

# THE AMBASSADOR'S HUSHED WORD

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## The Ambassador's Hush

Kael Varn stepped off the Ashen Road, his eyes narrowing as he took in the unfamiliar surroundings. The city of Everia lay shrouded in mist, its spires and turrets veiled in a damp haze that clung to everything like a damp shroud. He'd received a message from an old acquaintance, Lord Arin Veylan, requesting a meeting at the Thorn Key – a rare invitation for one not of House Veylan.

As he walked through the winding streets, Kael's hand rested on the grip of his dagger, a habit honed by years of walking 'where armies cannot.' People parted around him, their faces a blur of curiosity and suspicion. In this city, strangers were a novelty – especially those like himself who wore no badge or insignia to proclaim their allegiance.

Kael had heard whispers about Everia's peculiar affinity for seclusion. It suited his purposes, allowing him to operate beneath the radar while he sorted out the enigma that was Lord Veylan's message. He'd arrived just after midnight, with instructions to wait at the Thorn Key until dawn.

The silence within the tower's walls was a balm to Kael's ears, weary from the city's constant din and chatter. A hooded figure stood watch near the entrance, their eyes fixed on him like cold stones. "You are Kael Varn," they said, voice low and steady.

"Ambassador," he replied, his own tone even.

The hooded figure nodded, parting to allow him entry. Inside, a fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows on the walls. A faint scent of sandalwood wafted from the direction of Lord Veylan's chambers. Kael followed the fragrance, finding his host sitting by the window.

"My thanks for coming, Kael," Arin Veylan said, rising to greet him with a measured smile. "I've... acquired certain information that requires discretion."

Information was currency in the world of House Veylan, and Kael's instincts told him this would be a transaction, not an act of charity. He accepted the cup offered by his host – tea flavored with starlight mint, a rare delicacy from the farthest corners of the kingdom.

"What's the matter?" he asked, sipping the brew to avoid any hint of urgency.

Arin Veylan leaned against the window frame, his gaze drifting toward the rain-soaked streets below. "A piece of our writ has been... misplaced," he said. "Something tied to the Broken Writ – a detail in a long-forgotten treaty."

Kael raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite himself. He'd heard whispers about the Broken Writ – ancient text hidden away by the Order of Nightforge. "What's the significance?"

Lord Veylan straightened, his eyes locking onto Kael's. "If it falls into the wrong hands, our balance is imperiled. The very stability of our... patron's rule." The word 'patron' was laced with a quiet venom.

Kael understood the gravity. If the Broken Writ resurfaced, it could unravel centuries of delicate balancing acts. He took another sip, weighing the request – an unusual risk for House Veylan to take on someone not directly bound by their oaths.

Arin Veylan handed him a small package, sealed with the emblem of his house. "This contains a key and a charm. Use them wisely."

Kael opened the package, revealing a delicate silver chain and a small crystal orb. He sensed a whisper of magic within the token – a gentle pressure that made his head spin. He recognized the signature: a debt was owed to Melosdra's power, one he couldn't afford to pay without consequence.

"Tell me," Kael said, tucking the package into his cloak. "What exactly am I hunting?"

Lord Veylan leaned back against the window frame once more. "A man with no allegiance. One who walks shadows, collecting scraps and dusting for hidden truths."

Kael Varn's eyes narrowed as he took a final sip of the starlight tea – its delicate flavor lingering on his tongue like an echo of foreboding.

He left at dawn, walking into the mist-shrouded streets with purpose, the charm heavy against his chest. His specialty was not bloodshed but correction, and this was a balance that demanded subtle touch – one whispered secret at a time.

The cost would be calculated in shadows, where only whispers were currency.

Kael navigated Everia's winding streets, lost in thought as the mist swirled around him like a perpetual shroud. He followed the streets to their logical conclusion, arriving at a secluded courtyard where water features were anachronistically well-maintained amidst the city's general decay. Water danced within ornate fountains and pools, creating a melody that drew the eye, calming the tension coiled within his chest.

In the center of this oasis stood a statue of the patron, her features chiseled with deliberate imperfections – as if the sculptor sought to capture the depth of character in the stone. The city's balance of shadows hung heavy over her form, an oppressive weight that made Kael pause. He wondered what it would take for this fragile

equilibrium to unravel completely.

Beyond the courtyard's tranquil facade, a figure waited by the fountain, their face obscured by the hooded cowl. "You're the one I'm supposed to meet," Kael said, voice barely above a whisper, not breaking stride as he approached. The figure stepped forward into the mist, eyes gleaming with an otherworldly light - one that left him slightly off-balance.

"I am," they replied, their tone low and measured. "I've been... collecting information on the piece you seek." Kael's trained ears picked up a hint of something else beneath their words: desperation or hunger? He made no judgment, merely a note for later consideration. They handed him a parchment bearing an obscure notation - a cipher he'd never seen.

"We have reason to believe it's hidden within the Nightgallows' crypts," they said, voice neutral despite the air of urgency. Kael recognized the name - an infamous mausoleum where only those forgotten or outcast by society were buried. His hand drifted toward his dagger, an old habit when navigating morally ambiguous territory.

"You have a name?" he asked, eyes locked on the cipher. "For our discussion?" The figure hesitated, their head cocked to one side. "Asterion." A faint smile played on their lips before it vanished beneath the cowl.

He tucked the parchment into his cloak, mentally decoding the notation - a delicate weave of symbols that told him nothing without the key. Asterion's eyes seemed to follow this action, a glimmer of curiosity flickering in their depths before they masked it with an air of detachment. Kael sensed a web of intentions beneath their words, a fine thread he was not yet skilled enough to unravel.

"I'll need more information," he said, voice firm but tempered by the faint scent of sandalwood carried on the breeze from within Lord Veylan's chambers. Asterion nodded once, as if expected this response, then gestured toward a nearby bench, where they had presumably been waiting for some time. "I'll explain, but first - are you prepared to walk shadows?"

The question sent a flutter through his chest, an echo of the unease he'd felt upon meeting Lord Veylan. Shadows were House Veylan's domain, their specialty in extracting information from hidden places. He knew this was not an invitation to join them; rather, it was an evaluation - a test to see how far he'd go on his own. Kael chose his words with care: "Prepared as I need to be."

Asterion nodded once more, then began to walk toward the courtyard's entrance, their movements economical and precise. The mist swirled around them like a living entity, obscuring details but revealing the intent - to lead him out of this oasis and into the city's tangled web. Kael trailed behind, sensing they navigated these streets

as well as he did; only one step ahead of him at all times.

They crossed a narrow bridge spanning a canal, its waters murky and devoid of life – a testament to Everia's long-standing neglect. The air thickened with moisture from the canal, clinging to his skin like a damp shroud that made him frown, recalling Lord Veylan's chambers. This was not how he'd envisioned this conversation progressing; a hunt within the Nightgallows crypts would demand specific tools – ones House Veylan likely had at their disposal.

Asterion's pace quickened, drawing Kael into a small, unassuming tavern tucked between the city's ancient buildings. The sign creaked in the wind, bearing an image of a broken sword above the door – a token that spoke to those who understood its language: welcome, outcast.

Inside, the tavern was a labyrinth of narrow corridors and cramped rooms, lit by flickering candles that cast eerie shadows on the walls. The patrons were a mix of city dwellers and those with less fortunate circumstances – their eyes averted from Kael's as he entered, while Asterion led him to a secluded corner table. They took seats opposite each other, the air thickening with an unspoken tension.

"You see the problem," Asterion said, their voice hushed above the murmur of conversation and clinking glasses. "The crypts are... guarded. Not by physical means, but –" A hand gestured toward Kael's chest, where the charm hung heavy against his skin. "Your patron has a peculiar arrangement with the Nightgallows' custodian. It seems they provide him with... diversions."

Kael's mind spun through connections, settling on the most plausible explanation: the crypts were a repository of dark secrets and hidden truths. Someone in House Veylan wanted the information contained within those records, but Lord Veylan spoke only of balance and stability – a calculated risk he was not privy to. His gut told him there was more at play than balance; perhaps a game he'd yet to grasp.

Asterion's eyes sparkled with an unspoken amusement as if they sensed his confusion. "Your concern is understandable, but you should know the Nightgallows' custodian is under a... let's say, creative management by House Veylan. They provide him with distractions while he digs deeper into our business." A faint smile played on their lips before it vanished, replaced by an air of gravitas.

"What we can do is give you access to those records," Asterion said, the words laced with a quiet understanding – they knew Kael walked this fine line between correction and chaos. "In exchange for information about... something else."

Asterion's words hung in the air, a challenge that made Kael consider his next move carefully. He had expected more resistance from House Veylan; instead, they offered him a quid pro quo – a trade of information for access to the crypts. The weight of it

settled on his shoulders, making him fidget with the parchment still clutched in his hand. He needed that cipher deciphered before he could proceed.

"What's this something else?" Kael asked, voice firm despite the growing unease within him. Asterion leaned forward, their elbows resting on their knees as they met his gaze. "A piece of art," they replied, tone matter-of-fact but with an undercurrent of excitement that made Kael raise an eyebrow. "Specifically, a sketch of one of our associates." The words hung between them like a challenge, leaving no room for interpretation.

A flicker of light from the candles danced across Asterion's features, illuminating a glimmer of intensity in their eyes - a spark that made Kael sense they were hiding something significant. He leaned back, steepling his fingers as he weighed the risks and benefits. What information could they possibly have about House Veylan's operations that would be worth trading for access to the crypts? The question gnawed at him, refusing to let go even when the answers swirled like a maelstrom in his mind.

"I need more details," he said finally, trying to keep his tone measured despite the turmoil inside. Asterion's smile returned, this time wider and with an undercurrent of satisfaction - as if they'd anticipated this reaction. "We'll exchange them when you've seen what we have," they replied, their voice now carrying a hint of triumph that bordered on arrogance.

Kael felt a cold draft from the tavern's entrance, drawing his gaze toward the door just as a hooded figure slipped in, eyes scanning the room before locking onto Asterion. The air thickened with anticipation as the newcomer approached their table, and Kael realized they'd been too focused on the conversation to notice the subtle cues that told him someone was watching - probably following.

The figure slid into the empty chair beside Asterion, their hood falling away to reveal a face Kael recognized from whispers in dark alleys: Lyra, the thief known for extracting secrets without anyone noticing. Her eyes met his, a hint of warning flickering across her features before she leaned in close to Asterion.

Asterion's hand drifted toward hers, fingers intertwining with hers as they exchanged a glance that spoke of mutual understanding and shared purpose. Kael felt the weight of being an outsider grow heavier, his place within their circle uncertain - yet clear enough for him to know he didn't belong.

"You're here to finalize the plan," Asterion said, voice now tinged with a quiet command as they addressed Lyra. "We need confirmation on the custodian's schedules before we can proceed."

The hooded figure nodded, their gaze flicking back to Kael before returning to Asterion, a silent understanding passing between them. The air in the tavern seemed

to thicken, the patrons' conversations dying down as they sensed the shift in dynamics. Lyra leaned back, her eyes never leaving Kael's face, and pulled out a small notebook from her sleeve.

"We can get you access to the Nightgallows records," Asterion said, voice low but clear over the sudden hush of the tavern. "But first, we need something from you." The words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt the weight of his decision settle on him. He glanced at Lyra, who watched him with an intensity that made his skin prickle.

"A sketch," Asterion continued, their hand gesturing toward the parchment still clutched in Kael's fingers. "A drawing of one of our associates. We believe it's been taken by someone... unsavory." The tone was matter-of-fact, but Lyra's eyes flashed with a warning that made Kael's gut twist.

He felt a surge of frustration at being played, but Asterion's calm demeanor kept him tethered. They were not asking for something that belonged to him; this was a trade – a risk in exchange for access to the crypts and information about House Veylan's operations. The thought sent his mind racing through connections, trying to find any hidden thread or pattern that could help him navigate this delicate dance.

"What do you mean by 'unsavory'?" Kael asked, stalling for time as he tried to untangle the threads of their proposal. Lyra leaned forward, her voice low and husky. "You know what we're talking about, Kael. The one who's been leaving... messages." Her eyes darted toward Asterion, a silent question hanging in the air before they nodded.

Asterion's expression remained enigmatic, but their hand tightened around Lyra's. "We need your help to find this person," they said, their voice now tinged with a hint of desperation that Kael didn't expect. The dynamic shifted, and he sensed he was being pulled deeper into a web of intrigue than he'd ever imagined.

"I want to see the records before I agree to anything," Kael said, stalling for time as he weighed his options. Asterion's smile returned, wider this time, but Lyra's eyes flashed with a warning that made Kael's skin prickle. He leaned back in his chair, his mind racing through connections and possibilities.

The tavern's patrons seemed to sense the tension had passed, their conversations dying down as they returned to their own affairs. The candles flickered, casting eerie shadows on the walls as the silence lengthened, heavy with unspoken promises and hidden agendas.

Kael's eyes never left Lyra's face, searching for a glimmer of what Asterion wasn't saying, but she remained impassive, her expression a mask of calm. He leaned forward, his fingers drumming a slow beat on the parchment as he weighed the risks

and benefits. This was a calculated move, one that involved him walking into the heart of the Balance of Shadows, into the very organization his sister had been accused of betraying.

"What's in it for you?" he asked, voice firm but controlled, as if trying to keep the unease from spilling over into his words. Asterion leaned back, their eyes never leaving Kael's, a small smile playing on their lips. "We want to find this person," they said, voice steady, but with an undercurrent of urgency that made him wonder what was at stake. "Someone has been leaving messages, threatening our operations. We believe it's connected to your sister's disappearance."

Kael felt the world tilt off balance as he absorbed the implications. His sister, Eluned, had gone missing months ago – a case still open and unsolved in his mind, a nagging reminder of failure. He couldn't help but wonder if this was more than just a simple trade; if there was something deeper at play here, something that tied into Eluned's disappearance. The idea sent a shiver down his spine as he met Asterion's gaze, searching for any sign of manipulation.

"You think she's alive," Kael stated, the words slipping out before he could filter them. Asterion's expression remained neutral, but Lyra's eyes flickered with a warning. "We believe it's possible," they replied, voice measured, as if weighing every word. The candlelight danced across their features, illuminating a glimmer of hope that he hadn't seen in months.

Kael's gut twisted, memories of his sister flooding back – the way she smiled, her laugh, her eyes sparkling with a fierce determination to uncover secrets hidden within the Balance of Shadows. He pushed the thoughts aside, focusing on the present, but the pain of her disappearance still lingered like an open wound. He needed answers, and this seemed as good a place as any to start.

"A piece of art," he said finally, stalling for time, trying to gather his thoughts amidst the whirlwind of emotions. "What's so special about it?" Lyra leaned forward, her voice low and husky. "It's a sketch of one of our associates," she replied, eyes glinting in the candlelight. "A person who's been... compromised."

Asterion's eyes met Lyra's, a silent conversation passing between them before their attention returned to Kael. "We need something from the man known as Raven," Asterion said, voice low and even. "He's been receiving these... messages, threatening our operations." Kael's grip on the parchment tightened, his mind racing through the connections – the thief who'd been linked to several high-profile heists, the one person in the Balance of Shadows with skills rivaling those of the infamous Shadowhand.

A faint scent of smoke wafted from Lyra's direction as she lit a small pipe, her eyes never leaving Kael's face. "The messages are cryptic," Asterion continued, "but they

mention a debt owed to House Veylan. We believe it's connected to Eluned's disappearance." The words cut through the air like a knife, and for a moment, Kael forgot about the tavern patrons, the soft clinking of glasses, and the distant murmur of conversations. All he could think was his sister - where she was, if she was alive, and what had happened to her.

"Tell me more about these messages," Kael said finally, his voice firm, but with a hint of vulnerability creeping in. Lyra leaned forward, exhaling a plume of smoke that danced in the candlelight. "They're unsigned, but they reference an event from House Veylan's past - something called the Thorn Key incident." Asterion's eyes flickered with a mixture of pain and guilt as their hand tightened around Lyra's. Kael sensed a deeper truth hidden beneath the surface, something that made him wonder if he was walking into a nest of vipers.

The weight of his decision settled heavier on him as the realization dawned - this wasn't just about retrieving a piece of art or finding someone within the Balance of Shadows; it was about unraveling a mystery tied to his sister's disappearance and House Veylan's dark past. He thought back to the stories his father had whispered in hushed tones, about the Balance's ruthless tactics and the Thorn Key incident that had left scars on the organization. The pieces began to fit together, forming a picture of a complex web that threatened to consume him.

Asterion pushed their chair back, eyes locked onto Kael's as they stood. "We need that sketch," they said, voice firm but with an undercurrent of desperation. Lyra rose alongside them, her hand slipping from Asterion's as she leaned in close to Kael. For a moment, their faces were inches apart, and he caught the scent of pipe smoke on her breath. "You're making a choice, Kael," Lyra whispered, voice low and husky, eyes glinting with an unspoken warning. "One that will tie you to us - to the Balance of Shadows, and whatever secrets it holds."

Tags: House Veylan, Balance of Shadows, Thorn Key