer – sealed with House Veylan's emblem. "A token of our appreciation," she said, eyes flicking towards the shadows. "May it be a reminder of your...work."

Kael took the box and the girl's hand again, stepping into the light beyond Thorn Key's gates. In the cool evening air, he broke open the seal on the box – revealing a small silver pin in the shape of an eagle holding a rose.

His specialty is subtle correction.

The pin's weight in his palm was a reminder of the debt he now owed House Veylan, though its value went beyond mere metal and craftsmanship. As he held Eliana's hand, Kael felt the familiar tug of fatigue seep into his bones – a cost he paid for each soul freed from the manor's grasp.

They stepped back into the town, its wooden buildings darkened against the stars. The evening air was heavy with the scent of rain, and the wind carried the distant sound of laughter and music. For a moment, Kael forgot about the High Curator's words and the weight of his duties. The world outside seemed to be living, breathing, and free.

Eliana pulled her hand from his, gazing up at him with eyes that were both haunted and curious. "What was she like?" she asked, voice barely above a whisper. Kael hesitated, unsure how much to reveal – or whether he should reveal anything at all. The girl's eyes were still wide open, but they seemed older now, as if the weight of her own mortality had been thrust upon her.

The High Curator had said nothing about Eliana's presence in the meeting, and Kael had not pressed for answers. He wondered if she was a mere pawn in some larger game, or something more significant. "She was just a girl," he said finally, opting for simplicity. "A child with a life cut short." The words seemed inadequate, but Eliana's gaze did not waver.

Kael offered her a small smile – a poor attempt to reassure her – and they continued through the winding streets of Thorn Key. As they walked, the silence between them deepened, like a current he could feel beneath the surface of the air. He sensed that there was more to Eliana's story, but for now, she kept it locked within.

Their path led them past a cluster of vendors selling their wares by the light of lanterns and hearthfires. Kael bought a small piece of bread from a vendor, handing it to Eliana as he bit into his own – the taste a brief comfort in the darkness gathering around him. The girl took a small bite, her eyes never leaving his face.

They walked on, lost in their own thoughts, until they reached the edge of town. The High Curator's summons had been clear: Kael was to investigate the cause of Eliana's presence and find the reason for the lost novice's attachment to the manor. He had a name now – Eliana – but no answers. The darkness that seeped into his bones as he worked only deepened, like a promise unkept.

As they emerged from the town, Kael realized Eliana was walking him back towards Thorn Key, not away. His hand instinctively tightened around the silver pin in his pocket. He had expected her to flee or cry, but instead, she seemed drawn to the very place he had freed her from. "Why?" he asked softly, feeling a thread of unease tug at his heart.

Eliana's eyes drifted towards the dark shape of Thorn Key on the hill above them - its windows like empty sockets staring back. For a moment, Kael thought he saw something flicker within their depths, a light or a spark that seemed almost...familiar. He squinted, as if trying to see it clearly, but it vanished.

"I want to know what she was doing here," Eliana said finally, her voice steady but with an undercurrent of something more complex - a hint of resolve or perhaps even purpose.

They walked up the winding path to Thorn Key, the darkness swallowing their footsteps. Kael's hand absently went to the silver pin in his pocket, a habit born from years of dealing with the restless dead. He felt Eliana's eyes on him, but he didn't meet her gaze, lost in thought.

As they climbed higher, the air grew thick with the scent of damp earth and decay. The windows of Thorn Key seemed to loom over them now, like empty eyes watching their every step. Kael's skin prickled beneath the collar of his cloak, the familiar sensation of being observed by unseen forces. Eliana quickened her pace, as if drawn by an unseen thread.

The High Curator was waiting for them in the courtyard, a figure silhouetted against the faint moonlight. She beckoned them forward with an open hand, but Kael's attention lingered on the windows above, half-expecting to see some sign of movement or life within their empty sockets. The thought sent a shiver down his spine - memories he'd rather not recall. He shook off the feeling and followed Eliana towards the High Curator.

"You've been quiet since our return," she said, her voice like a gentle breeze on a summer's day. "Have you uncovered anything?" Kael's eyes narrowed, though his mind was still wrestling with the sense of being watched. "I freed her spirit," he replied, jerking his chin towards Eliana, who stood motionless beside him. "But I sense there's more to this." The High Curator's gaze flicked to Eliana, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a flicker of something like curiosity.

"Ah, yes - our young novice," she said finally. "Eliana is indeed one of our most promising students. Her...gifts are considerable." Kael raised an eyebrow, the word 'gifts' making him wary. What kind of gifts could this child possess that would make her so valuable to the High Curator? The question hung between them like a challenge.

"We'd like you to investigate further," she said, her tone turning practical. "Delve into Eliana's past, see if you can uncover why she became attached to the manor." Kael hesitated, unsure what lay beneath the surface of this task - or whether he wanted to become entangled in the High Curator's schemes.

As Eliana stepped forward, her gaze locked onto the High Curator's face, Kael sensed a subtle shift in the air around them – as if the shadows themselves were leaning in to listen. He had seen this before, the way people with power wove their words and silences into a complex dance of trust and obedience. The High Curator's eyes, however, seemed to hold a deeper truth, one that Kael couldn't quite decipher.

"Gifts," he repeated, his voice firm. "What kind of gifts?" His eyes narrowed as he searched the courtyard, half-expecting to see some subtle sign of enchantment at play – but there was nothing. The High Curator's smile was serene, like a mask that had been worn for too long. "Ah, nothing sinister," she said, her voice light.

"Merely...talents. A certain aptitude for the Order's work." Kael's mind whirled with questions – what kind of talents? How did they manifest? And why was Eliana so bound to Thorn Key?

The High Curator turned to Eliana, her expression softening. "Eliana, dear child, it seems our visitor has some concerns. Would you like to explain?" The girl's eyes flicked towards Kael, then back to the High Curator, before she spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. "I don't remember much," she said. "Not about my life before Thorn Key. Only...dreams." Kael felt a spark of recognition – the same sense he'd experienced when speaking with the restless dead. This was not just some child's innocent confusion; Eliana's memories were missing, lost to something or someone. The High Curator's expression turned sympathetic, but her words dripped with an undercurrent of calculation. "We'll help you recover those memories, Eliana. Together, we will."

The High Curator's words hung in the air like a promise, but Kael sensed an underlying intent, one that had nothing to do with genuinely helping Eliana recover her memories. He watched as the girl's eyes dropped, her small frame seeming to shrink under the weight of unspoken expectations. He stepped forward, his voice firm. "I'll need access to the records," he said, his eyes locked on the High Curator.

She raised an eyebrow, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Of course, Kael. I'll have our archivist prepare them for you." Her gaze flicked to Eliana, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a flicker of something like warning. "I'm sure it will be enlightening for all of us," she said, her voice dripping with honey. The air seemed to vibrate with tension as the High Curator's words hung in the balance, waiting to be interpreted.

Eliana's eyes darted towards Kael, and he could sense a plea hidden beneath their surface. He offered her a reassuring smile, though his mind was racing with questions. What secrets lay hidden within the manor's walls? And what did Eliana's memories hold that was worth uncovering? As they turned to leave, Kael noticed the courtyard seemed to be growing darker, as if night itself was creeping in to take over. He glanced up at the windows of Thorn Key, half-expecting to see some sign of movement, but there was nothing.

The walk back to the High Curator's chambers felt like a journey through a dream, Kael's thoughts tangled with questions and doubts. Eliana trailed behind him, her silence a palpable thing that he could almost touch. He slowed his pace, letting her catch up. "What do you remember of your life before Thorn Key?" he asked, his voice low. Her eyes darted towards the High Curator's chambers, as if seeking permission to speak.

Eliana's gaze fell back to Kael, and for a moment, he thought he saw something flicker in their depths - a glimmer of memory or perhaps even fear. "Just...dreams," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rustling of leaves in the courtyard. The darkness seemed to press in closer, as if listening to their conversation. Kael's hand went to the silver pin in his pocket, a habit born from years of dealing with the restless dead.

As they entered the High Curator's chambers, the air was thick with the scent of old books and dust. Eliana's eyes roamed the room, her gaze lingering on the shelves that lined the walls, stacked high with tomes bound in leather and adorned with intricate symbols. Kael watched as she reached out a small hand, her fingers brushing against the spine of one book before falling away. The High Curator smiled, her eyes glinting with a warmth that seemed almost genuine.

"Ah, Eliana has always had a fondness for our library," she said, her voice dripping with affection. Kael's gaze narrowed, sensing a hidden depth to the High Curator's words. Was this some attempt to draw Eliana in further? Or was it something more - a hint at a deeper connection between the girl and the manor itself? He pushed aside his doubts, focusing on the task at hand.

The High Curator gestured towards a small table in the corner of the room, where a single candle flickered, casting eerie shadows on the walls. "Our archivist will bring you the records," she said. "In the meantime, I suggest you begin by speaking with Eliana's mentor - Brother Edwin. He may be able to shed some light on her...gifts." Kael nodded, his mind racing with possibilities. But as he turned towards Eliana, he caught sight of something that made his blood run cold - a symbol etched into the wall, just above the girl's head. It was an emblem he knew all too well, one associated with a dark and forbidden art.

The High Curator's eyes never wavered from his, but Kael sensed a flicker of something like curiosity behind them. He took a step closer to Eliana, his gaze fixed on the symbol etched into the wall. "What does this mean?" he asked, his voice low and even. The air in the room seemed to thicken, as if the shadows themselves were holding their breath.

Eliana's eyes flickered towards the mark, her face pale. The High Curator's smile never wavered, but her eyes darted towards Kael with a hint of warning. "I'm not

familiar with that symbol," she said, her voice light, yet laced with an undercurrent of unease. Kael narrowed his gaze, sensing a thread of dishonesty in her words.

He turned to Eliana, his eyes searching hers for any sign of recognition or fear. But the girl's expression was calm, almost serene. "It means...nothing," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael's gut twisted with unease; he'd seen that symbol before, in the forbidden texts he'd encountered during his own...rehabilitation. It marked the practitioner of a dark and ancient art - one that manipulated the very fabric of memory and identity.

The High Curator's eyes locked onto Eliana, her gaze intense. "I think it's time for you to speak with Brother Edwin," she said, her voice firm but tinged with a hint of unease. Kael sensed a thread of panic beneath her words, as if she was trying to cover something up.

He nodded, his mind racing with possibilities. The symbol on the wall told him that Eliana's memories were more than just forgotten - they were hidden, locked away by some dark and ancient power. And he had a feeling that Brother Edwin might be at the center of it all.

The High Curator gestured towards the door, her eyes never leaving Eliana's face. "I'll send someone to escort you," she said, her voice firm but polite. Kael nodded, his hand on the silver pin in his pocket, as if seeking comfort from a familiar object. He watched as Eliana trailed behind him, her eyes fixed on the floor, as if searching for something lost.

As they left the High Curator's chambers, Kael couldn't shake the feeling that he was walking into a web of secrets and lies. The symbol on the wall seemed to haunt him, a constant reminder of the darkness he'd thought he'd left behind in his own past.

The darkness outside seemed to swallow them whole as they stepped into the courtyard, the air thickening with an almost palpable sense of foreboding. Kael's hand instinctively went to his pocket, his fingers closing around the silver pin like a lifeline. Eliana trailed behind him, her eyes fixed on the ground as if trying to avoid the shadows themselves.

They made their way through the winding corridors of Thorn Key, the silence between them growing more oppressive with each step. Kael couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, and his gaze darted towards the doorways and alcoves they passed, searching for some sign of movement or life. But the manor seemed empty, the only sound the soft creaking of old wood and stone.

As they walked, the air grew thick with incense, a scent that clung to Kael's skin like a shroud. He recognized it - myrrh, used in the darker rituals of his own past. The realization sent a shiver down his spine, and he quickened his pace, Eliana following

suit. They reached the door to Brother Edwin's quarters, its surface etched with intricate carvings that seemed to dance in the flickering candlelight.

The High Curator's words came back to him: _Brother Edwin may be able to shed some light on her...gifts_. Kael's gut twisted with unease – what did she mean by gifts? And why did he have a feeling that Brother Edwin was hiding something, even from the High Curator herself? He raised his hand, rapping three times on the door before pushing it open.

Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of burning incense and old parchment. A small fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows on the walls as Brother Edwin rose from his chair. His eyes were sunken, his skin sallow, but he smiled warmly as Eliana approached him. "Ah, child," he said, opening his arms for a hug.

Eliana's response was hesitant, her body stiff in Brother Edwin's grasp. Kael watched, his mind racing with possibilities – was she afraid of the old man? Or something more? As they pulled back, Brother Edwin's eyes flickered towards Kael, a hint of wariness dancing across his face before he composed himself.

"Ah, Kael," he said, his voice dripping with warmth. "I've been expecting you. The High Curator has told me all about your concerns regarding Eliana's... condition." He smiled again, this time to Kael, but the gesture seemed forced, and Kael sensed a tension beneath the surface.

Tags: Thorn Key, Corruption of Power, Forgotten Souls