

The Night Walker's Reckoning, Kael Varn, The Broken Writ

Black

The Night Walker's Reckoning

Kael Varn stepped off the last wooden planks of the Ashen Road, his dark cloak billowing behind him like a shroud. Beneath his feet, the forest floor creaked and groaned in protest, as if the land itself were alive and wary. He'd walked this stretch before, though he couldn't recall exactly when; years blended together on his path. The air clung heavy with the scent of damp earth and the faint tang of magic—a lingering echo from some long-forgotten ritual.

He navigated through the trees, eyes attuned to subtle shifts in shadows. Thalos Nightforge's moon had set, but a scattering of luminescent mushrooms cast an eerie glow on the forest floor. A chill wind carried whispers, rumors, and half-remembered prayers. Kael listened intently; such moments revealed more than questions.

At the center of this clearing stood an ancient Black Rose Oak, its gnarled trunk twisted with age. Beneath it lay a figure, arms splayed out to the sides. A faint scent of smoke clung to them—a recent fire, perhaps? Kael approached cautiously, wary of hidden traps or ambushes. As he drew closer, the individual's face came into focus: a young woman with skin like pale alabaster and eyes that seemed almost black in this dim light.

She'd been left bound with thin strips of Nightflower vine, an odd choice since it typically bound itself to those who wielded magic—though Kael's own experiences with the Black Rose Order had taught him not to assume. The woman's chest rose and fell with shallow breaths, her body relaxed but for one thing: a small pouch clutched in her hand.

With care, Kael freed the woman from her restraints. Her eyes snapped open, locking onto his face. "Kael," she whispered, recognition evident despite the fear that followed. "I... I was sent."

He recognized the look—same desperation he'd seen on countless others before their secrets were dragged into the open. She was a Curator, but which one? The Night Walkers' specialty was walking into secrets, not making them; it seemed this girl had been trying to walk out.

The pouch in her hand contained a small, intricately carved crystal. Its surface etched with fine runes that flickered like fireflies on a summer's night. A simple charm, but one that could be very difficult to place without the right context. Kael took it from her and carefully turned it over, sensing an affinity for the Black Rose Order within its core—a bond waiting to be claimed.

Kael tucked the crystal into his own cloak and helped the woman stand, supporting her as she swayed. Her eyes seemed to hold a thousand midnights, all reflected in those dark pools. He needed to get her out of here, but the night was young yet, and with the forest's secrets, patience could be a luxury he couldn't afford.

"You've been sent," Kael repeated softly, studying her face for any sign that she might remember more than this single fact. Her eyes drifted closed, as if seeking an escape from his words. "To whom?"

The woman's eyes fluttered open, her gaze locking onto Kael's once more, but this time with a hint of panic creeping in. "A name," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the trees. "I... I was sent by Elwynn. Please, you must find him." Her hand reached out, grasping for his, as if the mere mention of the name had given her a lifeline to cling to.

Kael's grip on the woman's arm tightened, steadying her as she swayed. He'd heard of Elwynn of House Calanthor—a man of means and influence, with connections that spanned the length and breadth of the Realm. But their paths had not crossed, and Kael had never met one of his Curators before. "Tell me what you know," he said, his voice low and urgent, as he guided her away from the Black Rose Oak.

The woman's eyes darted about, taking in their surroundings with a mixture of fear and confusion. Her breathing quickened, and Kael could see the faintest tremble in her lips. "We... we were sent to find something," she stammered, as if every word was a battle to recall. "A memory, an artifact... I don't know what it is. Only that Elwynn's life depends on finding it." Her eyes snapped back to Kael's, the desperation in them now almost overwhelming. "Please, you have to help me find him."

As she spoke, the wind picked up, rustling through the leaves with an unsettling intensity. The luminescent mushrooms seemed to dim, casting long shadows across the clearing. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine; he'd learned to recognize these signs—the forest was reacting, trying to tell them something. He glanced about, his senses on high alert, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The woman's hand still clutched at his arm, her grip tightening as she spoke. "We can't let them find us here. Elwynn will be killed if they... if they do." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw something flicker across her face—a glimmer of recognition that was gone before he could grasp it.

"We have to leave," he said finally, his mind racing with the implications. "Come on, let's get you out of here." He half-led, half-carried the woman through the trees, the forest's silence closing in behind them like a door shutting. The Night Walkers were not ones for stealth; Kael knew this was far from over.

As they pushed deeper into the forest, he realized that the silence had changed. It wasn't just the wind or the darkness that made it oppressive—it was something else, a presence lurking just out of sight. He could feel eyes on them, watching and waiting. The Black Rose Order's reputation preceded him; perhaps someone had seen his arrival.

Kael guided the woman to a narrow stream running through the trees, its crystal-clear waters reflecting the faint glow from above. "Drink," he said gruffly, helping her bend to take a swig of water. For a moment, she just stared at him, her eyes searching for something. Then, with a small nod, she drank.

The sound of rushing water and distant calls carried on the wind filled the silence that followed. The woman's breathing steadied, but Kael could sense the fear still simmering beneath her surface. He watched her closely as they walked, his hand instinctively reaching for the crystal in his cloak—a strange bond had formed between them already.

As they pressed onward, night began to shed its terrors for a deeper, more primal one: hunger and fatigue were starting to catch up with Kael. His feet throbbed from walking, his body heavy with the weight of secrets. He needed answers, but so did she—it seemed. And the forest... it was watching, waiting.

Suddenly, a gust of wind picked up, sending leaves swirling about their ankles. The darkness seemed to deepen, as if night itself had grown more menacing. Kael's hand closed around the crystal, feeling its power coursing through him—a reminder of what was at stake. He nudged the woman ahead, his voice firm. "Let's move."

As they walked, the trees grew closer together, their branches tangling overhead to form a canopy that blocked out most of the moonlight. Kael led on, his senses straining to detect any signs of danger. The woman followed closely behind, her footsteps light and hesitant. Every so often, she would glance back over her shoulder, as if expecting something to be following them.

The forest grew denser still, until they were forced to push aside branches that snagged at their clothes. Kael's cloak caught on a thorn, and he cursed under his breath as he freed himself. The woman stumbled behind him, her eyes fixed on the crystal in his hand. "What is it?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rustling of leaves.

"It's a memory charm," he replied, his voice low and even. "One that might help us find Elwynn." He tucked the crystal back into his cloak, feeling its power still thrumming through him. The woman's gaze followed the movement, her eyes locking onto the small pouch she'd been clutching earlier.

"We need to get out of here," Kael said finally, his patience wearing thin. "We can't stay in one place for too long." He glanced around, taking in their surroundings. They were deep in the heart of the forest now, with no sign of civilization in sight. The trees loomed above them, their branches creaking ominously in the wind.

As if on cue, a twig snapped behind them. Kael spun, his hand reaching for the blade at his belt. The woman froze beside him, her eyes wide with fear. "What was that?" she breathed. Kael's gaze swept the darkness, but there was nothing to see. He cursed under his breath, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down his spine.

The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with anticipation. Kael's senses were on high alert, straining to detect any sign of movement or danger. The woman shifted beside him, her hand reaching for the crystal once more. "Please," she whispered, her voice cracking with fear. "We have to find Elwynn."

He held up a hand, signaling her to wait, his eyes scanning the darkness with a practiced intensity. The snap of the twig had been loud enough to freeze blood in one's veins, but Kael knew the forest's secrets – or at least its silences. Silence was not always an absence, but rather a calculation, a deliberate withholding of information.

The wind stilled, as if sensing his tension, and for an instant, the forest held its breath. The trees creaked softly, their branches swaying in a slow, mournful rhythm. Kael's grip on the hilt of his blade eased, but only slightly. He didn't believe in coincidences – not here.

The woman shifted beside him, her hand still grasping for the crystal as if it were an anchor to reality. Her eyes darted about, drinking in every detail of their surroundings, searching for a threat that wasn't there. Kael's own gaze roved the darkness, lingering on the trees, the underbrush, and the shadows themselves. His mind replayed every sound, every movement, trying to discern what lay hidden.

The forest was alive tonight – not with malevolent intent, but with an alertness that bordered on curiosity. A subtle current ran through it, like a whispered rumor that had yet to be shared openly. Kael felt the thrum of its power, the thrall of connection to the land itself. He'd learned to listen to such whispers in the past, when life had depended on it.

With a quiet nod, he motioned for her to follow, his footsteps light as they moved deeper into the trees. The forest seemed to relax with them, allowing them passage

through its dense underbrush like an invisible curtain drawn aside. A narrow game trail led onward, winding between massive trunks that reached toward the sky like skeletal fingers.

They walked in silence now, their breathing synchronized as they navigated the darkness. Kael's senses were heightened, his mind racing with possibilities – who was out there watching them, and what did they want? His grip on the crystal tightened, feeling its power respond to his tension, a gentle hum of energy that soothed the fatigue clawing at his shoulders.

As they turned a bend in the trail, a faint light appeared ahead. At first, Kael thought it a trick of the eyes, but as they drew closer, he saw the glint of luminescent mushrooms lining the path, casting an ethereal glow over the clearing. The woman's hand tightened on his arm, her head cocked to one side as she took in the sight.

In the center of the clearing stood a massive tree, its trunk twisted with age and its branches like gnarled fingers reaching toward the sky. A door hung from its trunk, adorned with intricate carvings that seemed to dance across its surface like fireflies on a summer's night. The door was open, as if waiting for them.

Kael's eyes narrowed, his mind racing with possibilities. This was no natural occurrence – the forest's secrets were being revealed to him, and he suspected it was only half the truth. He glanced down at the woman, her eyes fixed on the door with a mix of wonder and trepidation.

"Elwynn?" she whispered, as if hoping against hope that their destination had finally come into view. Kael's grip on the crystal tightened, his mind racing ahead to the potential dangers within – or what lay beyond the forest's gates. He knew one thing for certain: they'd walked into a trap, and now was the time to decide which way to turn.

As they entered the clearing, Kael's senses went on high alert, his hand instinctively reaching for the crystal in his cloak. The air inside was heavy with a sweet scent, like blooming flowers on a summer day, but it was tinged with an undercurrent of something else – a faint tang that made his stomach roil. He scanned the area, his eyes tracing the outlines of several large stones that formed a circle around the base of the ancient tree.

The woman trailed behind him, her gaze fixed on the door as if mesmerized by its intricate carvings. "This can't be right," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the soft hum of the forest's energy. Kael followed her gaze to the door, and his eyes narrowed. The carvings depicted a sequence of events – battles won and lost, alliances forged and broken – but they seemed... distorted, like memories seen through a shattered lens.

He walked closer, his boots making barely a sound on the soft earth. The woman's hand reached out to touch the carvings, her fingers tracing the curves of a symbol that looked eerily familiar to Kael. He felt a shiver run down his spine as their eyes met, and he knew in that instant they were thinking the same thing: this was more than just a simple door – it was a gateway, one that held secrets and memories in equal measure.

The air inside seemed to vibrate with an otherworldly energy, like the thrum of a harp string plucked by an unseen hand. Kael's fingers brushed against his belt, feeling for the familiar weight of his dagger. His gut told him they shouldn't be here – that something was waiting for them on the other side of this door, something with eyes and teeth and an insatiable hunger.

The woman took a step closer to the door, her hand hesitating as if poised to touch the threshold. Kael's grip on his crystal tightened, its power coursing through him like a warning. "Wait," he said, his voice low and even, but she didn't turn. Her eyes were fixed on something beyond the door, something that only she could see.

"What is it?" he asked, his words barely above a whisper. The woman's gaze snapped back to him, her eyes unfocused, and for an instant Kael thought he saw something flicker behind them – a glimmer of fear, of uncertainty. "Elwynn," she whispered again, the word barely audible.

Kael's hand closed around her arm, holding her in place. "Not yet," he said, his voice firm, but she shook him off, stepping forward as if drawn by an unseen force. He caught up to her, grabbing her waist to hold her back from the threshold. The door creaked softly behind her, swinging open with a gentle, mechanical motion that seemed almost... patient.

"What are you doing?" he growled, his voice low and rough, but she shook him off again, her eyes fixed on something beyond the doorway. "I have to see," she whispered, her body swaying toward the opening as if pulled by an invisible thread. Kael's grip on her waist tightened, his mind racing with the possibilities – that she was leading them into a trap, or that this door marked a turning point in their journey, one from which there would be no return.

The air outside grew heavy, the forest holding its breath as if waiting to see what they'd do next. The woman's eyes locked onto his, pleading and desperate, and for an instant Kael hesitated – torn between his duty to protect her and his need to uncover the truth about Elwynn, and the secrets that lay beyond this door.

He let her go, his grip relaxing but not releasing as she stepped forward, her eyes fixed on something beyond the threshold. The door creaked softly again, its hinges a slow and deliberate counterpoint to the rapid beating of Kael's heart. He followed closely behind, his senses on high alert for any sign of treachery. The air inside was

heavy with the scent he'd noticed outside – a mix of blooming flowers and something else, something acrid that made his stomach roil.

The woman didn't stop until she reached the center of the room, where a figure stood leaning against a massive stone pedestal. Kael's eyes narrowed as he took in the sight: Elwynn, the one person they'd been searching for, the one who was supposed to have knowledge about their lost sister. His gaze swept over her, taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the way she leaned on the pedestal for support.

"What... where?" Kael asked, his voice low and rough as he took a step forward. Elwynn's head lifted, her eyes focusing slowly on him before flicking to the woman beside him. A mixture of emotions crossed her face: fear, wariness, but beneath that, something like hope. "You found me," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

The woman took another step forward, her hands extended in a gesture of supplication. "Elwynn, please – tell us what happened to Elara." Kael's eyes snapped back to the woman beside him, his hand tightening on the crystal as he wondered if she knew more than she was letting on. He felt a sudden unease, a sense that there was something beneath her words, something hidden beneath the surface.

Elwynn's gaze flicked between them, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for escape or rescue. "I didn't know," she said finally, her voice cracking with emotion. "She was taken by... the Order of the Black Rose." Kael's grip on the crystal tightened, his heart sinking. The woman's hand closed around his arm, her fingers digging into his skin as if warning him not to move.

The room seemed to darken around them, the air growing heavy with unspoken words and unasked questions. Elwynn took a step forward, her eyes fixed on Kael. "I know where she is," she said, her voice rising above a whisper. "But you have to understand – the Black Rose... they're not what we thought."

Kael's grip on his crystal tightened as he studied Elwynn's face, searching for any sign of deception or hesitation. Her eyes seemed haunted, but that didn't necessarily mean she was telling the truth. He glanced at the woman beside him, seeking some clue about her intentions, but her expression remained calm and intent.

"The Order of the Black Rose?" Kael repeated, his voice low and even. "What do you mean? They're a brotherhood sworn to protect the innocent." Elwynn's eyes dropped, her gaze darting around the room as if searching for an escape route. "That was what we thought," she said finally, her voice barely audible. "But I've seen... things. Terrible things. They're not what they seem."

Kael's mind reeled with the implications. The Black Rose Order had been a beacon of hope in a world torn apart by darkness and war. Their vow to protect the innocent was

one of the few constants in a chaotic world. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized that Elwynn might be telling the truth - or that she believed it, at least.

The woman beside him took a step forward, her hand reaching out to Elwynn in a gesture of compassion. "Tell us what you know," she said softly, but Elwynn recoiled, her eyes flashing with fear. "No, I won't say any more," she said, backing away from them until she pressed against the pedestal.

The air seemed to thicken around them, the heavy scent of blooming flowers and something else - something dark - making Kael's stomach roil. He could feel the weight of unspoken words hanging in the air like a challenge, waiting to be met. The woman took another step forward, her hand extended once more, but Elwynn raised it in a warning gesture.

"Wait," she said, her voice sharp with desperation. "You don't understand what's at stake. You can't trust me yet." Kael's grip on the crystal tightened as he searched Elwynn's face for answers, his mind racing with the possibilities - that she was telling the truth, or that she was manipulating them for some unknown purpose.

The woman's eyes flicked to Kael, a question there, but he hesitated. What did they know of Elwynn? Of her story? His gut told him she was hiding something, but his heart refused to let go of the hope that she might be their only lead to finding Elara.

Tags: Beneath the Blackened Trees, Lost and Found, Era of Expansion