The Hollow Sword Master — Book One

Anger Scimitar

by Kevin Perryman

CHAPTER ONE

The Coma of a Friend

The wheels shrieked to a halt in the hospital parking lot. Carl leaped out and left the engine running. The emergency alert flashed again in his peripheral vision: *Report at once—Sword Master Protocol.*

"Yeah, I fucking got it!" Carl roared. *All this strength, all this training, and I got stopped by a goddamn red light.*

He forced several breaths before storming up the stairs. His combat gear constricted his body with every step.

The alert flashed again, and this time, he forced his visor up over his head. There was no need for it now. Message received.

His father, "Knuckle" Jackson, stood at the entrance, speaking in low, urgent tones with a J-Clan operative standing guard. More operatives patrolled the hospital grounds, with several more taking possession of Carl's car and driving off with it.

"Where is he?" Carl interrupted, his voice rougher than he'd intended.

"Rephrase that question, Carl. And use a bit more tact."

"Forgive my impatience, Father," Carl said, his eyes fixed on the entrance. "I need to see him."

"The eighteenth floor. After you, son."

The elevator suffocated Carl with stale antiseptic air and his father's dreaded silence. 9… 10… 11… fought the urge to claw open the ceiling panel and climb the cables. Each new number on the display was an indictment: 12… 13… 14…

The world forced him to wait. He grabbed the railing to still the tremor in his hands, the cold steel a

welcome shock. As the pulse in his veins slowed, he dared someone to stop this agonizing climb. Today was not the day to test him.

The chime rang, and Carl burst through the doors by pulling them away with his hands. J-Clan guards flinched at the racket before recognizing their leader and saluting. His hands seared the edge of the desk, pushing it from its position. The desk nurse peered above the screen, pushing the desk back into place.

"Where is he?" The lightning crackled out the windows, and the thunder repeated his question. A sharp wind slammed against the building, followed by the torrential storm against the glass.

The nurse glanced left and right before looking at him. "Sir, this is a hospital; could you refrain from shouting?"

"Tell me, now! Where is Kevin Perry?"

It took one grip on his shoulder, and he knew he overstepped. "Carl." His father's aged hand locked him in place, followed by his name. No words came after that, and it anchored him back into reality.

"Apologies." A second strike for Carl. His father won't allow a third.

His father's gaze sharpened, casting an intimidating aura around those who witnessed it. The guards shifted their stance. "Nurse, please answer the question before I answer for you."

The nurse's eyes widened. She pointed her trembling finger. "Eighteen-oh-nine. But sir, I'm going to have to ask you to sign—"

Carl bolted away from the desk. *Don't fucking care*. Each door he passed was another barrier, and another agonizing delay.

He froze before entering, as Kevin's bed was visible in the corner. The curtain showed just enough, and it was him. He was really there. He gripped the metal door frame, and the current of his celestial power left his hand, and the electricity sparked beneath his fingers.

Nothing—not his training, nor his family—prepared him for the profound stillness that engulfed the room. The rhythm of the machine: *beep… beep… beep…* It refused to answer the horrifying question—what the hell happened?

"Kevin." Carl stared at his friend lying motionless on the hospital bed. Sprouted equipment wires and IV tubes dripped into his arm. His chest rose and fell in an unnatural rhythm. And with each mechanical breath, a fresh tremor of static, the question of why he wasn't there still refused to answer him.

He had to admit, he didn't recognize the man in the bed. His face looked thinner, the jawline sharper than the one Carl remembered. How long has it been? Twenty years? Of course, he had seen pictures, answered rare, often emotionless, sporadic phone calls. But up close? This man in the bed was a stranger. And no excuse would be a satisfactory response.

But the question he avoided was left unanswered. Why did the message exist? Kevin was not the Sword Master anymore.

Instead, he was a best friend whose 'best' faded over time. Whose fault was it, his? He wished he could blame Kevin. It would be simple. He cannot refute since he is in a coma.

But still. Kevin was not the one who lost contact. Carl did that all on his own.

The hospital air felt thin in his lungs, fueling the pressure building behind his eyes. The blame kept his distance for years, and with all the wars, the battles, and his adventures with his brothers, Carl wanted to keep his distance.

No, Carl had no intention of seeing Kevin. Convinced he had the better end of the deal, leaving him out was the decisive outcome. After all, he forgot the adventure, forgot their friendship. Forgot he called him… brother.

Yes, this was safer. And now, the view haunting Carl's weary eyes was of a life that clung to him with false lies.

Brother indeed.

"Carl."

A woman sat beside the bed; she was there the whole time, but now he *sees* her. How long has she been there? Kevin's hands folded into hers. Her fingers intertwined with his. This was Angela, the woman he married. The best friend who replaced Carl after abandoning their friendship twenty years ago. If he could change his name so it would not sting when someone called, it would be one word Kevin would proudly give him. Asshole.

Carl approached, every step moved as if through water. Memories flooded his mind, trying to make the impossible possible. "Hello, Mrs. Perry."

The residual streaks of tears dried on Angela's cheeks, leaving faint tracks on her exhausted face. Who was to blame for her tears? Him? Or Kevin? He wanted to place the blame on his absent friend so badly. He couldn't take the fact that she repeatedly rotated the ring on Kevin's finger. "Carl." His name in her mouth was a single-word indictment. "What are you doing here?"

Her tone grounded his celestial abilities, driving lightning straight into his chest where it belonged. Of course. Whatever conversations he had with Kevin were not enough. The years of their estrangement were all condensed into a footnote in Kevin's life. He was supposed to be the best man at their wedding. That wasn't his fault. There was a crisis his family needed to solve.

"So you're Carl." The voice was younger. Carl's mind flashed to the pictures—this had to be Kevin's daughter. The godfather she'd never met.

"The J-Clan received the—" He stopped himself. No excuse in the world would constitute him blaming the family for his answer. "Never mind. Angela, what happened?" Carl asked, his gaze returning to Kevin.

She wiped a tear away. "There was a storm. Kevin went to help a car trapped in a flooded road." She tried to say something else, but gripped Kevin's hand tighter, and her words did not leave her mouth.

"They said it was a lightning injury," his daughter continued, her words sharp. "But they said my father saved the people in the car." Her voice cracked. "I don't really give a fuck about that shit. My father is the one on the bed, and apparently, he has no injuries. The doctors are all shit. Then all of a sudden, the damn fucking commandos come busting in here and acting like this is some fucking quarantine zone. They tried to kick me out, but fuck 'em. They ain't touching my dad. She asked you a question, Carl. Why the fuck are you here, and why is everyone treating my father like a fucking leper?"

There was no right answer here. No, that was a lie. Carl chose not to answer because deep somewhere in the pit of his gut, no answer would satisfy her question, and any answer he gave would cause immediate accusations. Does he tell Angela that her husband is the originator of the supernatural covert team known as J-Clan? That her husband was left in the dark about the whole organization, a move to hand him a picket fence and four walls of peace?

Carl turned to Kevin, and the air fractured. A ring of red energy pulsed outward from his friend's body, bleeding through the room like a wound in reality. The crimson light caught in Kevin's veins, mapping them beneath his skin like rivers of fiery rage. Electricity crackles between Carl's fingers in an answering rhythm. Did Kevin's wife witness it? Did his daughter? No. She wouldn't be able to. If she did, she would have questioned it.

The room spun around him. The aura intensified to the pure measure of his abandonment. Carl stepped back to grab the doorframe once again, feeling the scorched metal singeing his fingers.

Kevin's eyes were closed, but they were staring right at him and blaming him for his condition. Telling him he did not do enough to protect himself. The noise of the monitoring equipment accused him of neglect. The machine was there for him, checking on him, unlike Carl. The room rejected him. Family and Friends only.

Even the hallway refused to let him walk straight. Measures. Counter-measures. He flipped the visor, showing his portrait in the corner staring at him. He can take care of himself, of course. The white space underneath is ready to add squad members. Form the team again. Spots reserved for his brothers.

But not Kevin's. No, he chose to keep Kevin out of it. Doing the right thing, as his brothers would say. *"Add Squad Member: Kevin."* His visor crackled and fuzzed out, displaying a red border around his screen. He wanted his vitals. "Add Squad Member—" he said aloud.

The visor did not give him a chance to finish. Static sparked on the screen, his own image flickering out, followed by a red rejection. No member of that name exists in the family.

His father waited in the hallway, pocketing his communicator. His stoic father refuses to accept communications with the visor, relying on old-school traditional technology. That rejection from the visor. The more the empty space reminded him that Kevin's picture should have been underneath, the more he preferred the old-school tech. Anything to not remind him. Anything else.

Anything.

"Son," his father said, placing a hand on Carl's chest. "We have a situation."

"No, Father. I have a situation." Carl wanted to sidestep him and move further away from the door. "My friend is in there and—"

"Your friend is the situation, son," his father cut him off. He gestured with his hand toward the hall and further away from the room. "Walk with me. Now."

Yes, anything to get away from the room. Running away is always easier. Out of sight, out of mind.

They returned to the nurse's desk, only to find the nurse had left her post. Not that she wanted to deal with the crazy lightning-wielding operative, whose lack of patience frightens everyone around him. Carl wouldn't either.

Distracted, there was no time to react when his father grabbed his arm and locked him against the desk, followed by a neck choke against the wall paintings. The guards shifted, caught unaware of the violent action, yet refused to move when they had witnessed their leaders attacking each other. With his forearm raised to Carl's neck, the lack of oxygen failed to give Carl the break he needed. "You are not acting like the leader. You have no enemies here, and yet you feel the whole world has crashed on your head."

"Father… You do not know who Kevin is," Carl said with the last of his breath.

"I know exactly who he is. The problem is that you do not," his father replied with the muscles in his mouth trying to form the words. "Now, I am going to release you. The moment you lose control again in front of civilians, you are going to wish I did not choose you to lead the family."

Air filled his lungs when his father pushed away, before grabbing him steady. "What is it that frightens you, son. Is it the lack of communication? Are you feeling guilty for not being there for him? Or that the entire foundational wall you built between you two has found a crack and now it is crumbling before your eyes."

Carl, rubbing his neck, "You knew about him. That is why all the guards."

"Good. Your mind is clearing, and you are starting to piece together the clues. What else?"

Kevin's role in the organization was a state secret. The Sword Master. Years when they fell into a portal to experience their greatest adventure, and afterward, the world turned upside-down.

Except Kevin was kept out of it. Carl had his reasons.

"Get out of your head," his father said, closing the distance between them with one single step. "What else!"

"The red pulse, it's a signal. It is not a coma."

Carl rushed back into the room, startling Angela, and witnessed another pulse erupt from his friend's body. Flipping the visor around his eyes again, he tracked the pulse, leading to a faint purple outline of a door in the corner of the room.

Except there was no door when he lifted the visor.

"Carl, what are you doing?" Angela asked.

"He is in Rowen. They took him back."

Kevin's daughter stepped in front of him. "That's bullshit. That place does not exist."

"Wait, you know about it?"

She turned to her father. "He spoke of it this morning. He just blurted it out, talking about swords and elves. Fucking goblins and shit. Said something was calling him back, and we didn't pay him any attention. Dad always cracked jokes."

“Carl, what are you saying? That someone took my husband? That does not make sense. He is right here.” Angela asked, surprising him and breaking his focus.

Carl glanced at his father, who agreed for him to speak. “I wish I could explain this, but… yes. Kevin’s soul is no longer in the realm.”

“What… I don’t understand.” Angela said, “You haven’t been around for years in his life, now you show up and say that his soul is no longer in him?”

“I—”

“And you barge in here, you and your father, spouting nonsense about realms and him not being here. These guards. The security. You are scaring me. Kevin doesn’t deserve this.”

“I—”

“Speak, for the love of god!” She caught herself, her hands squeezing Kevin’s.

Another red pulse. Another accusation.

“Carl,” His daughter moved to Angela and comforted her. “You listen, and you better listen good. My dad has been writing about you. About your family, all these dumb ass adventures, and your stupid code names. I thought, like her, it was nothing but a story. But now, here you are, standing in front of me, spouting off that my dad is in another realm and this… fucking Rowen has taken him away from us. I swear if you are involved, no—” She caught herself. “*You* have not been there for him. Whatever this is, it’s a past I do not know. I swear, Carl, you son of a bitch, you come rushing in here, thinking you are some sort of fucking savior. Well, go back out there, and fucking save him. You owe it to him to bring him back. You bring him BACK! Or don’t come back at all. Now leave us. And take your fucking guards with you.”

Her accusation hung in the air, a judgment he couldn’t refute. He switched his gaze from the shattered women to the friend he’d abandoned. Carl swore, the words a vow to himself as much as to theirs. “I swear I will bring him back, **even if I have to destroy Rowen to do so.”**

Want to keep reading?

The whole of Book One is free to read at **The Thematic Storyteller Lighthouse Library**.

hollowswordmaster.substack.com

Prefer to own it? **The Anger Scimitar** — Book One of The Hollow Sword Master — is on Amazon, Kindle and paperback.

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The world itself — the art, the fragments, the map, the cast — lives at **jclansoulwars.com**.

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