

# THE INVISIBLE HAND OF JUSTICE

Black

## The Subtle Hand

Kael Varn stepped into the dimly lit alley, his eyes adjusting to the flickering torches that lined the walls. The air reeked of smoke and desperation, a familiar scent in this part of the city. He navigated through the narrow passage with ease, avoiding the huddled figures that clung to the shadows. The Ashen Roads whispered secrets in his ear - whispers he had learned to listen for.

As he turned a corner, a figure emerged from the gloom. Kael recognized the hooded shape, the way the fabric was drawn over their face like a veil. It was Aethera, a Curator of the Black Rose Order, and one who had requested his presence in this forsaken place. They spoke in hushed tones, her words a gentle caress compared to the razor's edge of justice he often wielded.

"A correction needs making," she said, "One that requires your... particular skills."

Kael's gaze roved over the dark, dusty buildings as if searching for hidden threats. "Which one?" he asked, his voice low and even.

The Curator hesitated before answering. "In the north district, near the Everia bridge, a family has seen its children go missing. Foul play is suspected, but the parents - the Aethon's - refuse to involve the Nightforge. They fear... repercussions."

Kael's eyes narrowed, his mind already calculating the cost of involvement. The Aethons were not members of the Black Rose Order, and their silence came at a price. He nodded once, acknowledging the favor being asked.

As he followed Aethera through the winding streets, Kael detected the faint hum of magic in the air - an undercurrent that flowed through the city like the Ashen Roads themselves. He kept his own magic leashed, preferring the subtle approach that had earned him the nickname "The Invisibility." Besides, with the Broken Writ's power bleeding out across the land, even a whisper of magic might be enough to raise unwanted attention.

They reached the Aethons' residence, a modest dwelling near the bridge. Kael noted the candles burning in the windows, a nervous signal that the family was indeed hiding something. As they entered, he felt the weight of consequence settle upon him - the accumulation of silences, the whispered rumors, and the ever-present danger of

detection.

The father, Marcellus Aethon, was pacing near the hearth when Kael entered. His eyes locked onto the assassin, and for a moment, Kael thought he saw a glimmer of recognition, but it vanished beneath a mask of terror.

"You're here to tell me what you've found," Marcellus said, his voice trembling.

Kael sat on the edge of a chair, his eyes roving over the room. He spotted a faint symbol etched into the wall, near the bed – an emblem associated with one of the city's most powerful merchant houses. "I'll tell you what I've seen," he said slowly, "but first, answer me this: What do you know about the Silversmith's guild?"

Marcellus took a step back, his eyes darting toward Aethera before returning to Kael. "We... we don't know anything."

Kael rose from the chair, his gaze never leaving Marcellus' face. He reached into his cloak and produced a small vial of oil. "This came from your home," he said, holding it out. "I think you'll want to take it back."

Aethera stepped forward, her eyes locked onto the vial as well. For a moment, the only sound was the flickering flames in the hearth.

"You see, Aethera," Kael began, his voice measured, "the Silversmith's guild is looking for something – or someone. And I suspect they're willing to dig through the very foundations of this city to find it."

Marcellus' eyes widened, and he stumbled backward as if struck by a blow.

The sound of running footsteps echoed from outside, followed by Aethera's swift departure, leaving Kael alone with Marcellus. The family patriarch stumbled toward the door, only to be stopped by Kael's hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me," the assassin whispered, "what you know."

Marcellus' eyes locked onto Kael's, and in that moment, he revealed a truth that hung like a shadow over the city – one that Kael would later remember as he navigated the silent roads of the Ashen Roads.

In the end, it was not blood on his hands, but the faint memory of a scream that followed him out into the night.

The memory of the scream clung to Kael like a shroud, its presence lingering in his mind long after he stepped out into the cool night air. He felt Aethera's hand on his arm as she pulled him through the winding streets, her pace swift and urgent.

"Kael, we must speak with the Hierophant," she said, her voice low and commanding. "Marcellus' words have raised more questions than answers." The Curator navigated a narrow staircase that led up to the Hierophant's chambers, located in the heart of the

Black Rose Order's stronghold.

As they climbed, Kael couldn't shake the feeling that he was being pulled deeper into a web of secrets and lies. The memory of Marcellus' words replayed in his mind – "the Silversmith's guild is searching for something... or someone." He didn't know what to believe, but one thing was certain: the Aethons were involved, and their silence came at a steep price.

The Hierophant's chambers were dimly lit, the air thick with incense and the scent of old books. The Hierophant herself sat behind her desk, her eyes fixed on Kael as he entered. "So, you've seen the Aethons," she said, her voice dripping with an unspoken weight.

"Aye," Kael replied, his words brief. "Marcellus revealed a truth – one that could shake the foundations of this city." The Hierophant leaned forward, her eyes glinting in the dim light. "Tell me," she said, her voice commanding, and Kael hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"It's about the Silver Stag emblem," he began. "Marcellus' house was involved with one of the merchant houses that bear it – the ones seeking to expand their influence across the land." The Hierophant's face remained impassive, but her hands steeped together in a calculated gesture. "Go on."

"The merchant house is looking for something," Kael continued, "or someone connected to the Nightforge's activities. Marcellus said they were searching far and wide, willing to dig through this city's foundations if needed." The Hierophant's expression didn't change, but her gaze lingered on Kael as if searching for hidden meaning.

"A connection to the Broken Writ," she muttered to herself, "I should have seen it coming." Aethera shifted uncomfortably beside him, and Kael felt a flicker of unease in his chest. He had uncovered more questions than answers, but one thing was clear: the stakes were escalating, and he stood at the center of the maelstrom.

"We need to speak with Lord Arin," the Hierophant declared, rising from her chair. "He's been... investigating certain irregularities within the Nightforge. See what you can learn from him." Kael nodded, his mind racing ahead, anticipating the web of complications that would soon ensnare him.

As they left the Hierophant's chambers, Aethera leaned close and whispered, "Be careful, Kael. The threads are tangled now. We don't know who to trust." He nodded, his hand instinctively going to the small vial of oil he'd retrieved from the Aethons' residence. The memory of Marcellus' words still lingered – a reminder that, in this city, the truth was as elusive as the Ashen Roads themselves.

Kael navigated the winding corridors of the Black Rose Order's stronghold with Aethera by his side, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls. They arrived at Lord Arin's chambers, where the Nightforge's representative waited, surrounded by half a dozen Black Rose guards. The air was heavy with tension as Kael entered, the weight of consequence bearing down on him like a physical force.

Lord Arin rose from his chair, his eyes narrowing as he took in Kael's presence. "I've been expecting you," he said, his voice dripping with an unspoken warning.

"You know why I'm here," Kael said, his voice level, as he stepped forward, the vial of oil clutched in his hand. "The Hierophant wants me to learn from you what I can about the irregularities within the Nightforge."

Lord Arin's gaze flickered to Aethera before returning to Kael, a hint of wariness creeping into his eyes. "I know why you're here," he repeated, his voice measured. "But perhaps we should speak of this in private." He gestured toward a side door, where two Black Rose guards stood, their faces expressionless.

Aethera's hand on Kael's arm tightened as they stepped through the doorway, leaving the main room behind. The air was thick with silence as they entered a smaller chamber, its walls lined with shelves containing dusty tomes and scrolls. Lord Arin sat on a nearby bench, his eyes locked onto Kael's face.

"What do you know about Marcellus Aethon?" Kael asked, breaking the silence. Lord Arin's gaze shifted, his eyes narrowing as if calculating the weight of what he'd reveal. "He's been... discreetly questioned," he said finally. "We believe he may be involved with a rival merchant house, one seeking to undermine the Nightforge's influence."

Kael's grip on the vial tightened, the oil inside sloshing softly within. He recalled Marcellus' words - "the Silversmith's guild is searching for something... or someone." "What does this have to do with the Broken Writ?" he asked, his mind racing ahead.

Lord Arin leaned forward, his eyes glinting in the dim light. "The Broken Writ is an ancient text," he said slowly. "One that speaks of power and control. The Nightforge believes it holds the key to our future - and the guild seeks to claim it for themselves."

Aethera's grip on Kael's arm grew stronger, her face pale in the flickering candlelight. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized the true extent of the situation - the city was being manipulated by unseen forces, with him caught in the middle.

"We can't trust anyone," Aethera whispered as they stepped back into the main chamber, Lord Arin watching them from the doorway. Kael's eyes met Aethera's, a silent understanding passing between them - they were no longer walking through a city of shadows, but one of shifting allegiances and deadly politics.

The weight of consequence settled upon him once more as he turned to leave with Aethera, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls. They descended into the darkening streets, their path winding through the city's twisting alleys, the Nightforge's stronghold looming behind them like a monolith.

The evening air clung to their skin as they navigated the narrow alleys, the shadows cast by the flickering torches above them seeming to writhe like living things. Kael's thoughts swirled with the implications of Lord Arin's words – a rival merchant house, the Broken Writ, and the Nightforge's desperate pursuit. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being pulled toward some hidden precipice, the city's undercurrents sweeping him along.

Aethera's hand still held onto his arm, her grip tight as she guided them through the winding streets. They walked in silence, the only sound the soft rustle of their footsteps and the creaking of wooden signs above the shops they passed. The air grew thick with the smell of roasting meats and baking bread, the savory scents momentarily distracting Kael from the weight of his thoughts.

As they turned a corner, a figure emerged from the darkness ahead – a young woman, her features pinched by worry as she hurried toward them. "Kael Varn," she called out, her voice laced with a mixture of urgency and fear. Aethera's grip on his arm tightened, and Kael recognized the woman as Elara Vex, a novice scribe who often provided the Black Rose Order with discreet information.

"What is it, Elara?" Kael asked, his tone even as he slowed their pace. The streets around them seemed to darken, as if night itself was closing in. Elara glanced nervously about before leaning in close. "I've received a message," she whispered, her words barely audible over the sound of their footsteps. "The Silversmith's guild has taken one of our own – Eira Brightshield, a scribe who's been... investigating certain irregularities within the Nightforge."

Kael felt a jolt run through him like a spark of electricity, the implications exploding in his mind. He recalled Marcellus' words about searching for something or someone connected to the Nightforge's activities. This was more than coincidence – it was a web of connections and conspiracies that threatened to ensnare him completely.

"What do you know about Eira?" Aethera asked, her voice low and even, as they slowed to a stop in front of Elara. The young woman's eyes darted between them before her gaze dropped to the cobblestones beneath their feet. "I don't know what they're looking for," she said quietly, "but I was told that Eira stumbled upon something significant – something the guild wants desperately."

The city's shadows seemed to deepen, darkness seeping into the air as Elara's words hung between them like a challenge. Kael's mind reeled with the implications – Eira, a member of the Black Rose Order, taken by the Silversmith's guild? He felt a cold

dread creeping up his spine as he realized that Aethera's grip on his arm had tightened even further.

"Aethera," he said softly, turning to her. Her eyes met his, a spark of understanding flaring between them. They exchanged a silent understanding – they would need to act swiftly to secure Eira's release and unravel the tangled web of conspiracies threatening the city. Elara's words still lingered, her expression pinched by worry as she glanced about nervously once more before leaning in close.

"Be careful," she whispered again, her breath fanning against Kael's ear. "The Silversmith's guild doesn't take kindly to meddling. They'll stop at nothing to claim what they want." Her words were laced with a thread of fear that unsettled Kael – this was no longer just about loyalty or duty; lives hung in the balance, and the consequences of failure would be dire.

He nodded curtly, his mind racing ahead as he turned back to Aethera. "We need to move," he said, his voice firm but measured. They exchanged a brief glance before turning toward the Black Rose Order's stronghold, their footsteps quickening in purpose. The city seemed to darken further with each step, as if night itself was descending, shrouding everything in shadows.

The silence between them was oppressive, filled only by the sound of their footsteps and the distant clang of hammering from a nearby forge. Kael's thoughts swirled with Eira's capture – what had she discovered that was so critical? What did the Silversmith's guild plan to do with her? He felt a cold dread spreading through his chest as he pushed aside the questions, focusing on their immediate goal: securing Eira's release and unraveling the tangled web of conspiracies.

As they approached the stronghold, its gates swung open with a metallic creak. Kael's eyes met those of the guards standing at attention, their faces expressionless. "The Hierophant awaits," one of them announced, his voice flat and detached. "He wishes to see you, Kael Varn."

The Hierophant's chambers were dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of incense and old parchment. Kael followed the guards through the narrow corridors, Aethera by his side. As they entered the Hierophant's private quarters, he rose from behind his desk, a hint of a smile on his face.

"Kael Varn," he said, his voice low and measured. "I see you've been consorting with our esteemed Lord Arin. Tell me, what did he reveal to you?" The Hierophant's eyes seemed to bore into Kael's very soul as he gestured for them to approach the fire pit. Aethera moved forward, her movements fluid, while Kael hesitated, a sense of trepidation settling in the pit of his stomach.

"I know what the Nightforge seeks," Kael began, choosing his words carefully. "The Broken Writ, an ancient text that speaks of power and control. Lord Arin believes it's key to their future." The Hierophant's gaze lingered on him, as if searching for any sign of deception. "And I know they've taken Eira Brightshield," Kael added, the words tumbling out in a rush. "She was investigating irregularities within the Nightforge."

The Hierophant's expression remained inscrutable, his eyes gleaming with an intensity that made Kael's skin prickle. "Eira's disappearance is indeed a development of grave concern," he said finally, his voice measured. "But tell me, Kael Varn - what do you plan to do about it?" Aethera's eyes met his, and for a moment, they simply looked at each other, the unspoken understanding between them clear.

The Hierophant's words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael knew better than to respond hastily. "I'll need your guidance," he said finally, his voice even. The Hierophant's eyes flicked to Aethera, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a glimmer of something like approval.

The Hierophant nodded, his expression unreadable. "You will need all the guidance you can get," he said dryly. "Our guest has...acquired a certain interest in your well-being." Aethera's eyes flicked to Kael, and for an instant, he thought he saw a glimmer of curiosity. He knew what she was thinking: who this 'guest' could be, and why they were so invested in his safety.

With a gesture, the Hierophant summoned a figure from the shadows - a woman with skin like polished alabaster and hair as black as coal. She moved with an unnerving stillness, her eyes fixed on Kael with an unblinking intensity that made his skin crawl. "This is Lyra," the Hierophant said, his voice low and even. "She has a proposal for you, Kael Varn." Aethera's hand found his, her fingers intertwining with his as they stood there, surrounded by the shadows.

Lyra moved forward, her movements eerily silent. She stopped in front of Kael, her eyes still fixed on him like a cold weight. "I represent someone who can help you," she said, her voice low and husky. "Someone who knows the Nightforge's secrets better than anyone else." Kael felt a spark of hope ignite within him - this could be their chance to break into the Nightforge's inner workings and rescue Eira.

Aethera's grip on his hand tightened, and he sensed a warning there - don't trust her, not yet. He shot her a glance, but Lyra's gaze was still fixed on him, her eyes burning with an unsettling intensity. The Hierophant leaned forward, his eyes glinting in the firelight. "What do you say, Kael Varn?" he asked, his voice dripping with anticipation.

The Hierophant's question hung in the air, a weighty silence settling between them like a promise of impending doom. Kael's eyes lingered on Lyra, searching for any sign of deception, but her expression remained as serene as alabaster. He could almost feel Aethera's unease radiating from her side, her fingers digging into his hand like

tiny hooks.

"What do you know about the Nightforge?" he asked finally, his voice measured against the tension building around him. Lyra's gaze never wavered, her eyes still fixed on him with an unnerving intensity. "My patron," she began, her voice husky and low, "has...influenced certain individuals within the Nightforge's ranks. They have revealed to me the location of a hidden scriptorium, deep beneath the city." The Hierophant leaned forward, his eyes glinting with interest.

Kael felt Aethera's hand tighten around his, a silent warning, but he couldn't quite decipher its meaning. "What makes you think this scriptorium holds the key to Eira's release?" he asked, his mind racing ahead to the potential risks and benefits of such a plan. Lyra's lips curled into a faint smile, her eyes glinting with a cold light. "Because it's there that the Nightforge's most sensitive information is kept - including documents detailing Eira Brightshield's research."

The Hierophant nodded thoughtfully, his eyes still fixed on Kael. "Tell me, Lyra," he said, his voice measured, "what does your patron propose in exchange for this assistance?" Lyra's gaze never wavered from Kael's face as she spoke, her words dripping with a calculating politeness. "My patron is willing to facilitate Eira Brightshield's release - and provide you, Kael Varn, with a...favorable introduction to the Nightforge's inner workings."

Tags: Kael Varn, Consequence Over Time, Subtle Correction