

# In the Mirror's Hollow

Black

## The Shadows Within

Kael Varn moved through the Mirror's Hollow with an air of quiet purpose, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls as he descended into the heart of the ancient place. Few knew this hidden path existed, and fewer still had walked it in years. The silence was a balm to his soul, a respite from the weight of his duties as a Keeper of the Balance.

His gaze drifted over the intricate carvings that lined the walls – symbols of long-forgotten rituals, whispers of a time when the world was younger and the gods still whispered in mortal ears. He ran a hand over the rough stone, tracing the delicate patterns etched into its surface. It was a habit he'd developed, a way to connect with the past.

Ahead, the air grew thick with the scent of sandalwood and myrrh, carried on the faint hint of smoke from the distant city above. The smell transported Kael back to his early years as a Curator, serving under the patronage of Queen Everia herself. He had been tasked with uncovering secrets hidden within the ancient texts, deciphering the forgotten knowledge that lay scattered across the land.

As he turned a corner, the shadows deepened, and Kael felt the familiar tug of the Black Rose Order's presence. It was a subtle reminder of his own loyalties, of the price he'd paid for the privilege of walking in the night. A faint hum of dark magic still lingered on his skin, a lingering aftertaste that told him the cost of his recent endeavors.

He reached out with his senses, feeling the weight of memories within the Mirror's Hollow. There were secrets here, whispers of events long past and yet to come. The surface tension was low, but he detected the faint resonance of the Broken Writ – a subtle echo that spoke to him in hushed tones of warning.

The darkness seemed to coalesce around him, responding to his presence. Kael walked forward, hands extended before him like a ghostly silhouette. Shadows danced across the walls as he moved deeper into the heart of the Mirror's Hollow, where the secrets waited.

At the very center stood an ancient door, adorned with symbols that spoke of old wars and forgotten knowledge. The air around it vibrated with the power of the Black Rose

Order – a reminder of his own bond to the mysterious forces that ruled from beyond the veil. Kael's fingers trailed across the carvings as he whispered a single word, and the door swung open.

A shaft of dim light spilled out, casting long shadows across the room. He stepped forward, into the heart of the Mirror's Hollow, where secrets waited like ghosts in the darkness.

The air inside was heavy with dust, the scent of aged parchment clinging to every surface. Shelves upon shelves of ancient texts stretched towards the vaulted ceiling, their leather-bound spines cracked and worn from centuries of use. Kael wandered through the narrow aisles, running a finger over the spines as he searched for something specific – a text that mentioned the Broken Writ, or perhaps even the forgotten history of the Black Rose Order itself.

His hand halted on a particular volume, its cover embossed with a symbol that seemed to echo the markings on his own tattoo. The book was bound in a strange, dark wood that felt almost... wrong against his skin. He hesitated for a moment, feeling the familiar tug of caution, before carefully opening the cover. Yellowed pages crackled as he turned them, releasing a faint whisper of memories into the air. A map spread across the center pages, detailing a network of tunnels and hidden pathways that crisscrossed the city above.

Kael's gaze lingered on a particular section, marked with symbols he didn't recognize. The parchment seemed to shimmer, as if the ink was still fresh, despite being centuries old. He reached out, hesitating for a moment before touching the mark. A vision exploded in his mind – an image of a young woman, her eyes burning with a fierce determination as she walked the narrow corridors of the city's underbelly. The memory felt... familiar, like a long-forgotten echo.

His skin pricked with gooseflesh as he withdrew his hand from the book. The vision had left him feeling exposed, vulnerable to the weight of forgotten memories. Kael wondered how much more he would uncover, and what secrets lay hidden in these ancient texts – waiting for someone brave enough to disturb them.

He pushed the vision aside, focusing on the book's pages as his fingers instinctively began to scan the text once more. The symbols etched into the parchment seemed to shift, like leaves rustling in a breeze, revealing new secrets he hadn't noticed before. Kael's mind worked quickly to decipher their meaning, but the language was long forgotten – a relic of a time when the world spoke in tongues he couldn't understand.

A faint tremble ran through his fingers as the symbols began to take on a life of their own, glowing with an otherworldly light that cast flickering shadows across the shelves. He gritted his teeth, feeling the weight of magic build within him – a familiar sensation he'd grown accustomed to over the years, but never truly comfortable with.

Sweat beaded on his brow as he strained to focus, the symbols burning into his mind like embers. The Black Rose Order's power coursed through his veins, and with it, the price he paid: memories lost, secrets buried, and truths obscured.

A cold draft danced past his ankles, carrying whispers of ancient words and forgotten rituals. Kael shivered, despite himself, as the vision in the book began to take hold – a young woman walking alone, navigating narrow alleys that seemed to stretch on forever. He felt the weight of her footsteps, heavy with purpose, as she vanished into the city's depths. He saw the gleam in her eyes, and the conviction that drove her forward. Something about it stirred a long-dormant spark within him – an echo he couldn't quite grasp.

The vision dissipated, leaving Kael shaken and his mind racing. He took a deep breath, trying to clear the haze from his thoughts. His fingers released their hold on the book, letting it drop with a soft thud onto the dusty shelf. The silence was oppressive, heavy with secrets waiting to be unearthed. Kael felt the weight of his own responsibility settle upon him like a mantle – a duty he'd accepted long ago, though its terms had changed since that day in the Queen's chambers. He knew now what lay within these texts: echoes of lives lived and lost, memories he was bound to uncover.

A faint memory tickled at the edges of his mind – a conversation with an old Curator, discussing the price paid by those who delved too deep into the past. "The weight of remembering," the old man had said, his voice low and grave. "It'll consume you, Kael. Secrets have a way of devouring souls." He pushed the recollection aside, focusing on the task at hand. The woman in his vision – who was she? What secrets did the texts hold that he'd yet to uncover? And what lay hidden in the city's underbelly, waiting for him to find it?

Kael straightened, running a hand through his hair as he tried to clear his head. He had no intention of delving deeper into the memories, not now, not yet. The visions were already beginning to blur at the edges, and the shadows in the room seemed to be shifting, growing restless. The city's secrets would have to wait – for now, he had a duty to fulfill. With a deep breath, Kael turned away from the shelves, his footsteps echoing as he made his way back through the winding passages towards the door.

The air outside was heavy with the scent of smoke and baking bread. Night was falling over the city above, and the sounds of its inhabitants grew more pronounced – whispers in alleys, muffled laughter from taverns, and the distant clang of hammers on metal. Kael emerged into the cool night air, his eyes adjusting slowly to the faint moonlight that filtered through the narrow openings high above. The Mirror's Hollow receded behind him as he stepped out into the shadows, carrying with him a sense of purpose and a growing unease.

As he walked through the winding alleys, Kael felt the city's pulse quicken beneath his feet – each beat a reminder of the lives lived, loved, and lost. He navigated the narrow passages, avoiding torches that cast flickering shadows on the walls, trying to make sense of what lay before him. Memories still lingered in the back of his mind, teasing him like whispers from an old lover's caress. With each step, he felt the Black Rose Order's weight grow heavier within him – a reminder that the price he'd paid for this knowledge would soon be called upon.

He slowed to a stop before a door with a worn iron knocker in the shape of a lion's head. The mark etched into its surface told him it was his destination: the lodgings of Elara Vex, an old... acquaintance who might shed light on some of the secrets he'd uncovered in the Mirror's Hollow. Kael raised his hand, hesitating for a moment before rapping three quick knocks that echoed through the night.

The door creaked open, a warm golden light spilling out into the darkness. Elara Vex stood in the entrance, her eyes narrowing as she took in Kael's disheveled appearance. A faint smile played on her lips as she stepped aside, allowing him to enter.

"Kael, darling," she said, her voice husky from years of late nights and smoke-filled rooms. "I didn't expect you so soon." She led him through the narrow hallways, the air thick with the scent of incense and old books. The lodgings were a labyrinth of secrets and half-truths, each whispered conversation and hidden glance revealing a piece of Elara's character.

Kael followed her into a cozy room filled with plush armchairs and a fire crackling in the hearth. The walls were lined with shelves, groaning under the weight of ancient tomes and curiosities. Elara gestured for him to sit, pouring a glass of wine as she settled into a chair across from him.

"What secrets have you unearthed tonight?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. Kael hesitated, unsure how much to reveal – old habits died hard, and he'd learned the value of caution over the years. "The Mirror's Hollow," he said finally, his voice low, as if the words themselves might echo in the silence.

Elara's gaze sharpened, her fingers drumming a staccato beat on the armrest. "You've delved deep into the texts, I see." She leaned forward, her eyes glinting with a mixture of excitement and wariness. "Tell me, Kael – what did you find?" The words spilled out in a rush, tumbling from his lips like autumn leaves before the wind: visions of a young woman, a network of tunnels beneath the city, and symbols that whispered secrets in the darkness.

Elara listened intently, her expression unreadable. When he finished, she sat back, her eyes narrowing as if pondering a puzzle. "The woman," she said finally, her voice low and measured. "You're certain it was her?" Kael nodded, the memory still fresh in his

mind. Elara's gaze dropped to the floor, a faint tremble running through her fingers.

"It's possible," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "The Order's records mention a young woman... Arianna, I think. A scholar of some renown, who disappeared during the Great Conflagration." Kael's eyes snapped to hers, a spark of recognition igniting within him. "Arianna," he repeated, the name echoing through his mind like a long-forgotten melody.

Elara's gaze rose to meet his, her expression guarded. "What do you know of her?" The question hung in the air like a challenge, as Kael struggled to piece together the fragments of memory and half-truths.

As Kael spoke, his words spilling out in a rush of excitement and curiosity, Elara's expression shifted, her eyes clouding over like a summer sky before a storm. "I knew her," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "We... studied together, for a time." The admission hung in the air, charged with a mixture of emotions - nostalgia, regret, and something else, something darker.

"Arianna was brilliant," Elara continued, her gaze drifting away from Kael's. "She had a way of seeing the world that few others could match. But she was also... fragile." The word hung in the air like a challenge, as if daring Kael to fill in the blank. He felt a shiver run down his spine as Elara's eyes snapped back to his, her pupils dilating in the firelight. "You have to be careful, Kael," she said, her voice low and urgent. "The Order's secrets are not for the faint of heart."

Kael leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his mind racing with questions. What secrets had Arianna uncovered that led to her disappearance? And what did Elara know about the Mirror's Hollow, about the symbols etched into its walls? He pressed on, asking his questions in a steady stream, but Elara's responses were measured and guarded, like a master weaver carefully controlling the threads of a tapestry. The night wore on, the fire burning low as they spoke, their words dancing with an undercurrent of tension.

As the clock struck midnight, Kael finally stood to leave, the weight of his weariness settling upon him like a mantle. Elara walked him to the door, her hand on his arm a gentle touch that sent a shiver through his chest. "Be careful, Kael," she whispered, her breath warm against his ear. "The Order's secrets have teeth." He nodded, feeling a weight settle within him, as if he'd been handed a fragment of a puzzle with no clear picture in sight.

As he emerged into the night air, the city's sounds seemed muted and distant, like the echoes of a dream. Kael navigated the winding alleys, his mind reeling with questions and half-truths. He felt Elara's words echoing within him - "the Order's secrets are not for the faint of heart." The phrase repeated itself like a mantra, as he walked further into the night, the Mirror's Hollow receding behind him.

His footsteps carried him past rows of buildings, each one telling its own story of lives lived and lost. He felt the weight of Arianna's memory growing heavier within him, drawing him deeper into the heart of the city. The shadows seemed to grow darker, as if responding to his footsteps, like sentinels guarding secrets he was yet to uncover.

The night air clung to him like a damp shroud as Kael continued on, his mind whirling with the revelations of the evening. Elara's words hung in the balance, a constant reminder that he'd stepped into something much larger than himself. He navigated the winding alleys, his senses heightened, aware of every sound and shadow.

A figure emerged from the darkness ahead, their features indistinct until they drew closer - a young woman with skin as pale as the moon and hair as black as the night. She watched him approach with an unnerving intensity, her eyes seeming to bore into Kael's very soul. "Kael," she said, her voice low and husky, sending a shiver down his spine.

"You shouldn't be here," she continued, her words measured as she fell into step beside him. "Not after what you've discovered." Her pace quickened, drawing Kael along with her as they traversed the narrow alleys. The city seemed to have shrunk, its buildings looming over them like sentinels guarding secrets.

"You're a man of the Black Rose," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't think you'd be so... reckless." Kael's instincts prickled, sensing a threat in her tone. He flashed back to Elara's warning - "the Order's secrets are not for the faint of heart" - and wondered if he was walking into a trap.

The woman led him deeper into the city, their footsteps echoing off the buildings as they navigated a maze of narrow passageways. The air grew thick with the scent of decay and rot, a smell that clung to Kael like a miasma. He quickened his pace, sensing they were being herded towards some unknown destination.

"Who are you?" he asked finally, his voice firm, but the woman merely smiled, her eyes glinting in the dim light. "You'll know me soon enough," she said, her tone dripping with malice. Kael's grip on his dagger tightened as they turned a corner, revealing a small courtyard ahead - one that seemed to have been abandoned for years.

The silence was oppressive, broken only by the sound of scurrying rodents and the creaking of old wooden beams. In the center of the courtyard stood an ancient fountain, its waters dry and cracked, like the skin of some long-forgotten beast. Kael's eyes scanned the area, searching for any sign of danger - but his gaze kept returning to the woman beside him, her expression unreadable as a stone statue.

"You brought me here for a reason," he said finally, his patience wearing thin. The woman's smile grew wider, revealing teeth that seemed sharp enough to rend steel. "I

have a message for you, Kael," she said, her voice dripping with an unspoken menace.

The woman stepped forward, her movements fluid as a cat stalking prey, and stopped in front of the fountain. She raised a hand, her fingers tracing the intricate carvings on the stone basin. Kael's gaze followed, his mind racing with possibilities - what message could this mysterious woman bring that would require such secrecy? The carvings seemed to shimmer in the faint moonlight, like a key turning in a lock.

"You're searching for Arianna," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, yet it cut through the stillness like a knife. Kael's eyes snapped back to hers, his instincts on high alert. "You know something," he accused, his grip on his dagger tightening.

The woman's smile returned, her lips curving upwards like a ghostly crescent moon. "I've been waiting for you, Kael," she said, her voice dripping with an air of expectation. "Elara didn't tell you everything, did she?" The words hung in the air like a challenge, and for a moment, Kael's mind reeled, wondering how this woman knew Elara.

"You see, Arianna was... complicated," she continued, her eyes glinting with a knowing light. "She had a way of uncovering secrets that were meant to remain hidden." The words sent a shiver down Kael's spine as he remembered Elara's warnings about the Order's secrets. This woman's presence seemed to be a thread in a much larger tapestry, one that he was being pulled into whether he liked it or not.

"The Mirror's Hollow," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, "is only the beginning. Arianna discovered something that threatened the very foundations of this city." Kael's mind reeled as the implications hit him like a hammer blow - what could have been so important that it would be worth silencing Arianna? The woman's eyes seemed to bore into his soul, searching for something. "You're going to find out," she said finally, her voice dripping with an unspoken promise.

Tags: Dimming Age, Reflections Lost