

THE LOVING HAND THAT SHAKES THE THRONE

Black

The Shadow on the Throne

Kael Varn stepped out of the carriage and onto the worn cobblestones, his eyes scanning the flickering torches that lined the entrance to House Veylan's estate. It was a chilly autumn evening, the air heavy with moisture and the scent of woodsmoke from the nearby fireplaces. The rustle of leaves beneath his boots was the only sound as he walked towards the mansion, his presence seemingly unnoticed by the servants.

Inside, the halls were dimly lit, the air thick with the weight of velvet curtains and polished marble. Kael navigated the labyrinthine corridors, seeking out the one person who could grant him an audience with the Queen herself: Thalos Nightforge's personal Curator, Mistress Arachne.

He spotted her in the garden, surrounded by a trio of candles, her silver threads dancing as she tended to the delicate blooms that bloomed only in the flickering light. Her hands moved deftly, each stitch precise and deliberate, like an intricate embroidery on a cloak. "Mistress Arachne," Kael said quietly, not wishing to startle her.

"Kael Varn," she replied, without turning from her work, "I expected you earlier. You're here for the Queen." Her voice was smooth as silk, the words woven with care, like a thread through the needle.

"The Queen," he repeated, his eyes scanning the candlelit space, the delicate petals and fine threads that seemed to dance under his gaze. He couldn't help but wonder how much of this intricate balance she maintained.

"In your service," Arachne continued, finishing her task with a flourish before standing up, smoothing out her gown. "She is not pleased with the current... instability within House Veylan." Her eyes narrowed slightly, her voice measured. "And so, the Queen requests a demonstration of your particular gift, Kael."

"The hand that shakes the throne?" Kael asked quietly.

A faint smile touched Arachne's lips. "For balance, there are times to intervene subtly, and others where one must shake things, if only to steady them."

The garden's tranquil atmosphere belied the weight of Arachne's words, and Kael felt a familiar tingle in his fingers, a warning that the delicate balance he'd maintained was about to be upset. He had expected some form of test, perhaps a query or a task, but not a demonstration of his... gift.

Arachne led him through winding corridors, their footsteps echoing off polished stone, until they reached a grand study. Shelves lined the walls, laden with ancient tomes and parchments that seemed to whisper secrets in the flickering candlelight. At the far end of the room, a figure sat hunched over a massive desk, surrounded by stacks of papers and quills. The queen's personal scribe, Marcellus, looked up as they entered.

"A demonstration," Kael repeated, his eyes fixed on the scribe, sensing an undercurrent of tension in Arachne's manner. "What is it that the Queen seeks to balance?"

Arachne's gaze flickered towards the door, a hint of caution creeping into her voice. "Rumors have reached the palace regarding... discrepancies within House Veylan. We require a demonstration of your particular skills to address this situation."

Kael's attention snapped back to Marcellus, his mind racing with possibilities. The scribe's expression was pinched, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep or perhaps something more sinister.

"We've been expecting you," Marcellus said, not rising from his seat. "The Queen has a specific task in mind for the hand that shakes the throne." His voice dripped with skepticism, as if daring Kael to reveal any weakness. The words sent a spark of annoyance through Kael; he'd seen enough of this man's work to know he was not to be trusted.

Arachne's eyes locked onto his, a warning flashing there before she turned back to the scribe. "Marcellus will brief you on the specifics," she said smoothly. "Once you've demonstrated your... talents, I'm sure the Queen will be pleased."

As Marcellus began to speak, his words spilled forth in a jumbled heap, like a scribe hastily jotting down notes without regard for clarity. Kael listened attentively, his mind racing with the implications of what he was being told. "House Veylan's ledger has gone missing, and with it, certain... discrepancies have come to light." Marcellus's voice dripped with malice, the words crawling like a snake across Kael's skin.

"Discrepancies?" Kael repeated, his eyes never leaving Marcellus's pinched face. "What sort of discrepancies?"

"The Queen has reason to believe that the ledger was not as it seemed," Arachne interjected, her voice weaving a subtle spell of calm into the conversation. "There were... anomalies in the accounts, entries that did not quite add up." Her gaze

flickered towards Marcellus, and Kael sensed a silent warning: tread carefully.

Marcellus continued, his words tumbling forth like a waterfall, unchecked by Arachne's subtle interruptions. "It appears that Lord Veylan has been siphoning funds from the house, funneling them into secret accounts in the city's hidden vaults." The words hung in the air, heavy with accusation.

Kael's mind reeled as he processed the information. He had suspected as much, but to hear it confirmed by Marcellus himself sent a jolt of anger through his veins. He'd thought Veylan was shrewd, calculating, but perhaps that was just part of his act – a mask worn to conceal the rot within.

A faint hum began in Kael's fingers, a low thrumming that grew in intensity as he listened to Marcellus's words. It was a familiar warning sign: his gift was stirring, responding to the turmoil within him. He willed it quiet, but the hum persisted, a reminder of the power that simmered beneath his skin.

Arachne's voice pierced the tension, her words a gentle lullaby designed to soothe the savage beast. "And so, Kael Varn, you will demonstrate your particular skills, will you not?" Her eyes sparkled with an intensity that sent shivers down his spine. He nodded, the decision made in that instant: he would take on this task, and whatever balance it required.

"The ledger's disappearance is just a symptom," Marcellus continued, his words dripping with malice. "The true issue lies within House Veylan itself – the rot of corruption has spread deep." The scribe's eyes locked onto Kael's, a challenge thrown down like a gauntlet. "I suggest you get to work, Kael Varn. The Queen will not be pleased if you fail."

As Marcellus spoke, a faint scent wafted into the room – woodsmoke and damp earth, carried on the wind from outside. It was a familiar smell, one that transported Kael back to his childhood, to his father's workshop in the city's lower districts. He felt a pang of nostalgia mixed with unease as the memories resurfaced: the musty scent of old books, the sound of hammering on metal, and the quiet conversations about the Balance. His gift stirred once more, the hum growing louder, a reminder that he'd been out of practice. The cost would be paid later; for now, it was time to focus on the task at hand.

As Kael nodded, the hum in his fingers grew louder, a vibration that resonated through his entire body. He felt Arachne's eyes on him, her gaze piercing as she watched him. Marcellus, on the other hand, seemed to radiate an air of smug satisfaction, as if he'd just set a trap from which Kael could not escape. The scribe's words still lingered in his mind: "The Queen will not be pleased if you fail." A shiver ran down Kael's spine at the unspoken threat.

He pushed the thought aside and focused on the task at hand. "I'll need access to the ledger's last entry," he said, his eyes never leaving Marcellus's face. "And any information about the discrepancies you've discovered."

Arachne stepped forward, her movements fluid as a cat stalking prey. "I'll have it sent for you," she said, her voice husky with authority. "In the meantime, Kael, perhaps you should familiarize yourself with the house's layout and its occupants." She nodded towards Marcellus, who rose from his chair, a hint of tension etched on his face.

As Kael watched him gather his papers, he felt the hum in his fingers grow louder still. He could sense the power within him responding to the turmoil brewing inside House Veylan. He'd always been wary of getting too close to the inner workings of the palace, but this was different. This was a task that required finesse and precision, not brute force.

With Marcellus trailing behind them, Arachne led Kael out of the study and into the winding corridors of the palace. They traversed several levels, passing by tapestries depicting battles long forgotten and frescoes of mythological creatures. The air thickened with the scent of incense and old books as they walked. They stopped in front of a door that seemed almost indistinguishable from its neighbors, the only clue to its purpose being a small plaque bearing the Veylan crest.

"Your accommodations," Arachne said, pushing open the door with a smooth motion. "You'll be staying here until you complete your task." The room was Spartan but luxurious, with fine linens and plush furnishings that seemed out of place in the midst of Kael's gritty memories. He felt a pang of disorientation as he entered, his mind still reeling from the information Marcellus had shared.

Marcellus cleared his throat behind him, breaking the spell. "You have one day to complete your task," he said, his voice dripping with malice. "If you fail... let's just say the Queen will not be pleased." His words hung in the air like a challenge as Kael turned back to face him, a sense of foreboding settling in the pit of his stomach.

With Marcellus's parting threat lingering in the air, Kael closed the door behind him and leaned against it, letting out a slow breath. He felt the hum in his fingers die down, replaced by a dull throb that seemed to seep into his bones. His gift was stirring, responding to the turmoil within House Veylan, and he knew that this task would not be easy.

As he leaned against the door, Kael's gaze wandered to the room beyond Marcellus's retreating back. The space was dimly lit, the only light coming from a small candelabra on the bedside table. Shadows danced across the walls as he stepped away from the door and walked towards it. He ran his hand over the intricate carvings on the furniture, feeling the familiar weight of power within him responding to the new surroundings.

The bed beckoned like a soft cloud, inviting him to collapse onto its plush surface. Kael resisted, telling himself he had work to do. With Marcellus's words still echoing in his mind, he began to pace the room, searching for any clue that might help him unravel the threads of House Veylan's corruption. His eyes scanned the space, taking in every detail: a small desk with a high-backed chair, a wardrobe with intricate carvings on its door, and a writing box with an unfamiliar crest etched into its lid.

A faint noise echoed from outside the room, the sound of soft conversation carried through the thin walls. Kael's ears perked up as he recognized one of the voices – it was Arachne, speaking in hushed tones to someone else. He moved closer to the door, his heart beating a fraction faster with curiosity. The conversation was muffled, but the words "Veylan" and "the Queen" were repeated several times. He strained his ears to listen more closely, his fingers tapping against the wall as he waited.

"...can't let him dig any deeper," Arachne's voice rose above the others, a note of urgency creeping into her tone. "We can't afford for him to uncover anything else." Kael's grip on the wall tightened, his mind racing with implications. He was not alone in this task; there were forces at play that he knew nothing about. A pang of unease danced across his chest as he realized he'd been set up from the start.

The voices fell silent, and Kael stepped back from the door, his eyes scanning the room once more. His gaze landed on a small bookshelf tucked into a corner, its contents hidden behind a thin curtain. He strode towards it, his fingers reaching for the cord that pulled back the drape. A faint musty smell wafted out as he pushed aside the curtain, revealing a collection of books bound in worn leather. His eyes scanned the spines, searching for any title that might shed light on House Veylan's secrets.

As he delved into the shelves, Kael's fingers began to hum again, a low vibration resonating through his body. The power within him responded to the proximity of the books, and he knew he'd find something hidden among their pages. He pulled out a small tome bound in black leather, its cover embossed with a strange symbol that seemed to shimmer in the candlelight.

As he opened the book, a musty scent wafted up, carrying with it the whispers of forgotten knowledge. The pages were yellowed and brittle, but as Kael's fingers brushed against them, they seemed to flex, releasing secrets they'd kept hidden for years. The symbol on the cover pulsed softly, a gentle reminder that this book was more than just a simple tome. His gift stirred within him, responding to the power emanating from its pages.

The text within was written in an archaic language Kael couldn't quite decipher, but as he touched his fingers to the words, they began to shift and rearrange themselves before his eyes. The language changed from a tongue he didn't know to one he

understood perfectly – a rare occurrence that hinted at a connection between the book and his own abilities. He felt a jolt of excitement mixed with trepidation as he read on, the words dancing across the page like fireflies in summer. The text spoke of an ancient pact between House Veylan's founder and a mysterious entity known only as "The Architect," one that had granted the family a fraction of its power but at a terrible cost: their memories.

Kael's eyes widened as he read on, his mind racing with implications. He felt a shiver run down his spine as the text mentioned a hidden compartment within the palace walls, one containing documents that could prove House Veylan's corruption was not just a rumor, but a cold, hard fact. His fingers hummed louder now, the vibration resonating through his entire body as he read on, devouring every detail of the pact and its consequences. The pages seemed to unfold before him like a map, revealing secrets that had been hidden for generations.

With a newfound sense of purpose, Kael closed the book and tucked it into his belt, its power still coursing through him. He took a deep breath, feeling the air fill his lungs, and let himself slide against the wall, his eyes scanning the room once more. The faint sound of footsteps echoed outside the door, and he rose to his feet as Arachne entered, her expression unreadable. "You're making progress," she said, her voice a little too casual. Kael's instincts screamed at him to be wary, but he couldn't quite place the reason why.

"You want me to find something specific," he stated, trying to keep his tone neutral, but Arachne's gaze darted towards the book still tucked into his belt before returning to his face. A faint flicker of a smile played on her lips as she nodded, and for an instant, Kael saw something beneath her polished surface – a glimmer of unease that made him wonder if he'd misjudged Arachne entirely.

Kael's mind reeled as he tried to keep his composure, unsure what to make of Arachne's sudden unease. He pushed the thought aside, focusing on her request. "Specifically, what do you want me to find?" he asked, his voice steady, though his thoughts were a maelstrom.

Arachne took a step closer, her eyes never leaving his face. "The documents you're looking for are in the east wing, hidden compartment," she said, her tone measured. "Be careful, the passage is treacherous." Kael's grip on the book tightened as he nodded, already making a mental note of the location. The east wing was rumored to be one of the most secure areas in the palace.

As Arachne turned to leave, her hand brushed against his, sending a jolt through him. "What is it about these documents?" he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. She paused at the door, her fingers withdrawing from his as she looked back over her shoulder. "You'll understand when you see them," she said, and Kael couldn't read the

enigmatic smile playing on her lips.

With Arachne gone, Kael's thoughts returned to the book still clutched in his belt. He felt a new connection to it now, one that went beyond mere curiosity. The pages seemed to whisper secrets in his ear as he turned back to the room, his eyes scanning for any clue he might have missed. He spotted the wardrobe, its intricately carved door glinting in the candlelight.

A shiver ran down his spine as he approached the wardrobe, the symbol on the book cover pulsating softly in time with his heartbeat. He raised the lid, revealing a space within that was almost perfectly empty except for one item: a small, ornate box adorned with the same symbol he'd seen on the book. The lid creaked open with a soft whisper, releasing a puff of stale air.

Inside, Kael found a lock of dark hair tied with a length of crimson thread. He recognized it as belonging to his own sister, Lyra, who had gone missing six years ago. His fingers trembled as he picked up the lock, the power within him responding in sympathy. A faint memory resurfaced, one he'd thought long buried – a memory of their mother's words: "The cost of our gift is high, Kael. One of us must be sacrificed for another to thrive."

Kael's mind reeled as he stared at the lock of hair, his fingers tightening around it like a vice. Memories long buried burst forth, flooding him with a sense of loss and helplessness. He recalled the day Lyra vanished, the frantic search that followed, and the pain that had gnawed at their family for years. His thoughts swirled in a vortex of emotions as he wondered if his mother's words were more than just a solemn vow – a dark truth he'd long suppressed.

He felt Arachne's hand brush against his arm as she returned to the room, her eyes locked on the lock of hair clutched in his fist. "Find what you're looking for?" she asked, her voice low and cautious. Kael shook his head, his grip on the lock tightening further. Arachne's expression changed from curiosity to concern, and for an instant, he thought he saw a glimmer of something more – guilt, perhaps, or even compassion.

"Let's leave this room," she said quietly, guiding him towards the door. As they stepped out into the dimly lit corridor beyond, Kael felt the weight of his memories bearing down on him. The symbol on the book cover seemed to sear itself into his mind, its pulsing a constant reminder of the secrets and lies that had haunted his family for years. He felt the power within him respond, a low thrumming that vibrated through every cell in his body as he took the first step down the corridor.

The air was heavy with the scent of old tapestries and dust as they walked deeper into the palace. Kael's senses reeled, struggling to keep pace with the revelations flooding his mind. Arachne led him through narrow passages and grand halls, their

footsteps echoing off cold stone. Every step brought them closer to the east wing, and the documents he was meant to find. He wondered what secrets they held, and whether the truth would bring him solace or more pain.

As they turned a corner, the air grew thick with an eerie silence. Tapestries hung motionless, their subjects frozen in eternal scenes of battles long past. Kael's skin crawled as he sensed a presence watching them from the shadows, its gaze lingering on the symbol etched into his palm. Arachne didn't seem to notice, her pace steady and unhurried, but Kael felt her hand brush against his again, this time with a hint of reassurance.

They stopped before a tapestry depicting a scene of courtly life in the Veylan estate's heyday. Kael's eyes locked onto a figure in the foreground – a young woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Lyra. A shiver coursed down his spine as he turned to Arachne, but she only offered him a steady glance before nodding towards the tapestry. "You see why I think you're better suited for this task," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kael's grip on the lock of hair tightened as he stepped forward, running his fingers over the tapestry's intricate weave. He sensed a hidden catch beneath the surface, one that would release a compartment in the wall. The air seemed to thicken around them as Arachne raised her hand, and with a gentle touch, she pressed against the symbol on the book cover Kael still held. A faint hum began to build in the air, like the quiet buzzing of a harp string.

Tags: Power and Corruption, Silent Justice, Unseen Hand