

# Whispers in the Night

Black

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The rain-soaked streets of Ashen Roads were always a haven for those who walked in shadows. Kael Varn, known only by whispers and rumors, stepped into the flickering torchlight of the local tavern without drawing attention. His face was as familiar to the patrons as the worn wooden beams above their heads; it was said he'd walked among them all at some point, but never stayed long enough for anyone to remember his name.

Behind the bar, a gruff voice greeted him with a nod, while the bard in the corner strummed an unsettling melody on his lute. Kael slid onto a stool, his eyes scanning the room with practiced ease. He'd come for a purpose – a quiet one, as was always the case. The rain drummed against the roof above, creating a soothing background hum.

The barkeep sidled over, wiping his meaty hand on his apron before placing a small jug in front of Kael. "House wine or something stronger?"

"Water will do," Kael replied, his voice low and smooth as he handed the man a coin. The barkeep pocketed it without comment, disappearing into the throng to collect change from other patrons.

As the evening wore on, whispers began to spread – the usual rumors, of course. Kael's presence only encouraged speculation; some said he was an Order Knight, come to investigate rumors of malfeasance within the Ashen Roads' Curators, while others whispered he was a member of House Veylan's 'Shadowhand', here for the same reason.

The bard, his music taking on a melancholy tone, caught Kael's eye. He rose and made his way over, his instrument slung over his shoulder. "A rare evening in, Lord—"

"Varn," he provided curtly, not ungraciously. It was said he preferred not to be called 'Lord' or any title; the bard merely nodded.

The lute music changed – for a moment, it seemed as if the melody echoed something within Kael himself. The patrons didn't notice, of course, but the bard's gaze lingered on him a fraction longer than necessary before he turned back to his playing.

Kael finished his drink and stood up without leaving any coin behind. As with all places, there was an understanding between him and the tavern; no need for words or markers. He walked out into the rain, lost in its rhythmic beat as he vanished into the Ashen Roads' night.

The rain-soaked streets were a blur as Kael walked, his eyes squinting into the downpour. He navigated the narrow alleys and backstreets of Ashen Roads with ease, knowing every twist and turn like the lines on his own hands. His footfalls echoed off the wet stone, but only one or two passersby gave him a fleeting glance before hurrying onward.

Kael's thoughts returned to the tavern, specifically to the bard. There was something in that man's eyes – not just curiosity, but an almost... recognition? It was as if they'd crossed paths before, though Kael couldn't place where or when. He shook off the thought; it wasn't a luxury he could afford to indulge.

His destination lay on the other side of Ashen Roads, near the River Luminari's eastern bank. The city's night market thrived here, lit by lanterns strung between buildings and overhanging balconies. Kael pushed through the crowded stalls, the smell of roasting meats and fresh bread mingling with incense from the various vendors. In this chaos, he was just another anonymous face – or so he'd like to think.

A young woman stood out amidst the throng, hawking intricately carved wooden trinkets from a small table. Her gaze flickered over Kael before returning to a customer, her hands moving deftly as she wrapped a delicate necklace in parchment. When the customer departed with a smile and a few coins, she caught his eye once more – this time holding it longer.

For a moment, nothing passed between them; just two people standing in a sea of faces, their connection like a thread pulled tight. It was enough for Kael to slow, then stop by her stall.

The woman's smile was a whispered promise, her eyes gleaming in the lantern light as she wrapped a small wooden charm in parchment for him. "A little something from my family's craft," she said, her voice barely audible above the night market's din.

Kael took the package, his fingers brushing against hers in exchange. A jolt of electricity ran through him, but he didn't flinch; it was a sensation he'd grown accustomed to over the years. "I'll pay you later," he said, his eyes locked on the charm – a delicate bird carved from a piece of walnut.

The woman nodded, her gaze drifting back to the next customer in line, but not before Kael caught a flicker of something like recognition. He tucked the parchment-wrapped charm into his tunic and wove through the crowd towards the eastern end of the market. The smell of roasting meats gave way to the River Luminari's cool mist as he

walked along its bank.

As he strolled, the rain began to let up, leaving behind a heavy stillness that clung to the city like a damp shroud. Kael breathed it in deeply, letting the familiar scents of Ashen Roads – smoke and wet stone – carry him further into the night. The market stalls dwindled, replaced by empty lots and warehouses until he reached the old clock tower.

He stopped beneath its looming presence, the woman's wooden charm still clutched in his hand. A small, weathered door on the tower's western face was slightly ajar; Kael pushed it open without hesitation, descending into the dimly lit stairway beyond. The air inside was stale and heavy with dust – and something else: the scent of old incense and worn leather.

A hooded figure stood at the bottom of the stairs, its back to him as it lit a candle. The flame cast eerie shadows on the walls, making Kael's hand move to the dagger at his side. The figure turned, revealing a woman with skin like polished alabaster and eyes that seemed to see right through him. "Kael Varn," she said, her voice husky as she smiled.

She beckoned him closer, her eyes never leaving his as he descended the stairs. "You've been avoiding me for months," she said, her voice like a soft breeze through dry leaves.

Kael's hand tightened around the hilt of his dagger, but he didn't draw it; this wasn't a confrontation to be met with steel. He stopped before her, his gaze flicking over the room – dusty tomes, ancient-looking artifacts, and an atmosphere thick with secrets. "I've had other priorities," he said, his voice even.

The woman's smile was like a faint sunrise on a cloudy day; it promised warmth but rarely delivered. "Your priorities are always... flexible, Kael." She stepped closer, her eyes glinting in the candlelight. "You were seen speaking with a member of House Veylan at The Red Griffin last night."

Kael's expression remained neutral, but his mind was already racing. "Business," he said, though it wasn't exactly a lie; he'd been watching them for weeks.

The woman's gaze didn't waver, her eyes seeming to bore into him as if searching for hidden meanings. "Business that requires you to linger in the open? You know better than most the risks of being seen." She paused, her voice taking on a hint of curiosity. "Tell me, Kael, what exactly did the Shadowhand propose?"

She leaned in, her alabaster skin seeming to glow in the dim light, as she added, "And don't bother trying to lie to me. I know your eyes, Kael Varn." Her words carried a weight that made him shift his stance, though he kept his expression neutral.

"I wasn't seen with anyone from House Veylan," he said finally, his voice firm but laced with the slightest hint of impatience. "You know I'm not one for idle chit-chat or careless connections." The woman's gaze never wavered; it was as if she saw through him, and Kael found himself wondering if perhaps she did see more than he let on.

The silence between them grew, heavy with unspoken words, until the woman finally spoke up. "I've been watching you for months now, Kael," her voice a gentle breeze on a summer's day, though it carried a hidden warning. "You're playing with fire, dancing around secrets and half-truths, but I know the truth: you were indeed seen speaking with a member of House Veylan." She stepped closer still, until they stood inches apart.

She leaned in, her breath whispering against his ear, and Kael's instincts screamed at him to step back, but his legs seemed rooted to the spot. "I know what they want from you," she whispered, "and I'll make you a deal: tell me what Veylan promised you, and I'll ensure you're protected." The air in the room felt thick with secrets, like a weight settling on Kael's shoulders.

He hesitated, his mind racing to think of any possible escape from this conversation. But something in her words resonated; she seemed to be speaking from a place of genuine concern rather than manipulation. He took a step back, clearing his throat as he replied, "It's not about what they promised me. It's about what I need." The woman's eyes narrowed, her gaze piercing as she asked, "And what is it that you need?" The words felt strange on his lips, but Kael found himself speaking them: "I need to know the truth about my sister's death."

The room seemed to hold its breath as her expression transformed from concerned to calculating. She turned away from him, pacing across the dimly lit space before stopping in front of a shelf filled with dusty vellum scrolls and ancient-looking texts. "You're willing to gamble everything for a chance at closure," she said, her voice tinged with a mix of fascination and concern. "I can help you find out what really happened to your sister, Kael." Her words hung in the air like a challenge as she turned back to him, her alabaster skin seeming to glow in the faint candlelight.

"What do I have to pay for this information?" he asked, though his voice was barely above a whisper. The woman's smile was like a promise of redemption, but Kael knew better than most that promises were made to be broken. She gestured towards a small table against the far wall, where a single candle burned with an eerie flame. "Let us begin," she said, her eyes glinting in the flickering light.

She led him to the small table, her movements economical and precise as she motioned for him to sit across from her. The flame of the candle cast eerie shadows on the walls, making Kael's skin prickle with unease, but he settled into the chair, his eyes never leaving hers. A faint scent of sandalwood wafted up from the worn leather

binding of a book on the table between them.

"You want to know the truth about your sister," she repeated, her voice low and measured as she pulled out a small notebook from beneath the pages of the book. "Tell me everything you remember." Her hand moved with a life of its own, scribbling notes in the margins of the page as Kael hesitated, his mind racing back to the events surrounding his sister's death. He'd thought he'd pushed those memories deep, but they lingered, refusing to be buried.

He took a breath, letting the words spill out in a rush. "We were at the old windmill on the outskirts of town," he began, his voice steady despite the turmoil brewing inside him. "It was late, and we were supposed to meet up with some people from the city - buyers for my sister's art." Kael's hands clenched into fists as memories flooded back: the arguments they'd had about her involvement with those shady characters, his futile attempts to convince her to walk away.

The woman listened attentively, her gaze locked on his face as he spoke. "We were ambushed," Kael continued, his voice growing hoarse. "I remember a fight, and then...and then I was knocked out." He cut himself off, feeling the familiar weight of frustration settle in. That's all he remembered - fragmented images, the sound of screams, and the taste of dust on his lips when he came to.

The woman's expression remained impassive as she scribbled more notes in her book. "And what about your sister's final words?" she asked finally, her voice softening ever so slightly. Kael's gut twisted at the memory, but he forced himself to continue. "She...she told me something before she died," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Something about 'the Shadows'." The word hung in the air like a challenge, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw something flicker behind her eyes - something that looked almost like understanding.

He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, as the woman's gaze snapped back to his face. "What do you know about the Shadows?" he pressed, his mind racing with possibilities. She smiled again, this one enigmatic and guarded, as she leaned back in her chair. "Let us continue," she said, her voice dripping with a subtle, sweet music that sent a shiver down Kael's spine.

The woman's smile lingered, but her eyes had returned to their piercing gaze, as if daring him to continue questioning her. Kael's skin crawled under her scrutiny, but he pushed on, his need for answers fueling his determination. "What does she mean by 'the Shadows'?" he asked again, his voice steady despite the tension building inside him.

She leaned forward once more, her eyes glinting in the candlelight like polished onyx. "You know what they are, don't you, Kael?" Her words hung between them, heavy with unspoken meaning, and for a moment, Kael thought she was trying to prod

something out of him, but he wasn't sure what. He shook his head, feeling a shiver run down his spine as her gaze seemed to bore into his very soul.

"Very well," she said finally, her voice dropping to a low whisper. "I'll explain. The Shadows...they're an organization, one that operates in the city's underbelly. They pull the strings, Kael - and by 'strings,' I mean they decide who lives and dies." Her words dripped with malice, sending a cold dread spreading through his chest. "But there's more to it than just murder and extortion," she continued. "They have...influence."

Kael's grip on the table tightened as he felt his world tilt on its axis. Influence? What could that possibly mean in a city where the nobility pulled the strings, where might made right? He shook his head, trying to clear it, but his mind reeled with possibilities. "What influence?" he repeated, his voice barely above a whisper.

She leaned back in her chair once more, steepling her fingers together as she smiled again - that enigmatic, guarded smile. "Ah, Kael, the Shadows have their hands in all corners of this city. Merchants, thieves, nobles - they all dance to the tune of the Shadows' strings." Her eyes glinted like dark jewels in the candlelight. "And your sister, she was...entangled with them."

The air seemed to thicken around him as Kael's grip on reality began to slip. His sister, entangled with the Shadows? It sounded like a wild accusation, one that threatened to unravel all he thought he knew about her and himself. He pushed his chair back from the table, his eyes locked on hers, as he demanded, "What do you know?"

The woman's smile never wavered as she nodded for him to continue. "Tell me what else you remember," she said, her voice a soft cajoling that belied the danger lurking beneath the surface.

Kael's mind reeled as he strained to recall more details, but they remained stubbornly out of reach. He felt like a man drowning in a sea of uncertainty, with the woman's words lapping at his ears, pulling him under. His thoughts churned with memories of his sister, memories he'd tried to suppress for so long. Why had she been involved with the Shadows? And what did it mean?

He forced himself back to the table, sitting down with a sense of resignation. The woman's eyes never left his face as she leaned forward once more, her steepled fingers releasing a faint scent of sandalwood into the air. "Your sister was...fascinated by the Shadows," she said, her voice measured and detached, like a scholar discussing a subject from afar. "She wanted to understand their power, to know what drove them." Kael's gut twisted with a mix of emotions: anger, fear, and a creeping sense of understanding. His sister had always been drawn to the dark corners of life; it was part of her art.

The woman's words hung in the air as she pulled out a small vellum sheet from beneath the book, smoothing it flat on the table. "This is a symbol," she said, pointing to a crude drawing of a serpent coiled around an eye. "A mark associated with the Shadows. Your sister used this symbol in her work - paintings, sketches, even poetry." Kael's eyes fell on the symbol, and for an instant, he felt a shiver run down his spine. He remembered those symbols now, etched into his sister's sketchbook, scattered across her paintings like a hidden language.

A noise from outside broke the spell, and the woman's head snapped up, her ears pricked towards the sound of footsteps in the corridor beyond the room. "I think we've spoken enough for tonight," she said, her voice low and urgent as she gathered her papers together. Kael's eyes narrowed; he didn't like the way his questions had unsettled her. Something was off - something more than just his own unease with the Shadows. He stood up, towering over the table, as the woman hastily pushed back her chair.

The door creaked open, admitting a tall figure clad in dark robes, their face obscured by a hood that seemed to swallow the light around them. The air was heavy with an unspoken message: they were being watched, and Kael's instincts screamed for him to leave.

Tags: Kael Varn, Shadows that Bind