

# Beneath the Iron Sky

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Kael Varn walked the cobbled streets of Ashen Roads, his eyes scanning the crowded market for any sign of the merchant's daughter. He'd been tracking her for hours, ever since a hooded figure slipped him a note with her name and a location. She was supposed to meet him at the Old Forge, but the sun was setting, casting long shadows across the city.

Kael pushed through the throngs, his black leather armor blending in with the darkness. He had no love for these crowded marketplaces; the stench of desperation clung to every face like a shroud. People spoke in hushed tones about the Black Rose Order, and some said Kael's work for them was done at great cost. But he'd long ago stopped caring what others thought.

As he navigated through the crowd, his hand brushed against the worn leather strap of his Nightforge dagger. The weight of it soothed him, a reminder that sometimes balance required more than words. A gentle correction here, a whispered secret there – not every imbalance demanded bloodshed.

A figure detached from the throng and fell into step beside him. "Kael Varn," she said, her voice like silk. "I see you're still bound to the streets." Arin Thalos, a Curator of the Order, eyed the crowd warily, as if expecting ambushes around every corner.

"Beneath the Iron Sky," he said quietly, acknowledging her presence without turning his head. He knew what she'd seen; they both did. The world above was fading fast, and even the Black Rose's influence couldn't keep the shadows at bay forever.

"Mercy is not always justice," Arin observed, her words aimed into the wind. "But perhaps this one case will make it worth our while." They navigated through a narrow alleyway between two stalls, dodging a cluster of drunken revelers celebrating the evening's wine and song.

The merchant's daughter, Elara, was waiting for them in an abandoned stable at the edge of Ashen Roads. Her father had died months ago; her mother still lingered, clinging to life with a fragile grip on reality. Kael suspected she'd been driven mad by grief – but in this world, madness came cheap.

Kael and Arin found Elara sitting amidst hay-strewn stalls, the setting sun casting an eerie glow over her huddled form. A small wooden box lay open on her lap, its contents spilling out like scattered autumn leaves. A faint blue glow emanated from within, a tiny spark of magic that would soon burn itself out.

"Elara," Kael said softly, crouching beside her. "We need to talk." Her eyes flickered up, empty and lost – or perhaps something more sinister lurked beneath the surface?

As Elara's gaze locked onto Kael, her eyes seemed to sharpen, and she sat up straight, the scattered items from the wooden box spilling across the hay-strewn floor. The blue glow from within pulsed more rapidly now, as if trying to keep pace with her rising emotions. "You found me," she whispered, a hint of determination in her voice.

Kael nodded once, his hand still resting on the Nightforge's leather strap. "I did. I have a proposition for you, Elara. One that requires discretion." He glanced around the stable, ensuring they were alone before continuing. "There's been... trouble with the Red Vipers, and we think you might know something about it."

Elara's eyes darted between Kael and Arin, her fingers drumming against the wooden box as if trying to contain some inner turmoil. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said finally, but her voice lacked conviction.

Kael leaned forward, his eyes locking onto hers. "Don't play coy, Elara. We've been watching you. The Vipers have been sniffing around your family's business for months. Your father may be gone, but we suspect they're still looking for something – or someone." He paused, letting the words sink in before adding, "Your mother's life is at risk if we don't get to the bottom of this."

Arin shifted beside him, her voice a gentle counterpoint to Kael's sharp tone. "Elara, we can help you keep your mother safe. We'll find out what's going on with the Red Vipers and put an end to it." She paused, her eyes scanning Elara's face as if searching for any sign of trust. "But we need your cooperation."

For a moment, Elara just stared at them, the blue glow from the wooden box still pulsing like a small, erratic heartbeat. Then, with a slow nod, she reached out and closed the box, her movements economical and precise. "I'll tell you what I can," she said finally, her voice resigned but firm.

The dim glow of the wooden box's magic began to fade, a dying ember that left Elara's eyes red-rimmed but resolute. "My father was involved with them," she said, her voice low, "but I don't know what he did for the Red Vipers. He wouldn't tell me." Her gaze drifted away from Kael and Arin, focusing on some distant point in the darkness beyond the stable.

"He'd been making deliveries," Elara continued, "taking goods to various locations around the city. My mother thought it was just normal business, but I think there was

more to it than that." She paused, her words hesitant as if searching for the right path forward. "He'd sometimes come back late at night, his eyes... different. Like he carried a burden, and the weight of it was pressing him down."

Kael's expression remained neutral, but his grip on the Nightforge's strap tightened ever so slightly as Elara spoke. He'd seen that look before in men who worked for the Red Vipers – the weight of secrets, the crushing pressure to keep them hidden. "What kind of goods?" he asked, his tone matter-of-fact.

Elara's eyes snapped back into focus, her gaze locking onto Kael's with a flicker of defiance. "Food, mostly," she said, her voice firm. "Grain and wine and other essentials for the city's markets. But my father would sometimes receive small packages – odd, unmarked boxes that he'd keep hidden away in our storage room." A faint tremor ran through her hand as she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Arin leaned forward, her eyes locked onto Elara's with an intense focus. "Tell us more about these packages," she said, her voice low and urgent.

The stable's shadows seemed to grow darker as Elara spoke, as if the words themselves were suffocating what little light remained. Kael's eyes roved over her, searching for any sign of deception or hidden agendas, but she met his gaze with a stubborn determination that made him wonder if he was getting in too deep. He had seen it before – the desperation to hold onto hope, no matter how fleeting.

Arin's voice cut through the tension, pulling Kael back into focus. "Describe these packages," she pressed, her words laced with a quiet intensity that suggested this was more than just idle curiosity. Elara's eyes dropped, avoiding the direct question, but Kael's gaze followed hers to the wooden box still clutched in her lap.

The blue glow had dimmed to a faint ember now, and the air seemed heavy with unspoken words as Elara's fingers absently drummed against the box. "They were... unusual," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "Small, wrapped in black cloth. Some had no markings at all; others had symbols – strange runes that my father wouldn't explain." A faint tremble ran through her hand as she paused, her eyes darting to Kael and Arin before falling back into the stable's shadows.

Arin shifted forward, her presence commanding attention without demanding it. "What about the contents?" Her voice was firm but not unkind, a reminder that they were there to help Elara, not judge her. The merchant's daughter hesitated, as if weighing the consequences of speaking further. For a moment, Kael thought she'd clamp down on her words, but then she spoke in a low, barely audible tone.

"Medicine," she whispered. "My father said it was for... research." The word dripped with a mixture of fear and suspicion, and Kael's eyes narrowed as he processed the information. He had seen similar packages before – black-marketed goods traded on

the city's shadowy undercurrents. "What kind of medicine?" he pressed, his tone even but probing.

Elara's eyes flickered up to his, a silent plea for understanding or perhaps absolution. But Kael's expression was unreadable, and Arin's gaze remained fixed intently on the merchant's daughter. They both knew that in this world, sometimes the line between medicine and poison blurred until it became impossible to distinguish between healing and harm.

Kael's eyes lingered on Elara, searching for any sign of deception, but her gaze remained fixed on the wooden box in her lap, her fingers drumming a slow rhythm against its surface. The dim light in the stable seemed to grow even more oppressive, as if the shadows themselves were pressing down upon them.

"Medicine," he repeated, his tone neutral, but his mind racing with the implications. He'd seen it before – rare, exotic ingredients smuggled into the city under the guise of research or medicine, only to be used for more nefarious purposes. The Red Vipers had a reputation for pushing the boundaries, experimenting with forbidden knowledge. "What did your father say about these packages?" he asked, his eyes never leaving Elara's face.

She hesitated, her gaze flickering up to meet Kael's before dropping away once more. "He said they were... experimental treatments," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the stable's wooden beams. Arin shifted forward, her presence a gentle prod to encourage Elara to continue. The merchant's daughter took a deep breath, her eyes locking onto Kael's with a determination he recognized – the same look she'd worn when negotiating with suppliers or dealing with demanding customers.

"The Red Vipers have been using this city as a testing ground," she said, her words spilling out in a rush. "My father was involved, but I don't know what exactly he did for them. He'd talk to their representatives in secret, often under the cover of night. They'd send him on errands – to retrieve supplies or deliver packages – and sometimes he'd return with... changes." Her voice dropped to a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard. "Physical changes."

Kael's grip on the Nightforge's strap tightened, his eyes narrowing as the implications sank in. The Red Vipers were experimenting on people – using this city as their playground for dark and twisted research. He thought back to the rumors circulating through the Order's ranks – whispers of human subjects being used in twisted experiments. It seemed those rumors might be more than mere hearsay.

Arin leaned forward, her eyes locked onto Elara's with an intensity that made Kael feel like an outsider. "Where were these deliveries?" she asked, her voice low and urgent. Elara's gaze dropped away, and for a moment, Kael thought she'd clamped down on

the conversation, but then she spoke in a small, defeated tone.

"My father said they were to a warehouse on the outskirts of town - one owned by a man named Marcellus. He's a trader, or so I thought." Her voice trailed off, and the stable's shadows seemed to deepen, as if the words themselves had become heavy with unspoken secrets.

Kael's eyes remained locked onto Elara's, searching for any hint of deception, but her gaze wavered only slightly before settling on Arin's face. "Marcellus," Arin repeated, her voice a low hum of understanding. "We know the warehouse. It's one of several properties owned by the Red Vipers' front businesses."

Kael's grip on the Nightforge's strap eased ever so slightly as Elara nodded, a small, haunted smile twisting her lips. The shadows in the stable seemed to recede, as if the weight of her words had lifted slightly. "My father was... involved," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what exactly he did for them, but I do know that those packages were just a small part of it."

Arin's eyes never left Elara's face as she leaned back in her chair, her expression thoughtful. The dim light seemed to highlight the lines etched into her features, and Kael realized that even their brief time spent together had aged her, worn down by the weight of their mission. "We need to investigate this warehouse," she said finally, her voice firm but not unkind. "See if we can find any evidence of what's going on."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt his gut twist with anticipation. He'd been expecting this moment - the inevitable pivot that would draw them deeper into the Red Vipers' operations. The stable seemed to darken further as Elara's eyes flickered up to meet his, a mixture of fear and determination etched on her face.

"We should go tonight," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Before it's too late." Kael's grip on the Nightforge tightened as he nodded, a plan already forming in his mind. They'd need to move swiftly - gather their gear and get to the warehouse before anyone raised the alarm. The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with unspoken thoughts and looming consequences.

The creaking of the stable's wooden beams seemed to grow louder, echoing through the darkness like a countdown. Arin's eyes locked onto Kael's, a silent understanding passing between them - they were about to step into the unknown, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Kael's thoughts churned as he stood up, his eyes scanning the stable with a practiced intensity. "We need to move," he said, his voice low and urgent. "Gather our gear, make sure we're ready to leave at sundown." Arin nodded, her expression set in a determined mask, but Kael's attention remained on Elara.

"Can you tell us more about your father's involvement with the Red Vipers?" he asked, his tone gentle but probing. Elara's gaze dropped away, and for a moment, Kael thought she'd clamped down on her words, but then she began to speak in a low, hesitant tone. "He... helped them acquire supplies," she said, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the stable's beams. "I don't know what kind of supplies, but I've seen him bring back strange crates and boxes – things that looked like they belonged in a laboratory."

Kael's grip on the Nightforge's strap tightened as he processed this new information. The Red Vipers were using the city's merchant guilds to acquire forbidden knowledge and materials – using their influence to smuggle in dark goods under the guise of research or trade. He thought back to the rumors circulating through the Order's ranks, whispers of human subjects being used in twisted experiments. It seemed those rumors might be more than mere hearsay.

Arin stood up, her movements fluid and economical, as she began to help Elara gather their gear. Kael watched them with a practiced eye, his mind racing with the implications. They needed to move swiftly – get to the warehouse before anyone raised the alarm or alerted the Red Vipers' operatives. He turned away from the stable's entrance, his eyes scanning the dimly lit alleyway outside for any sign of potential dangers.

The night air was heavy with a fine mist, the stars hidden behind a veil of clouds. Kael felt the familiar weight of his sword at his side, the Nightforge's strap digging into his shoulder as he moved through the narrow alleys. He knew these streets like the back of his hand – every hidden passage, every potential escape route. But tonight, with the weight of their mission settling in, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

As they made their way to the safehouse, the silence between them grew oppressive, heavy with unspoken thoughts and looming consequences. Kael's mind kept returning to Elara's words – her father's involvement with the Red Vipers, the mysterious packages, and the warehouse on the outskirts of town. They were getting close to something, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they were walking into a trap.

The safehouse was a nondescript building, tucked away in a forgotten corner of the city. Kael knocked three times, the sound echoing through the stillness like a challenge. The door creaked open, revealing a gruff-faced woman with a scar above her eyebrow and a look of practiced hostility. "What do you want?" she growled, her hand resting on the hilt of a dagger.

Arin stepped forward, her movements fluid and confident. "We're here for gear," she said, her voice firm but polite. The woman's expression softened slightly, and she stepped aside to reveal a cramped storage room filled with an assortment of tools and

equipment. Kael's eyes scanned the shelves, his mind racing with the possibilities – they'd need everything from lockpicks to climbing gear if they were going to infiltrate the warehouse undetected.

The woman handed Arin a small satchel containing their gear, her expression unreadable. "Be careful out there," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Kael nodded, his eyes never leaving hers as he accepted the satchel and began to check its contents. The woman's words hung in the air like a warning – they were walking into danger, and only time would tell if they'd emerge with their lives intact.

As Kael loaded their gear into his pack, Elara slipped away from Arin's side, her eyes scanning the storage room as if searching for something – or someone. She paused beside a crate in the corner, her gaze locked onto a small, intricately carved wooden box tucked between two larger containers. The woman followed her line of sight and muttered a warning under her breath before turning back to Arin.

"Be sure you understand what we're getting into," she said, her voice low and serious. "The Red Vipers don't play by the rules – not even in this city." Arin nodded curtly, her expression set in a mask of determination. Kael finished packing the satchel, his eyes flicking to Elara, who still stood frozen beside the crate. He felt a shiver run down his spine as she reached out and opened the small box, revealing a collection of silver-tipped daggers, each one etched with a symbol he didn't recognize.

"Leave that," Kael said abruptly, his voice harsher than intended. Elara's eyes met his, a flicker of surprise followed by a hint of hurt before she closed the box and tucked it back between the crates. The woman's gaze narrowed as if sensing the tension in the air, but Arin merely shifted the satchel onto Kael's shoulder, her hand brushing against his. "Let's get moving," she said, her voice softening slightly.

As they emerged from the safehouse, the city seemed to stretch out before them like a labyrinth of shadows and darkness. The stars above were hidden behind a veil of clouds, casting an eerie gloom over the alleys and rooftops. Kael led the way, his eyes scanning the streets for any sign of danger as they made their way toward the warehouse on the outskirts of town.

The air grew thick with the stench of smoke and ash as they approached the city's industrial quarter. Flames danced in the distance, casting a fiery glow over the skeletal framework of a half-built factory. Kael's heart sank – it seemed the Red Vipers were using this area for their operations, burning through whatever buildings they could to conceal their activities. He quickened his pace, his hand on the Nightforge's hilt as they turned onto a narrow street lined with warehouses and factories.

The building they sought loomed ahead, its walls shrouded in shadows like a monolith of darkness. A chill ran down Kael's spine as he caught sight of the entrance – a pair of heavy iron doors adorned with intricate locks and symbols that seemed to writhe in

the flickering torchlight. Arin's eyes met his, a silent understanding passing between them - this was it, their moment of reckoning.

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