

THE UNSEEING EYE OF JUSTICE

Black

The Unseen Watcher

Kael Varn stepped off the Ashen Road, his boots scraping against the dry earth. He'd walked these roads for years, long after the armies of conquest had retreated. His specialty was correction – not every balance demanded blood – and he preferred to move unseen. The wind picked up as he descended into the valley below, carrying the whispers of the past.

In the fading light, Kael spotted the crumbling walls of Nightforge, its once-majestic silhouette now overgrown with vines. He navigated the narrow streets, following a thread of worn cobblestones that led him to the Black Rose Order's citadel. The air inside reeked of old parchment and stale air; it was always like this when he visited.

"Lord Kael," a soft voice called from the shadows. Curator Elwynn emerged from the darkness, her eyes cast down in respect. "We've received news of an... incident, north of Everia. The Lord-legate demands your presence."

Kael's grip on his walking stick tightened; he didn't need the reminder of his obligations, but loyalty – unwavering loyalty – was what bound him to this duty. He nodded once and followed Elwynn through the winding corridors.

The room where the sovereign met with her representatives was dimly lit, its cold stone walls adorned with ancient tapestries. Queen Thalos, a woman of stately beauty and unyielding will, sat at the far end, her advisors seated around her like dark specters. Elwynn announced his arrival; Kael's footsteps echoed through the hush.

"Sire," he said, his voice low, "what need do you have for me?"

"Word from Everia speaks of a missing ward, last seen near the river," Thalos explained. "The Lord-legate requests an... investigation, discreet and swift."

Kael nodded; it was his specialty to walk unseen into such shadows. "I'll speak with the locals and see if anyone remembers anything." He turned to leave.

As he walked back out of Nightforge, Kael felt a weight settle in his gut – not because of the task ahead but because of the cost that came with it. The price of his loyalty was always weighed and measured, yet always paid in full.

He made his way through the winding roads, following the Ashen Road toward Everia, where shadows waited like silent sentinels, waiting to swallow up whatever truth Kael Varn sought to uncover.

The sun was setting when Kael arrived in Everia, casting a golden glow over the thatched roofs of its homes. He walked among the villagers, their faces etched with worry as they spoke in hushed tones of the missing ward. The local lord's manor lay ahead, its grandeur a stark contrast to Nightforge's crumbling walls.

Kael entered the manor, his boots creaking on the polished floors. Lord Arin himself stood by the fire, sipping a cup of wine as he conversed with two hooded figures. Their eyes flickered in Kael's direction before returning to their conversation. The lord excused himself and walked over to meet him.

"A pleasure, Lord Kael," he said, his voice a little too jovial for the evening hour. "Glad you're here to help us. We've had no news of our ward since yesterday afternoon. I fear we may be facing some manner of abomination."

"I'll do my best to find her, milord," Kael replied. His eyes scanned the room, lingering on the hooded figures.

"Please, call me Arin," Lord Arin said, his smile faltering for a moment. "I'm beside myself with worry. Elara, she's... a bit of a handful, but we love her dearly."

One of the hooded figures stood, its presence imposing despite its stillness. "If I might speak with you, Lord Kael," it said in a voice devoid of inflection.

"Of course," Kael said, his grip on his walking stick tightening ever so slightly.

Kael led the figure, its height and build making him think of a blacksmith's apprentice, out into the garden beyond the manor's windows. Night was falling quickly now, and the air was heavy with dew. "What do you know of the ward's disappearance?" he asked.

"We were in the lower stables, watching," the figure replied, its voice flat as a stone. Kael noticed that his breathing sounded different behind it – not quite human – but he couldn't quite put his finger on why. "We saw nothing out of the ordinary, but then she was gone."

"Who are you?" Kael asked, his eyes narrowing in an attempt to discern more from the figure's features.

"My name is... irrelevant," it said, its gaze sweeping across the garden before settling back on Kael. Lord Arin appeared at the window, peering out into the night. "We were asked to watch over the ward," the figure continued. "Lord Arin's request."

Kael turned his head toward the manor. He didn't like that there was something hidden beneath the surface, but it seemed he'd have to dig deeper to find what was

truly going on. "Did you speak with the other... watchful eyes?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean," the figure said, its tone devoid of inflection, but Kael detected a flicker in its eyes – an instant before they returned to their stillness. He'd seen it before; some creatures found the concept of expression difficult to grasp.

Back inside, Lord Arin gestured for Kael to sit with him by the fire, where his wife's chair sat empty beside theirs. The hooded figure melted back into its seat near the wall, lost in the shadows. Kael accepted a cup of wine from the servant and took a sip, watching as the flickering flames danced on the walls. "Tell me more about the ward," he said to Lord Arin.

"She's our youngest child, eight winters old," Arin replied, his voice low. "Sweet, gentle soul... we thought nothing was amiss until her governess reported her missing from the gardens." His eyes scanned the room before returning to Kael's face.

As Lord Arin spoke, Kael's gaze wandered to the servant pouring wine from a decanter in the corner of the room. The figure's hands moved with an almost mechanical precision, its face obscured by a hood that seemed to swallow its features whole. He sensed a... wrongness about it, like a key turned slightly off pitch.

"I see," Kael said finally, his eyes returning to Lord Arin's anxious face. "And have you noticed anything unusual around the manor? Strange noises, movements in the night?"

Lord Arin hesitated before responding, his voice barely above a whisper. "We've had some... strange dreams, lately. My wife has been plagued by them, as well." He glanced nervously at the hooded figure, which remained still and silent.

Kael's grip on his walking stick tightened. Dreams were often a symptom of something deeper, and in this household, it seemed they might be connected to the ward's disappearance. "I'll speak with your wife," he said, standing up from his seat. "And I'd like to review the manor's security, see if anything's been overlooked."

Lord Arin nodded vigorously, relief written across his face. "Please, yes, do that. And... be careful. We don't want any harm coming to you or anyone else." Kael's eyes met the hooded figure's for an instant, but it didn't react; it simply remained motionless.

As he made his way back to the main hall, a quiet murmur of voices caught his attention. The governess and two other women were huddled together near the door, speaking in hushed tones. Their conversation faltered as Kael approached, their faces pale with worry. "Excuse me," he said gently, "what's been happening?"

One of the women took a deep breath before speaking. "It's... the dreams. They've been getting worse, and some of the servants are acting... strange. As if they're sleepwalking or something." Her voice trailed off, and Kael detected fear underlying

her words.

He made a mental note to investigate the servants further, but for now, he had to focus on finding the ward. The silence in the room seemed oppressive as he nodded sympathetically at the women. "I'll do my best to find out what's happening," he promised, before turning towards the stairs that led up to the manor's private quarters.

As he climbed, Kael couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on here than met the eye – and it wasn't just the strange dreams or the missing ward. Something in this household felt off-key, like a note that had been miscalculated by a skilled musician.

Kael knocked softly on the door to the lord's quarters, and a gentle voice bid him enter. Inside, he found Lady Arin pacing back and forth in front of a candle-lit dresser, her eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. She halted as Kael entered, a look of relief crossing her face.

"My lord," she said softly, "I'm so glad you've come. I fear for my child's safety."

Kael gestured gently for her to sit, and Lady Arin collapsed into the chair beside him, her shoulders shuddering. He poured himself a cup from the nearby decanter, but didn't drink. "Tell me about these dreams of yours," he said instead.

"They started a few nights ago," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "Vivid visions of darkness, and a feeling... a feeling that something's watching me." Her eyes flicked to the door, as if worried someone might be listening.

Kael leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "What do you think it means?"

Lady Arin shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know. I just feel... trapped. And the ward's disappearance... it feels connected, somehow." She looked at him with a pleading expression. "Please, find her, Kael. For my sake."

He nodded sympathetically, making a mental note to investigate Lady Arin further. There was something about her that didn't quite add up – a fragility he'd yet to see in their interactions. He glanced around the room for signs of potential clues but noticed nothing out of place.

Kael stood up and walked over to the window, gazing out into the darkness beyond. "I'll do everything I can," he promised, his voice calm. As he spoke, a shiver ran down his spine. The air seemed heavy with an almost palpable tension, one that went far beyond the simple worry for a missing child.

He returned to Lady Arin and helped her to her feet, leading her back downstairs. They walked in silence, Kael pondering the dreams, the strange watchful eyes, and the servants acting strangely. When they reached the main hall, he gently released

his grip on her hand and gave a reassuring smile. "I'll go review the manor's security," he said.

Kael made his way to the manor's central courtyard, where he had stored his gear in a small storage room. The silence of the night was oppressive, punctuated only by the soft chirping of crickets and the distant hooting of an owl. He lit a lantern from a nearby torch and descended into the musty darkness of the storage room, the beam casting flickering shadows on the walls.

The first thing he did was to check his sword, unsheathing it from its scabbard and running his hand over the worn leather grip. Satisfied that it was secure, he hung it back in place and turned to the large wooden chest in the corner. Inside, he found his collection of lockpicks, a few valuable coins, and a small pouch containing various potions - including one that would grant temporary resistance to pain. He rummaged through the pick set until he found what he needed, a delicate set of pins for intricate locks.

Kael made his way back upstairs, lantern in hand, and stopped at the main hall where two guards stood stationed by the doors. "Good even," he said quietly, his eyes scanning their faces for any sign of sleepiness or distraction. The pair nodded in unison, their expressions somber but alert. He moved past them into the study, where he began to review the manor's security logs and maps.

The hours ticked by as Kael pored over the records, searching for anything that might hint at a weakness in the manor's defenses or an explanation for the strange occurrences. As he worked, his eyes kept drifting back to the hooded figure standing near the wall, its gaze fixed on some distant point beyond the room.

A faint scratching noise caught Kael's attention - one of the women who had been speaking with him earlier, the governess, was furtively trying to remove a small piece of paper from her apron pocket. He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, observing the woman without drawing attention to himself. The governess hastily hid the paper inside a nearby book, its leather creaking as it closed. Kael's mind began to whirl with possibilities; had she been tampering with something - or trying to send a message?

He made a mental note to speak with her in private, but for now, he kept his attention focused on the task at hand. The governess's actions were only one of several threads Kael was trying to unravel - the dreams, the missing ward, and the strange sense that something was watching him from the shadows.

Kael's gaze drifted back to the hooded figure, which remained motionless, its face hidden in darkness. He felt a shiver run down his spine as their eyes met for an instant; it was like staring into a void. The guards near the door seemed oblivious to the hooded figure's presence, but Kael's instincts told him that this person was no

ordinary servant.

He refocused on the papers before him, pouring over the security records and searching for any discrepancies. As the night wore on, his eyes began to burn from the close work, and his body ached with fatigue – the potion in his pouch wouldn't last long against the strain of constant vigilance. Kael's hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, a comforting weight in the darkness.

The silence was oppressive, broken only by the creaking of the old wooden beams above and the distant howling of wolves outside. The hours ticked by with agonizing slowness as Kael searched for any sign of weakness or a hidden vulnerability in the manor's defenses. He found several potential entries in the logs that warranted further investigation, but nothing concrete.

The flickering light from his lantern cast eerie shadows on the walls, making it seem as though dark shapes were moving across the room. Kael's grip on his sword tightened, his mind racing with possibilities – and the weight of responsibility for Lady Arin and her child's safety. Just as he was about to set aside the papers and take a moment to rest his eyes, he noticed something that made his heart skip a beat.

A small notation in one of the entries caught his attention, a seemingly innocuous comment on maintenance repairs to a door on the east wing. But what drew Kael's eye was the faint scribble alongside it – a symbol he recognized from an old book on cryptography he'd read years ago. The mark indicated a hidden compartment or passage within the manor, something that shouldn't be there according to the official blueprints.

Kael's heart quickened as he set aside the papers and rose from his chair, his hand on the hilt of his sword. He moved towards the guards stationed near the door, their eyes watching him with a mixture of curiosity and fatigue. "I need to speak with Lord Arin," he said quietly, "and I require two men to accompany me to the east wing. We have a lead on the ward's disappearance."

He approached Lord Arin's chambers, two guards trailing behind him in silence. The door was open, a single candle casting a warm glow within. Kael knocked softly, then entered upon a voice calling out from within. Inside, he found Lord Arin pacing by the window, a glass of wine still clutched in one hand.

"My lord," Kael said quietly, drawing his attention to the guards waiting behind him. "I believe we have a lead on Lady Arin's ward." He recounted the discovery of the notation and symbol, watching as Lord Arin's eyes narrowed, concern etched on his face. The lord nodded curtly, gesturing for the guards to follow Kael back downstairs.

The east wing loomed before them, its corridors dark and silent. The only sound was the soft crunch of gravel beneath their feet as they walked towards the door in

question. Kael's hand rested on the hilt of his sword, a familiar weight in his palm. He examined the lock carefully, running the delicate pins over it with precision. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he worked, but the potion granted him temporary resistance to pain. The mechanism clicked open, revealing a small compartment hidden within the wall.

Inside, Kael found a collection of dusty ledgers and papers, some bound in worn leather, others tied with twine. He began to scan the contents, searching for any hint of connection to Lady Arin's ward or the strange occurrences plaguing the manor. A faint scrawl caught his eye – a name, written in the same handwriting as the notation on the security log. "Eira," he whispered to himself, recognizing it from the list of servants.

A soft rustling behind him made Kael turn, finding one of the guards standing in the doorway, eyes wide with alarm. "What is it?" Kael asked quietly, sensing a presence beyond the guard's fear. The guard took a step back, his hand on the hilt of his own sword. "There's someone else here," he whispered.

Kael's eyes narrowed, hand tightening around his sword hilt as he turned to face whatever lay beyond the guard. The air seemed to thicken, the shadows cast by the faint moonlight outside twisting into menacing shapes on the walls. He moved forward, his footsteps quiet on the stone floor, the guards following closely behind.

As they approached the threshold of the small compartment, a figure emerged from the darkness. Its features were obscured by a hood, but Kael's instincts screamed that this was the Unseeing Eye of Justice he had sensed earlier. The figure stood tall, its presence seeming to fill the cramped space, and regarded Kael with an unnerving intensity.

"Eira," the figure whispered, its voice like a sigh on the wind. "I have been waiting." The words sent a shiver down Kael's spine as he took another step forward, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Who are you?" he demanded, trying to keep his tone steady despite the creeping unease.

The Unseeing Eye regarded him for an instant before responding in a voice that was both ancient and ageless. "I am the one who keeps balance," it said. "And I have come to settle accounts." Kael's mind reeled as he tried to grasp the implications of this enigmatic claim, his thoughts racing with questions. The guards behind him seemed frozen, their eyes fixed on the figure with a mixture of awe and terror.

"Accounts?" Kael repeated, trying to keep his voice level. "What do you mean?" The Unseeing Eye's gaze seemed to bore into his very soul as it replied, its words dripping with an unspeakable weight. "The debt that has been accumulating for so long, hidden in the shadows and blood-soaked stones of this manor."