

In Kael Varn's Shadow

Black

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Kael Varn stood motionless against the city wall, the flickering torches above him casting eerie shadows on the wet cobblestones. The streets of Erebo were always treacherous at night, but Kael was accustomed to the darkness. He had walked these shadows for years, ever since he'd first taken his order's vow.

A soft voice interrupted his reverie. "Kael Varn, you're late." A slender figure emerged from the alleyway opposite. Amaranth, a fellow Curator of the Black Rose Order, fell into step beside him. Her eyes scanned the rooftops, though she knew as well as Kael that their meeting was not chance.

They walked in silence, their footsteps echoing off the buildings until they reached the designated tavern. Inside, the air reeked of smoke and cheap perfume. The patrons were a mix of locals and travelers; all of whom seemed to be keeping to themselves, wary of outsiders. Amaranth spotted their contact – a hooded figure sitting alone at the bar – and nudged Kael forward.

The figure raised its head as they approached. For an instant, their eyes locked. "Gorvoth," Amaranth said, her voice barely audible over the din of the tavern.

Gorvoth nodded curtly. "Curators. I have information about a shipment headed for Ashen Roads."

Kael signaled to the barkeep, ordering three drinks in silence. Gorvoth continued, its low voice drawing out the words: "It's a small convoy, mostly local traders with some... other cargo. They expect to pass through the Broken Writ within a fortnight."

Amaranth's eyes narrowed. "What makes this shipment of interest?"

"A symbol," Gorvoth replied, the hood dipping lower. "The Nightforge crest – in plain view on each wagon. It seems the sovereign has decided to send a... gesture to the Nightforged people."

Kael's expression was neutral as he raised his drink, its contents sloshing against the rim of the mug. The taste of cheap ale lingered on his tongue.

Amaranth leaned back in her chair, eyes fixed on the hood's edge. "You know what this might be about, Gorvoth."

"No," the figure said quietly. "I only brought it to your attention. You'll have to decide how to proceed, Curators."

The ale was bitter. Kael set his mug down, the clink against the table resonating through the air as he stood. "We need more information. Gorvoth, can you arrange an introduction?"

Gorvoth's nod was almost imperceptible before it vanished into the night, leaving Amaranth and Kael to their thoughts.

Their meeting had lasted mere minutes, yet in that time, a weight settled upon them – a consequence they knew would not be resolved so easily. As they left the tavern, shadows swallowing the patrons once more, Amaranth glanced up at Kael.

"Kael?" she said softly.

He hesitated before responding, his voice measured: "We proceed with care, Amaranth. The Nightforged have a long memory."

And so did he, one which whispered of blood spilled in secret, of whispers unspoken and shadows walked.

As they walked away from the tavern, Kael's thoughts turned to the Nightforged, their city a labyrinth of half-abandoned streets and crumbling architecture, where moonlight struggled to penetrate the heavy clouds that shrouded Ashen Roads. He had never been there, but the stories he'd heard spoke of its eerie silence, of buildings overgrown with ivy, and fountains dry as bone. The Nightforged were a reclusive people, wary of outsiders, and their treatment of visitors was a whispered legend among the Curators.

Amaranth kept pace beside him, her steps quick and purposeful, but her eyes cast about the streets as if expecting something to leap from the shadows. Kael's attention remained on the task ahead, weighing the information Gorvoth had given them – the symbol of the Nightforge crest, emblazoned on the side of each wagon. It was more than a simple gesture; it was a challenge, one that spoke to a deeper issue between the sovereign and the Nightforged people.

At a crossroads ahead, Amaranth slowed, glancing up at Kael before turning into a narrower alleyway. He followed, his eyes scanning the rooftops, but the shadows seemed quiet tonight. In another life, he would have called in favors, gathering more information on the convoy's cargo and its destination within Ashen Roads. But the Curators' methods had changed; they'd learned that sometimes, less knowledge was a safer path.

They arrived at a nondescript door, its wood worn by time and weather, the symbol of a crescent moon etched into the lintel above it. Amaranth produced a small key and

opened the door, stepping inside as Kael followed. The air within was stale, with an undertone of lavender, and a narrow stairway led down into darkness.

"Welcome to our humble abode," Amaranth said, her voice low as she began descending. "We'll discuss what Gorvoth told us – and how we can use that information without putting the convoy on high alert."

Kael closed the door behind them, the sound of the latch echoing off the walls as he followed Amaranth down into the dimly lit stairway. The air grew thick with the scent of old books and stale candle wax as they descended deeper into the earth. A single flame cast a warm glow on the pages of a large tome lying open on a nearby workbench, its words dancing in the flickering light.

The room below was cluttered with papers, maps, and scattered notes, each scribbled in hasty handwriting. Amaranth settled onto a narrow stool behind the workbench, gesturing for Kael to do the same. "Let's go over what we know," she said, her voice soft but focused. "The convoy carries the Nightforge crest on every wagon – it's not just a symbol; it's an invitation." She pointed to a map spread out before them, several wagons marked with a crude 'N' in red ink. "Their route passes through the Broken Writ, a stretch of land claimed by neither Ashen Roads nor Erebo."

Kael's gaze drifted from the map to Amaranth's face. The concern etched on her features told him she'd already connected the dots – just as he had. "This is more than a simple gesture," he said, his voice low and measured. "The sovereign's involved in some way."

The flame on the workbench cast a warm glow over Amaranth's face, illuminating the creases of concern etched between her brows. Kael's eyes lingered there for an instant before moving to the map, his mind working through the implications. The Broken Writ was no-man's land – a lawless stretch of terrain where bandits and outlaws roamed free. If the convoy carrying the Nightforge crest passed through there, it would be vulnerable to attack.

"What do we know about the cargo?" Kael asked, his voice low as he studied the map. Amaranth's eyes flicked to a nearby note scrawled on a piece of parchment, her brow furrowing. "We have a list of the traders involved – all locals, most with some reputation for being... cautious." She tapped the map, pointing out several marked locations. "The convoy's route takes them through a series of checkpoints, but once they reach the Broken Writ, it's open range."

Kael's gaze lingered on the marks indicating these checkpoints, his mind ticking over the possibilities. Each stop was an opportunity for the convoy to be ambushed or, more subtly, compromised. He'd need to send word to the various factions operating in the area – the Black Viper clan, perhaps, or the Red Hand – to keep a watchful eye out for any signs of trouble. The thought of negotiating with these rough outfits made

his stomach twist; they were as untrustworthy as the nobles he usually dealt with.

Amaranth's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Kael, I've been thinking... if we're right about this being more than just a simple gesture, there's only one way to be certain." Her eyes met his, a thread of determination in their depths. "We need someone inside the convoy."

The flame on the workbench cast eerie shadows on the walls as Kael's gaze turned to Amaranth, his expression unreadable. It was a high-risk plan – one that would require them to find and insert an agent into the convoy before it reached Ashen Roads. He'd have to weigh the pros against the cons, though he knew as well as she did what it meant: if they succeeded, it might be too late to stop whatever fate had been set in motion.

The silence between them stretched out like a thread pulled taut – until Amaranth broke it with a quiet "I'll take care of getting someone on board." Kael nodded curtly, already thinking ahead to the logistics and potential fallout. He'd need to prepare a cover story, something that would let their agent blend in without raising suspicion among the convoy's guards or the Nightforged themselves. But as he turned his thoughts back to Amaranth, he noticed her eyes had strayed from the task at hand – to the flame on the workbench.

The flickering shadows seemed to be taking hold of her, casting a subtle, unholy glow over her face. Kael's gut tightened; Amaranth was not one to look for signs or portents. It was time to send word to the Curators in Erebo – to gather more information and coordinate their efforts, before it was too late.

Amaranth's hand rose, her fingers hovering above the flame as if drawn to it. Kael's instincts flared into warning, his eyes narrowing in alarm. He'd seen that look before – a hunger to transcend the boundaries between life and death, and the darkness beyond. She was too close; he knew it from the tension in her frame. "Amaranth," he said, his voice firm but controlled, no higher than a whisper.

She didn't flinch or pull back; instead, her eyes fixed on the flame as if mesmerized. The air around them grew heavy with an almost palpable anticipation, and Kael felt it then – a shiver along his spine, like a cold breeze on a winter's night. It was a moment he'd grown accustomed to reading in people, one that told him she teetered on the edge of crossing into unknown territory. He rose from the stool, the wooden floor creaking beneath his weight as he closed the distance between them.

"Amaranth, listen –" His hand brushed against hers, and for an instant, her fingers wrapped around his wrist like a vice before releasing him with a jerky motion. The flame danced higher on the workbench, casting eerie shadows that seemed to writhe like living things across the walls. Kael's heart picked up pace as he grasped her upper arm, the grip firm but gentle. "We need you focused," he said, his voice low and

urgent. Amaranth blinked once, twice, before turning away from the flame with a slow, deliberate movement.

As she turned back to him, her eyes seemed clearer – no longer drawn into the abyss. Kael's hand lingered on her arm for an instant, before releasing it. They both knew that moment could have gone either way; now was not the time to push his luck. He took a deep breath, trying to clear the tension from his voice. "We need you sharp," he repeated, this time with more conviction. "Let's focus on getting our agent in place."

Amaranth nodded once, her expression calm but wary. She leaned against the edge of the workbench, her eyes never leaving Kael's face. For a few moments, they simply breathed together – Kael aware that he'd held back a precipice from opening wide enough to swallow them both. "The question is," Amaranth began, her voice steady but laced with a hint of reluctance, "who are we sending in?"

The silence between them stretched out, heavy with unspoken possibilities, as Amaranth's eyes searched Kael's face for a spark of inspiration. Kael's gaze drifted to the map spread out on the workbench, his mind racing through the faces they'd worked with in the past – names that had become almost second-nature to him: Arin the Scribe, Elwynn the enforcer, and the quiet, unassuming Jax Blackwood. But none of those names seemed fitting for this task, and Amaranth's eyes would tell her if he suggested one without thinking it through.

"Aurora," she said finally, breaking the silence with a name that took Kael aback. He raised an eyebrow, his mind racing to understand how she'd come to think of their newest recruit. "Aurora Nightwalker?" Amaranth nodded, her jaw set in determination. "She's been with us for months now – quiet, resourceful, and has a background in... persuasion." Kael's eyes narrowed; it was true that Aurora had a reputation for extracting information without being asked, but he hadn't thought of sending her on a job this high-stakes.

"Persuasion" was Amaranth's polite way of saying "coerced by magic". Kael's gut twisted at the thought of using their newest recruit in such a way; Aurora had been working with them under her own terms, not as a means to an end. He knew that look in his eye, and the weight of responsibility on Amaranth's shoulders would be crushing soon if she didn't learn to temper her ambition. "We can't use her for this," he said firmly, shaking his head.

Amaranth's eyes flashed with a hint of frustration, but Kael stood firm; it was too high-risk for Aurora. He needed someone more... expendable. He let his gaze drift back to the map, his mind racing through possibilities until one name stuck out – Arin the Scribe, who'd been quiet and still in the corner during their last meeting. His eyes met Amaranth's as a plan began to take shape. "We'll send Arin," he said, making it a

statement rather than an invitation for discussion.

Amaranth's face remained neutral, but Kael detected a flicker of doubt behind her eyes – and something more: a calculating weight that made him wonder if he'd misjudged her entirely.

Amaranth's eyes lingered on Kael, her expression a map of calculated thought as she seemed to weigh his decision. "Arin," she repeated, her voice flat. Kael nodded once, his jaw clenched in anticipation of a counterargument he knew would be forthcoming.

"We can't afford to waste Arin," Amaranth continued, her words dripping with an undercurrent of urgency. "You know as well as I do that this is more than just a simple gesture – it's a risk with the potential for catastrophic consequences. If we don't get inside and verify what's going on, who knows what kind of destruction they'll unleash?" Kael met her gaze, his eyes locked onto hers like an anchor, and held firm. He'd expected this reaction from Amaranth; he just hadn't anticipated how tenaciously she'd hold to it.

A faint flush crept up her neck as the silence stretched between them – a tiny crack in her façade that told Kael they'd crossed into uncharted territory. "We can't afford to waste anything," Amaranth spat, her voice rising, "not now when everything is falling apart." She turned from him, striding across the room with an energy that seemed almost desperate. "You want to play it safe? Send in a novice and be done with it. I'm not the one who's going to second-guess myself out of a position of power, Kael."

Her words echoed off the walls as she stopped at the door, her hand grasping the handle like a lifeline. For an instant, her eyes flashed back to him – an unspoken challenge – before she spun on her heel and vanished into the night outside.

Kael took a deep breath, letting the stillness settle over him like a shroud. The darkness beyond the windows seemed to press in closer, as if the shadows themselves were listening for his next move. He let out a slow exhale, weighing the risk of failure against the danger of pushing Amaranth too far. In this dance with fate, there'd come a point where he'd have to pick which direction to take – and it seemed they'd reached that moment.

The night air outside seemed heavy as he stepped into it, the sound of distant city life muffled beneath the weight of his boots on the cold cobblestones. The streets were almost deserted at this hour; Kael navigated them with practiced ease, following Amaranth's path until he found himself standing before a nondescript door tucked between two larger shops. A flicker of candlelight spilled from within – and for an instant, Kael felt a twinge of unease at the thought that Amaranth had already moved ahead without him.

"Who is this?" a low voice said, and in the shadows beyond the flame-lit threshold stood a figure Kael hadn't expected to see: Arin the Scribe, her eyes narrowed into slivers of moonlight.

Arin's gaze was fixed on Kael, a mixture of wariness and curiosity etched across her face as she took in his presence outside her door. "I wasn't expecting you," she said, her voice low and neutral, though a hint of suspicion crept into the words.

Kael stepped forward, into the dimly lit space beyond the threshold. A single candle cast flickering shadows on the walls as he moved past Arin and into the room, his eyes adjusting to the subdued light. The air inside was heavy with the scent of old books and dust, and Kael's gaze fell upon a stack of parchment and quills scattered across a small desk in the corner. "I'm glad I caught you," he said, his tone easy as he turned back to Arin. "Amaranth wanted me to speak with you."

Arin's expression didn't change, but her eyes narrowed slightly as she folded her arms across her chest. "What does Amaranth want?" Kael watched a small muscle tick in Arin's jaw before she spoke again, this time with a hint of resignation. "She said it was about the job." Kael nodded once, his mind racing ahead to the task at hand. He knew that Amaranth had sent him here for a reason – not just to discuss the details of their plan, but also to keep Arin from asking too many questions.

"Amaranth wants you to accompany me," Kael said, watching as Arin's gaze flickered with surprise before she recovered. "Tonight," he added, his voice firm but matter-of-fact. "We'll be heading in a little while; it won't take long." Arin's eyes searched the room, as if seeking something to ground herself against the unspoken demand that lay between them. For an instant, Kael felt a pang of unease at the thought of pushing her into this – but he reminded himself that they didn't have time for debate. He needed someone with her skills; Amaranth had seen to it that Arin was their best bet.

The silence that followed was heavy and deliberate as Arin's eyes settled back on Kael, a slow nod working its way from her chin up to her forehead. "I'm in," she said finally, the words flat but resolute. A faint glimmer of something akin to acceptance flickered across her face before she turned away, disappearing into the shadows beyond the candlelight as if vanishing from sight.

Arin led Kael through narrow alleys, their footsteps echoing off crumbling brick walls as they navigated the winding streets of Valtoria's lower districts. The city was a maze of secrets and half-truths, where whispers spread like wildfire on the night breeze and shadows hid the faces of those who lurked within. Arin moved with an air of familiarity, her eyes scanning every corner as if searching for something she might have missed before.

As they turned onto the main street, Kael caught sight of Amaranth waiting by a large stone fountain, the water dancing in the moonlight like silver ribbons. She wore a

cloak clasped around her shoulders, its hood pulled back to reveal a face set in hard lines, her eyes fixed on something across the way. "Kael's come," Arin said quietly as she fell into step beside him, and Amaranth turned, her gaze meeting Kael's with an unreadable expression.

"You're not going alone," she stated flatly, though her words were directed more at Arin than Kael, who felt a surge of curiosity at the implied meaning. "We've got reason to believe there's more than one person involved in the disappearances," Amaranth said, her voice low and measured as if sharing a confidence. "And I don't trust any one person to handle it." Arin's eyes flicked from Amaranth to Kael before settling back on the other woman's face with a hint of understanding.

"Where are we headed?" Arin asked, her tone neutral but with an undertone that suggested she already knew the answer. "The old windmill on the eastern edge," Kael said, his eyes never leaving Amaranth's face as he spoke. "Rumors say it's been taken over by some sort of... enthusiast group." The words hung in the air like a challenge as Amaranth's eyes seemed to bore into Arin's very soul.

Arin's expression remained impassive, but Kael detected a flicker of unease beneath the surface. "What's the play?" she asked after a moment, her voice even but with an undercurrent of tension. Amaranth's gaze snapped back to hers as if seeking something - reassurance or confirmation, perhaps - before she turned away once more, disappearing into the shadows ahead.

Tags: Balance, Consequences, Weighed