

Shadows on the Throne

Black

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Kael Varn stepped off the carriage and onto the frost-kissed cobblestones of Nightforge, the imposing silhouette of the city's citadel looming before him. He wore his worn leather mask in place, a habit that seemed as much a part of him now as breathing.

"Your business here, Kael?" one of the city guards asked, eyeing his attire.

"I have an appointment with Her Majesty," he replied, not breaking stride towards the citadel.

A few passersby nodded in recognition or acknowledged his presence with quiet respect. Few knew what 'Kael Varn' really did – whispered speculations of 'a ghost hunter', 'a shadowed accountant', or 'an advocate for the forgotten' seemed as likely as the truth.

Upon entering the throne room, he recognized the Queen's private secretary, Tharros. A thin man with spectacles perched on the end of his nose, he looked relieved to see Kael and stepped forward to intercept him.

"Kael Varn, a pleasure, as always. The Queen is... occupied at the moment. She'd appreciate a word in private."

Their footsteps echoed through the chambers as they traversed to an adjacent study, where a fire crackled in the hearth. Books lined the shelves; each tome seemed to hold more than its weight in secrets.

The fire cast eerie shadows on the walls as Tharros poured two cups of tea from a silver pot on the sideboard. "She's concerned about the... situation with the Broken Writ."

Kael accepted a cup, inquiring softly, "Which part?"

"The recent disappearances in Melosdra. We've had no word from your people. Her Majesty fears it might be a test of our resolve – or something more sinister." Tharros' voice dropped to a whisper, eyes scanning the room before settling back on Kael.

A flicker of unease danced at the edge of Kael's perception. His gaze roamed the room, committing every detail to memory for possible future analysis. He took a sip of

tea, which felt bitter in his mouth, as if it had an aftertaste that he couldn't quite place.

"Your people," Kael repeated, leaning back in his chair. "I'll see what I can do."

Tharros nodded, pressing forward. "As you do, be discreet. There's more... the Queen is concerned about her own health. These last few months have taken a toll - fatigue, headaches... She believes someone may be siphoning the balance from around her."

Kael raised an eyebrow behind his mask. His ears tuned in to every whisper of the city beyond the fire's warmth; every sound told him nothing new.

"I see," he murmured, setting down his cup. "You know I won't speak of this outside these walls." A promise made without expectation of reward - only a debt to be repaid in fullness or silence.

As if sensing the gravity of their conversation, the fire seemed to dwindle, casting the room in shadows once more.

Outside, Kael navigated through alleys that led him towards Melosdra, guided by intuition rather than explicit instructions. He had always been a part of this world where balance was as easily upset as it was fragile. In this era of expansion, some secrets were too precious to share - even with those sworn to protect.

He walked into the night, toward darkneses where he found his home.

Hours later, Kael stood within an abandoned mansion on Melosdra's outskirts, a faint hum echoing through the halls from where someone had set up a ritual circle. There was no visible symbol for what they sought - just three black candles burning like embers of a fire long extinguished.

He slipped in unnoticed, his footsteps a mere echo of the night itself. One glance told him it was his specialty, not bloodshed, but correction: an equilibrium that had grown lopsided, needing rebalancing.

A woman stood at the center of the circle, her focus intently on the candles as if willing them to speak. When she noticed Kael's presence, a shiver ran down her spine - recognition or fear, he couldn't quite tell.

"You're... 'Kael Varn'," she stated, her voice carrying an air of accusation and unease.

He nodded once, still masked. "What are you doing here?"

She took a step back, eyes darting between the candles as if hoping to escape their power through will alone. "I'm trying to correct it. The balance. The Broken Writ is not just rumors or myth; it's truth - and I'm trying to restore what's been taken."

Kael approached her calmly, no change in his tone or demeanor betraying the storm that brewed inside. "How do you know this?" he asked softly.

She seemed hesitant but led him deeper into the circle, pointing to a small, intricately drawn symbol etched on the wall. It was an exact replica of the Black Rose sigil, used by the Order in secret rituals for the greater good – their own form of rebalancing.

"Someone has been taking... pieces," she explained. "Fragments of balance from various locations across Nightforge and Melosdra. The Broken Writ is just a term. I found it hidden within an ancient text."

He noticed her fingers trembled when mentioning the fragments, but there was also determination in her voice – something he recognized all too well.

"Who else knows about this?" Kael inquired.

"No one," she replied firmly. "I'm acting alone."

A heavy silence followed her words, punctuated by the steady burn of the candles and an air so heavy with anticipation it felt almost palpable.

"I need your help," she asked suddenly, reaching out.

Kael hesitated – loyalty to the Order was a double-edged sword that cut both ways. On one hand, his job required him to uphold balance; on the other, he had his oath to the Queen and, in some measure, to those under his care within the Nightforge citadel.

He thought of the tea in his stomach – its aftertaste now unmistakable as the burn of his own weariness. His silence was weighed against the cost of action.

A whisper of decision made him step back from the circle. "You're not taking this seriously enough," he said, then turned to leave.

The darkness outside felt less ominous with the sound of her footsteps behind him, but it also weighed heavier – for both of them had crossed a threshold into the unknown.

He navigated the night streets of Melosdra, unsure if he'd made a mistake by involving himself in this mysterious woman's affairs. The darkness seemed to swallow him whole as he traversed alleys and side streets, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Her words lingered: 'I'm acting alone.' A truth that carried its own weight, but what did it mean? Was she truly the only one aware of these 'fragments' being taken?

Kael's fingers instinctively drifted to the small pouch hidden beneath his cloak, containing a token from the Queen – a silver pin in the shape of an open book. It was a symbol of their understanding: she knew what he did and why; he understood her situation. He'd been sent to gather information on the Broken Writ, not to take action or investigate. The weight of his responsibilities hung heavy as he pondered whether this new development was something he should share with the Queen or keep hidden for now.

He stopped in front of a small, dingy tavern, deciding it would be an ideal place to lose himself in conversation and questions. His eyes scanned the interior – patrons huddled over mugs of ale, their faces obscured by shadows. A lone figure sat at the bar, hood raised. It was too early to tell if they were involved with this matter or merely another anonymous soul lost in the city's undertow.

As Kael slipped inside, the swinging door creaked shut behind him. He sidled up beside the hooded figure and called for a room, not bothering to introduce himself. The bartender nodded, moving to guide them upstairs. The air was thick with the smell of stale smoke and sweat; it clung to his clothes like a bad habit.

Once in their private room, Kael motioned the hooded figure to sit, pulling out a small pouch of gold coins from his cloak. He slid it across the table, voice low but firm. "If you know anything about the Broken Writ or someone siphoning balance, I'll pay triple this amount for information." The hooded individual's gaze flickered toward the coins before refocusing on Kael's face, hidden behind the familiar mask.

"I'm not looking for coin," they stated, voice low and gravelly. "I am, however, willing to trade knowledge – if you have something I need." Their eyes narrowed, a calculating glint in their gaze that sent a shiver down Kael's spine – he was being sized up, assessed for worth.

He leaned forward, the chair creaking beneath his weight. "What do you propose we exchange?"

The hooded figure leaned back in their chair, steepling their fingers together as if collecting their thoughts before speaking. "A... memory," they said finally, voice dripping with an air of deliberation. "I have a recollection from several years ago – one that could be relevant to your investigation." Kael's interest was piqued, his weariness momentarily forgotten in the face of potential information.

The hooded figure reached into their tunic and produced a small, intricately carved wooden box. They slid it across the table, opening it with a flick of the lid to reveal a yellowed parchment inside. "This was given to me by someone who claimed to be a member of a group researching the Broken Writ. I've kept it safe for... reasons." Kael picked up the parchment, unrolling it to examine the intricate symbols etched upon its surface.

The room seemed to grow heavier as he studied the text – symbols that told him nothing yet spoke volumes about the complexity and danger involved in this affair. His mind replayed the woman's words: 'someone has been taking... pieces.' These fragments of balance were more than just a metaphor; they represented lives, delicate balances within the fabric of reality. Kael knew he had to tread carefully, weighing each step, lest he upset the very equilibrium he sought to restore.

He handed the parchment back to the hooded figure, eyes narrowing as he tried to commit every detail to memory. "What do you want in return for this?" The hooded figure's response was immediate: "I seek information about a former Nightforged member - one who fled several years ago and has since disappeared into the shadows." Their voice sent a shiver down Kael's spine; it carried an unmistakable hint of desperation, a plea that spoke to more than just curiosity.

Kael leaned forward once more, weighing his options. He could offer a description or more questions about this Nightforged member, but something nagged at the back of his mind - he didn't know if he was ready to delve any deeper into these mysteries, not yet. The costs of involvement seemed higher than the potential rewards, especially with the weight of his responsibilities in Melosdra.

As they deliberated, the hooded figure leaned forward, their voice taking on a more urgent tone. "Tell me, Nightforged - do you know of any others like this woman, those who seek to rebalance the world without permission?"

Kael's eyes met the hooded figure's, a spark of recognition flickering between them. He recalled similar pleas from various sources over the years - all searching for a way to right ancient wrongs, each with their own agenda. The woman's words echoed in his mind: 'I'm acting alone.' A claim he couldn't verify but one that hinted at desperation and possibly deceit.

"I've heard stories of those who seek to alter the balance," Kael said finally, trying to gauge the hooded figure's reaction. "Some say they're misguided, while others claim they possess knowledge lost to the ages." He shifted in his chair, hands clasped together as he studied the air around them - searching for a hidden thread, a hint of duplicity. The shadows cast by the candle on the table danced across their features, making it impossible to discern their expression.

A sudden burst of insight made him pause, fingers steepled together as he leaned back in his chair. "Wait... you're not from around here, are you?" Kael's eyes narrowed, weighing the cost of further involvement. His thoughts turned to the various factions and guilds operating within Melosdra - some openly hostile toward outsiders, while others saw potential allies. The hooded figure's presence seemed out of place in this city, their motivations an enigma.

The air remained thick with anticipation as Kael waited for a response. The figure's silence became oppressive, weighing on him like the night itself. He was accustomed to assessing threats and identifying potential allies; the unknowns here threatened to upset that balance. A part of him wanted to push forward, uncovering more about this Nightforged member and the mysterious woman who sought to rebalance the world without permission.

The hooded figure shifted in their chair, breaking the silence as they responded in a low tone. "I'm not from Melosdra," they said, eyes cast downward before flickering back up to meet Kael's gaze. For an instant, he thought he saw something there – a glimmer of recognition or perhaps even kinship.

"Yet you're here now," Kael pressed on, the words spilling out in a measured pace. "What brings you to this city?"

The hooded figure's gaze drifted back to Kael, their eyes holding a flicker of something like understanding. "I'm here for a particular reason," they said, their voice low and measured, "one that doesn't involve coin or influence." They paused, the air thickening with anticipation as Kael leaned forward once more.

"I was told of a... scholar who resides in Melosdra," the hooded figure continued. "One who possesses knowledge of the Broken Writ and its true nature. The city's networks are vast and complex; it took time to pinpoint their location, but I've finally identified them." Their eyes locked onto Kael's, an unspoken challenge hanging between them. "I propose a trade: information on this scholar in exchange for the truth about the Nightforged member who disappeared."

The room fell silent as Kael weighed his options. He knew of scholars who dabbled in the mysteries of the Broken Writ, but few possessed knowledge so specific it could tip the scales of balance. The hooded figure's words had stirred up questions – who was this scholar, and what drove them to uncover secrets hidden for centuries? His thoughts were interrupted by a faint noise from the floor below – footsteps, light at first, then growing heavier as someone climbed the stairs.

A burly man with a thick beard appeared in the doorway, his eyes scanning the room before settling on Kael. "Friend of yours?" he asked gruffly, his tone laced with suspicion. The hooded figure's head snapped toward the new arrival, a subtle tensing in their posture as they regarded him warily.

Kael slid out of his chair, using the distraction to consider the proposal made by the hooded figure. He knew the risks involved – offering information on the scholar could lead them down a treacherous path, one from which there might be no return. Yet, if it led him closer to understanding the Breaker's motivations and goals... He decided swiftly, a plan forming in his mind as he turned back to the hooded figure.

"I'll consider your proposal," Kael said finally, "but first, tell me about this scholar." The hooded figure leaned back in their chair, steepling their fingers once more as they began to speak in measured tones.

The hooded figure's eyes seemed to light up with an inner spark as they leaned forward once more, their voice taking on a measured cadence. "She's a scholar of the arcane, one who has devoted herself to unraveling the mysteries of the Broken Writ.

Her name is Elara Vex, and she resides in a secluded manor outside the city walls. I've been told her research focuses on the nature of power within the text – how it can be wielded, manipulated, and even controlled." They paused, their gaze piercing Kael's as they added, "It's said that her work could tip the balance of power in Melosdra. And perhaps beyond."

Kael's mind whirled with possibilities. He had heard whispers of Elara Vex, a name associated with both reverence and trepidation among the scholarly circles within Melosdra. Her research on the Broken Writ was said to be nothing short of revolutionary, yet some claimed her ambition bordered on hubris. He recalled the words of his mentor, Arinthal: "The pursuit of power is a thin line between innovation and madness." Kael's thoughts were interrupted by the burly man in the doorway, who had been watching their conversation with growing interest.

"Time for introductions, perhaps?" the man said, his tone still laced with a hint of suspicion. The hooded figure's gaze flickered toward him before returning to Kael. "This is Maric," they said, their voice neutral. "A local acquaintance who has offered me... hospitality." Kael raised an eyebrow at this, intrigued by the ambiguous word choice. Maric stepped forward, his presence dominating the space as he offered a rough-hewn hand for Kael to shake.

As Kael obliged, he couldn't help but sense that something more was at play here – Maric's sudden appearance seemed almost too convenient, and Kael's mind turned over the implications. Was this man merely a friend of the hooded figure or someone who had been watching him, monitoring his movements? A flicker of insight made him glance at the hooded figure, whose eyes met his in a fleeting moment of understanding. They knew something he didn't, and Kael's instincts told him to proceed with caution.

A new development unfolded as Maric spoke up, his voice gruff yet curious. "Tell me, what business you have with this... scholar?" The hooded figure leaned back in their chair once more, fingers steepled together as they considered their response. A shadow fell across Kael's face, and for an instant, he felt the weight of the night outside these walls settle upon him – a reminder that secrets lurked in every alleyway, each one waiting to be uncovered.

"I'm afraid I've said too much already," the hooded figure replied finally, their voice tinged with regret. "Perhaps we can continue this conversation another time?" As they spoke, Maric shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes flicking between Kael and the hooded figure before settling on something behind them – a sign that an unseen presence watched from the depths of the room.

The air in the chamber began to vibrate with tension as Kael's gaze turned toward the unspoken threat. He sensed it – a pressure building, like ripples on the surface of a

pond disturbed by a thrown stone. The silence between them grew until Maric broke it with a heavy sigh, his massive frame seeming to fill the space once more. "Perhaps we can indeed continue this conversation another time," he repeated, a hint of menace creeping into his voice.

As Kael watched, Maric stepped forward, offering a hand to the hooded figure as if escorting them out. They rose from their chair with an air of resignation, casting a fleeting glance in Kael's direction before following Maric toward the door. In that moment, something clicked into place – Kael realized he had been given a choice: pursue Elara Vex and risk unraveling threads within Melosdra, or retreat to the familiar shadows of his responsibilities.

Tags: Ashen Roads, Shadows Claiming Power