

The Unseen Hand of Kael Varn

Black

The Silent Hand

Kael Varn slipped through the crowded streets of Ashen Roads, his dark cloak a shadow among shadows. No one marked him as the Unseen Hand except by those who knew his work. And those who knew were sworn to silence.

He navigated alleys and backstreets with practiced ease, avoiding the flickering torches that lined the main thoroughfares. The flicker of lights from Nightforge's high towers cast a sickly glow over the city, as if trying to compensate for the absence of true daylight in these narrow streets.

Kael moved unseen through a market square, sidestepping merchants hawking their wares and citizens going about their day. They sensed his presence but would not look up, too entranced by their own transactions to suspect that they shared space with one whose silence was more deadly than any sword.

At the city's eastern gate, he stopped to adjust a tattered awning above a stall selling used leather goods. The proprietor, an old man named Maric, nodded as Kael touched his shoulder. 'You'll find what you're looking for,' he said quietly. Maric's eyes told of secrets shared long ago.

As the sun began its slow descent into the Dimming Age horizon, casting the city in a deep blue twilight, Kael slipped through the gate and out into the open countryside. There, a raven-haired woman waited, her face hidden behind a hood. She was his messenger, one he trusted.

'You were seen at the Broken Writ last night,' she said without preamble, her voice barely audible above a whisper. 'The Curator's daughter is in trouble.'

Kael did not confirm or deny. He knew what was being said.

She handed him a small pouch containing a worn silver ring. 'Meet her in secret; that's all I'm told.'

As he took the pouch and ring, Kael felt his connection to the Nightforge pulse with a soft hum – its price in fatigue paid for every consideration like this one. He weighed the ring in his hand before giving it back.

'You know what this means,' she said. 'Betrayal.'

'The weight of that decision is mine,' he replied, already moving away from her into the gathering darkness.

His path was clear now: Kael Varn walked where armies could not – into the hearts of those with balance as little as a blade's breadth in their scales.

Kael Varn traversed the moonlit countryside, his senses heightened as he navigated the darkening landscape. The fields were deserted, their crops harvested months ago, leaving only stubble to crunch beneath his boots. He followed the subtle cues of the Nightforge's hum within him, guiding him toward the meeting point with the Curator's daughter.

As he walked, memories began to seep into his thoughts – of Elwynn Thane, his former mentor and a master of the Silent Hand, teaching him the delicate balance between cause and consequence. The training had instilled a mantra within Kael: "Weight and measure each deed, lest darkness claim what light would be." It was a creed he'd lived by ever since.

After an hour's walk, he came upon a copse of twisted trees, their branches grasping toward the sky like skeletal fingers. In their center stood a small cottage, smoke drifting lazily from its chimney. Kael approached cautiously, his senses on high alert for any sign of deception or hidden danger. He reached out with the Nightforge's power to scan the surroundings, but it was a fleeting effort, and he felt the strain – a dull ache in his mind that would grow worse over time.

Inside the cottage, the Curator's daughter, Elianore, waited. She sat at a small wooden table, her eyes fixed on a hand-woven rug as if tracing its intricate patterns. Kael recognized the symbol of the Broken Writ embroidered along its edge – a mark he'd never thought to see outside the city walls. He entered silently, his boots making soft crunching sounds in the dust.

"You came," Elianore said without turning around, her voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you."

Elianore's eyes, an unsettling shade of grey, remained fixed on the rug as if mesmerized by its patterns. Kael moved closer, his footsteps quiet on the creaky floorboards, and set a small vial of oil on the table beside her hand. The soft scent of lavender wafted up from it.

"What's wrong, Elianore?" he asked softly, his tone measured to match hers. His connection to the Nightforge still hummed within him, but the ache in his mind persisted – a reminder that even minor uses of its power left a residue that would need to be paid for eventually. She turned her gaze up to meet his, her eyes flicking towards the vial before returning to his face.

"The Broken Writ," she whispered, "has... complications. I've been trying to help, but—"

Elianore's voice trailed off as a sob caught in her throat, and for a moment, Kael worried he'd misjudged the situation. He recalled Maric's warning - that Elianore was in trouble, that there was betrayal involved. "What kind of complications?" he pressed gently.

A flicker of emotion danced across Elianore's face, but she composed herself quickly, her composure brittle as ice. "Father—" She hesitated before continuing. "He received a message from the Shadowhand Guild. They're demanding the return of... something they claim is rightfully theirs." Her voice cracked, and this time Kael saw genuine fear in her eyes.

He recognized the name - the Shadowhand Guild was one of the more powerful organizations within Nightforge, feared for their brutal tactics and unwavering dedication to the balance of power. If they were involved, things had indeed become complicated. "What's this thing they want?" Kael asked, his mind racing with possibilities.

Elianore glanced around the room as if checking for unwanted listeners before speaking in an even softer tone. "A book. A journal written by one of our most skilled Curators. It's said to contain—"

Kael raised a hand, silencing her. "Not here," he whispered urgently. His connection to the Nightforge was still active, and he'd rather not attract any unwanted attention - or worse, give away their meeting place.

He made his way to the window, parting the curtain with a quiet motion to gaze out into the darkness. The trees surrounding the cottage seemed to loom closer than before, their branches like skeletal fingers grasping for him. Elianore's presence had triggered something within him - an instinctual unease that urged him toward caution and vigilance.

A faint rustling noise echoed from outside, a low hush of leaves or fabric catching in the wind. Kael spun back to face Elianore, his eyes narrowing into slits as he assessed their surroundings anew.

The rustling grew louder, but it was a cautious sound, one that suggested whoever made it was not eager to be discovered. Kael's hand instinctively went to the hilt of his dagger as he watched Elianore's eyes flicker towards the window, her gaze darting between the panes and the rug before settling on him again. She seemed frozen, a statue carved from the same material as the cottage itself.

Kael took a step back, his weight shifting onto his left foot as he balanced against potential threats. "You said they sent a message," he said softly, trying to keep

Elianore's attention. "What did it say?" His eyes never left the window, his senses tuned to the subtle vibrations of tension in the air.

Elianore's gaze snapped back to his, her pupils dilating as she spoke. "It demanded the journal's return within three nights. They claim... they claim it's a family heirloom, that it contains secrets crucial to the balance." Her voice was barely audible, the words tumbling out in a breathless rush. The shadows outside seemed to deepen, the wind picking up with a mournful sigh.

Kael's focus narrowed on the window as he pieced together the situation. "You didn't get much else from them?" He pushed his weight off his left foot and took a step forward, his right hand still resting near the dagger. The Nightforge within him hummed softly, warning of potential harm, but he paid it little heed for now.

Elianore's eyes seemed to hold a thousand questions, her gaze darting around the room once more as if searching for an escape or a clue. "Just that... they'll be waiting at the old windmill on the outskirts tonight," she whispered. Her voice was a mere shadow of its former self, and Kael felt his gut twist in response.

The wind picked up again, this time with a gust of cold air that sent the candle flame dancing. Shadows danced across the walls as Elianore's eyes met his, a silent plea for help reflected within their grey depths.

As Elianore finished speaking, Kael's gaze snapped back to hers, his mind racing with the implications of the Shadowhand Guild's involvement. He knew better than to underestimate their power or their willingness to do whatever it took to maintain balance. The wind howled outside, and for a moment, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Elianore," he said softly, reaching out to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder, "you're not alone in this." He knew that tone, one he'd used with Maric before, to calm him down when the stakes were high. It was a gentle reminder that they would face whatever came next together.

She didn't flinch under his touch, but Kael saw her eyes well up again. "I don't know what's going on," she whispered, her voice cracking as tears began to fall down her cheeks. "Father... he's always been so careful, so secretive about the Broken Writ. But this... it feels different." The wind outside seemed to grow louder, the shadows dancing across the walls taking on a menacing quality.

Kael wrapped his fingers around Elianore's wrist, a gentle squeeze meant to anchor her in reality. "We'll figure this out," he said firmly, though his mind was racing with possibilities - some of which he dared not speak aloud. He glanced at the vial of oil still on the table, its surface rippling with tiny waves as the flame danced above it.

A faint sound came from outside, a scraping against the wooden door that sent Kael's grip on Elianore's wrist tightening. His eyes snapped towards the window once more, but this time, there was no sign of movement – only the darkness, impenetrable and oppressive. The wind died down, leaving an unsettling stillness.

"You need to get out of here," Kael said abruptly, his voice low and urgent as he pulled Elianore to her feet. "It's not safe." He guided her toward the back door, his hand on her elbow a guiding pressure that didn't loosen until they reached the threshold.

The cold air outside enveloped them like a shroud, but Kael knew every inch of this cottage and its surroundings better than his own skin. They moved swiftly, Elianore's footsteps matching his own in time as they made their way through the dark to the stables at the back of the property.

A lantern hung on the wall cast a warm glow over the space, illuminating hay scattered across the floor. Elianore stopped beside the stable door, her breath misting in the chill air as she turned to him. "What about Father?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"We'll deal with that later," Kael said, his words clipped as he led her into the stables and toward a horse already saddled and waiting. He handed her the reins, his eyes scanning their surroundings once more before turning back to hers. "Mount up. We have three nights to figure out what's going on."

As Elianore settled into the saddle, Kael's eyes flicked to the window of their cottage one last time before swinging back to her. The night air was heavy with an almost palpable weight, as if the darkness itself was watching them. He took a deep breath, his gaze lingering on the faint tremble in Elianore's hands around the reins.

The stables were quiet, the only sound the creak of leather and the soft huff of the horse as it shifted its weight. Kael led them out into the night, the silence broken only by the crunch of gravel beneath their feet. As they emerged from the stableyard, he glanced up at the cottage window once more, wondering if he'd been foolish to leave Elianore behind, even if it was for her own protection.

Their path wound through a narrow lane that led out into the wider darkness of the forest. Trees towered above them, their branches like skeletal fingers grasping for the moon, which hung low and silver in the sky. Kael guided the horse forward with a gentle pressure on its reins, his mind racing with the implications of the Shadowhand Guild's involvement in the Broken Writ. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this than met the eye – secrets hidden beneath the surface that he'd yet to uncover.

The wind died down once they left the cottage behind, and an eerie stillness settled over them as they rode deeper into the forest. Kael kept his eyes peeled for any sign of pursuit or hidden threats, but the darkness seemed to swallow their movements whole. The only sound was the creak of leather, the soft thud of hooves on the forest floor, and Elianore's quiet sobs.

It wasn't until they'd been riding in silence for what felt like an eternity that Kael spotted a glimmer of light up ahead – a beacon calling out through the darkness. His grip on the reins tightened as he urged the horse forward, his heart rate quickening with every step. Elianore's head came up, her gaze locking onto his as she caught sight of the light.

"Stop here," Kael said softly, reining in the horse as they approached a clearing. A small wooden hut stood at its center, smoke curling lazily from a pipe protruding from its roof. An old woman sat outside, tending a fire that crackled and spat in the darkness. She looked up as they dismounted, her eyes locking onto Kael with an unnerving intensity.

Kael handed Elianore down from the horse, his hand brushing against hers in passing. "Wait here," he said quietly, dismounting to lead the horse towards a cluster of trees nearby, where it could graze undisturbed. The old woman's gaze followed him as he moved, her eyes lingering on Elianore with an almost accusatory glint before snapping back to Kael.

As Kael led the horse away, he felt the weight of the Nightforge within him humming softly – a reminder that he was being watched, and by forces both seen and unseen.

The old woman's gaze lingered on Kael as he returned, her eyes a deep shade of indigo that seemed to see right through him. He felt a shiver run down his spine as she beckoned Elianore forward with a gnarled hand.

"Elianore, child," she said in a voice like the crackling of the fire behind her. "I've been expecting you." The words were laced with an air of gentle reprimand, and Kael saw Elianore's eyes widen slightly as she took a step forward.

Kael hung back, his mind racing with the implications of this encounter. He'd heard rumors of the old woman, a seer who dwelled on the outskirts of the forest, her abilities tied to the ancient magic that still lingered in the trees. The stories were hushed and full of fear, but Kael had always been skeptical – until now.

As Elianore approached the fire, the old woman's eyes flickered towards Kael once more. He felt a spark of recognition within those indigo depths, as if she saw something within him that he'd rather keep hidden. "And you, Kael Varn," she said, her voice dripping with an undertone of warning. "You've brought trouble to our doorstep."

Kael's grip on the horse's reins tightened involuntarily, his instincts on high alert. He scanned their surroundings, his eyes lingering on the trees beyond the firelight, searching for any sign of movement or hidden threats.

The old woman gestured to a stool beside her, and Elianore sank down onto it, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. The old woman's gaze never wavered from Kael's face as she spoke, her words dripping with an otherworldly authority. "I know why you've come, child. I know what the Shadowhand Guild has set in motion."

The fire crackled and spat, casting flickering shadows across the surrounding trees. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he stepped forward, his eyes locked on the old woman's face.

"What do you mean?" Elianore asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The words were hesitant, her tone uncertain, but the old woman's expression was one of unyielding certainty.

"Your father," she said, her voice rising to fill the night air, "has been playing with forces beyond his control. The Broken Writ is more than just a simple writ - it holds the key to balance itself."

The old woman's words hung in the air like a challenge, her eyes never leaving Kael's face as she spoke. He felt a spark of unease ignite within him, the weight of his Nightforge stirring in response to her words. Elianore's hands had stilled, her grip on them relaxed as she listened with an intent gaze.

Kael took a step forward, his eyes locked on the old woman's. "What do you know about the Broken Writ?" he asked, his voice firm, but his mind racing with the implications of her words. The Nightforge within him seemed to thrum in anticipation, as if sensing that this was the moment of truth.

The old woman's gaze flickered towards Elianore before returning to Kael's face. "I know it's a writ forged from dark magic," she said, her voice dripping with an otherworldly authority. "A writ that can reshape the very balance of power in the land." She leaned forward, her eyes glinting like dark gemstones in the firelight. "Your father has been playing with forces beyond his control, Kael Varn. The guild he's affiliated with... they're not what they seem."

Kael felt a cold dread creeping up his spine as he took another step forward, his mind racing with the implications of her words. Elianore's eyes were fixed on him now, her gaze filled with a mix of fear and uncertainty.

"What forces?" Kael repeated, his voice low and even, but his heart pounding in his chest. The Nightforge within him stirred, its power coursing through him like liquid darkness.

The old woman leaned back, her eyes never leaving his face as she spoke. "The Shadowhand Guild has ties to the very source of that darkness," she said, her voice dripping with a morbid intensity. "They've been manipulating events from behind the scenes, using your father's writ to further their own agenda."

Kael's grip on the horse's reins tightened as he digested the old woman's words, his mind reeling with the implications. He had always known that his father was involved with the Shadowhand Guild, but to think that they were manipulating events from behind the scenes... it was a blow he hadn't seen coming.

The Nightforge within him pulsed with an almost manic energy, its power coursing through him like liquid darkness. Kael felt the familiar sensation of being watched, and his eyes flicked towards the trees beyond the firelight, searching for any sign of movement or hidden threats. But the forest seemed to be holding its breath, the only sound the soft crackle of the fire.

"What do you mean by 'manipulating events'?" Elianore asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked up at Kael with a mixture of fear and uncertainty in her eyes. The old woman's gaze never wavered from his face, her expression unreadable as she spoke. "The guild is using the Broken Writ to disrupt the balance of power in the land," she said, her voice dripping with an otherworldly authority. "They seek to create chaos and disorder, that they may reap the benefits of their own twisted game."

Kael's eyes narrowed as he listened, his mind racing with the implications of her words. The Shadowhand Guild had always been a shadowy organization, shrouded in mystery and rumor. He had never thought them capable of such grand manipulation, but now he wondered if there was truth to the whispers about their true intentions. The Nightforge within him stirred again, its power coursing through him like liquid darkness.

"What's their endgame?" Kael asked, his voice firm as he tried to keep his temper in check. The old woman's eyes seemed to bore into his very soul, and for a moment, he felt the weight of her gaze like a physical force. "Why would they seek to disrupt the balance of power?" Elianore's eyes were fixed on him now, her face pale and worried as she waited for his answer.

The old woman leaned forward, her hands clasped together in front of her. "They believe that by creating chaos and disorder, they can create a new order," she said, her voice dripping with conviction. "One in which the Shadowhand Guild holds the reins." Kael felt a cold dread creeping up his spine as he listened to her words, the Nightforge within him stirring into a frenzy of power. He knew that this was more than just politics or manipulation – it was about something fundamental to the very fabric of their world.

"I don't believe it," Elianore said suddenly, her voice firm and resolute. "My father wouldn't do that." Kael felt a pang of surprise at her words, and he looked at her with newfound respect. She had always been strong-willed, but this was the first time he'd seen her show such conviction. The old woman's eyes flickered towards Elianore before returning to Kael's face.

"Ah, child," she said, her voice dripping with a mix of sorrow and understanding. "You don't know what your father is capable of."

Tags: Balance, Betrayal, Redemption