

JUDGMENT BY THE WIND

Black

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Kael Varn stood at the edge of the Ashen Roads, a faint tremor in his hand as he watched the last wisps of mist burn off the horizon. He had been summoned to this forsaken place to address a situation that refused to resolve itself. Discreetly, as was always his wont.

House Veylan's influence waned in these parts; their once-sturdy grip on power now faltered like the withered trees that lined the roads. People whispered of famine and dark magic seeping into the land, a notion Kael neither confirmed nor denied. His specialty lay not in quelling darkness but in adjusting balances.

A flicker of unease danced at the base of his spine as he tied his hood tighter. The air clung to him like damp cloth, heavy with secrets. It was said that the Ashen Roads revealed one's true self: a test for those attuned and a reckoning for those not so lucky. Kael navigated them often; his name was whispered in hushed tones among those who believed in omens.

He began walking, feet sinking into dust where moonlight failed to reach. Every step stirred whispers—ancient memories of the land's history seeped from the ground like mist. It was said that those attuned could hear the echoes, but Kael heard only his own heartbeat. He trusted no one to keep his secrets; keeping silence had become a well-honed habit.

As he traversed the winding paths, houses dwindled and eventually vanished into crumbling stone and vines. The air thickened with the scent of smoke and desperation. In a hollowed-out courtyard, he found Elwynn, once House Veylan's chief curator. Her eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, locked onto Kael's.

"Lord Kael," she said, her voice low as a sighing wind.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I see the situation here weighs heavily on you, Elwynn."

"In more ways than one, sir." Her eyes roamed toward the darkness beyond, where black silhouettes seemed to be watching. "They have lost their way, Lord Kael. Our influence has waned too far; the balance—"

"Enough," Kael said gently, his hand rising as a calming gesture. "This isn't about what you've lost. It's about correcting what needs correction."

Elwynn nodded, understanding in her eyes, but not in her voice. Her words hung on the edge of every sentence, like promises made to a listener who wasn't there. In this place, secrets seeped through every step and gesture.

Kael Varn continued into the night, following the silhouettes that watched from the shadows, knowing that justice came not with banners but in whispers. His footsteps were the wind's gentle brush against skin—sometimes soft, sometimes a reminder of what lay beneath the surface.

The balance, a whispered word among those who knew the true depth of power and the price it demanded.

He walked with Elwynn in silence, the darkness seeming to swallow their footprints before they could be made. They navigated narrow alleys that wound through what had once been a thriving quarter of Veylan influence. Kael's eyes adapted to the dim light, his gaze flicking between the crumbling facades and the people huddled within.

Some tried to sell him goods from hidden stashes: a few coins for a promise of hope; others offered the whispers they'd heard from the land itself, though their voices were as thin as reeds. Kael refused them all, leaving behind a small pouch of silver on the table of each merchant he met. He moved like a ghost through these streets, his presence both seen and unseen.

Elwynn led him to a larger structure, one that stood as testament to Veylan's former grandeur: a mansion with intricate frescoes and arched windows. Kael recognized it as the Hall of the Silent Corrector, where Elwynn was said to have overseen the meticulous recording of every event in House Veylna's history. The thought brought him unease, but he had no intention of looking back.

They entered through a side door, the wind howling around them like it sought to follow. Inside, the air was thick with dust and the scent of old parchment. Kael navigated through the labyrinthine halls, his footsteps echoing off stone. The hallways seemed to have shrunk since his last visit; every step now felt like a traverse through a maze designed by those who knew the secrets it held.

Elwynn's hand brushed against his, her fingers closing around his wrist in a warning as they reached a door he hadn't noticed before. "This one," she whispered, "remains sealed." Kael raised an eyebrow but made no move to open it. There was something in her tone, a hesitation that went beyond mere caution.

With a nod, he stepped back from the door and turned down another corridor. The air was stale here; every surface was as dry and untouched as if waiting for the first drop of moisture to awaken its memories. Kael sensed a particular place ahead—his steps

led him there as if guided by an unseen hand.

He found himself in a room shrouded in darkness, lit only by a faint luminescence emanating from the walls. The air was heavy with dust and the stench of decay. Kael's footsteps stirred up motes of dust that danced in the dim light, but he didn't move to clear them. Elwynn trailed behind him, her breathing slow and deliberate.

As his eyes adjusted, he made out the shapes within the room: rows of shelves, their surfaces cracked and worn, held ancient texts bound in black leather. Some were adorned with symbols that glowed with a faint blue light. Kael's gaze settled on one particularly large tome, its cover etched with an emblem of House Veylan. The book seemed to be... waiting for him.

He reached out, his fingers brushing against the cold surface. The symbol on the cover began to glow brighter, illuminating a message etched into the spine: "For the eyes that see, not the ones who read." Kael's hand lingered on the cover, and he knew this was more than a simple archive; it held the secrets of Veylan's decline. He felt the weight of his decision to come here; every book in this room would contain pieces of the truth.

"Lord Kael," Elwynn whispered, her voice barely audible over the creaks of old wood, "I told you we should have brought torches." Her eyes flicked towards the symbols on the books, a hint of unease creeping into her tone. "This place... it's been sealed for years."

"I know," he replied, his mind racing ahead to what secrets lay within these texts. "The balance isn't always about correcting past wrongs; sometimes it requires understanding them." His hand still rested on the book, a spark of curiosity igniting within him.

Elwynn nodded, though her eyes betrayed a fear Kael couldn't quite grasp. He didn't push for clarification; instead, he lifted the tome off its shelf. The room seemed to darken further as if it was sharing secrets already, but only with those willing to listen.

As Kael opened the book, a rush of stale air escaped its bindings, carrying with it whispers from long-forgotten years. The pages, yellowed to the point of brittleness, crackled as he turned them. Symbols etched into the margins seemed to shift in his peripheral vision, their meaning unclear but their presence undeniable. Elwynn's breath caught behind him, and for a moment, Kael thought she might pull back from the room altogether.

The text within spoke of power once wielded by House Veylan, of an era when they ruled not with strength or cunning but with the subtle dance of balance. It detailed how they'd maintained equilibrium between light and darkness, keeping the shadows at bay and the land's forces in harmony. Kael's fingers tightened on the book as he

read on, the fine print blurring into a single word repeated throughout: "Nyx." His thoughts wove a connection – Nyx, the forgotten goddess of balance.

"What is this?" Elwynn whispered, her presence forgotten in his absorption. "These aren't stories; they're... codes."

"The language of those who knew how to listen," Kael murmured, eyes scanning the text for any mention of what had led House Veylan's downfall. The pages began to yellow more noticeably as he turned them, a testament to their age and neglect.

"This is madness," Elwynn said, her voice rising in alarm. "You can't expect me to believe—"

He lifted his head, finding her standing close, a single candle flickering between them. Kael's gaze drifted back to the text as he spoke calmly, "Elwynn, listen. If I'm wrong, then we've nothing but dusty texts. But if House Veylan was more than just another faction vying for power... We have to know."

Her eyes held a mix of fear and conviction; Kael saw that she wanted to believe him, needed to. He offered no reassurance, his focus on deciphering the codes etched into the margins, searching for any clue that would reveal what had led House Veylan's balance to falter.

The air was heavy with silence as Elwynn stepped back, her eyes not leaving his face but her gaze drifting toward the exit. "If you're right... Lord Kael, if this is the truth..." Her words trailed off into a whisper, lost in the dusty stillness.

He didn't need to turn to know she'd left him there, with the weight of his decision and the secrets contained within the book that seemed to hold more than just the history of House Veylan.

He turned back to the book, his fingers tracing the etchings on the pages as he delved deeper into the text. The symbols shifted and morphed in his peripheral vision, the language weaving itself around him like a spell of comprehension. Kael's mind reeled with every new concept, each revelation sparking a different path of thought, making him question everything he had ever believed about the world. Nyx, the goddess of balance – it all seemed to be tied back to her.

A chill ran down his spine as he read on, an understanding settling that made his skin crawl. This wasn't history; it was warning. The downfall of House Veylan wasn't a matter of power struggles or internal decay but something more sinister. Something born from the heart of Nyx herself, a concept so abstract, Kael couldn't quite grasp its form. Yet, he felt it reaching out to him, taunting him with every step back into the shadows. The texts spoke of an era long past, one where the fabric of balance had been torn, and House Veylan's attempt to mend it came at a terrible cost.

The creaks in the old wooden shelves seemed louder now, as if the very foundations of the Hall of the Silent Corrector were shifting with Kael's revelations. He closed the book, its covers still warm from his touch, and stood up. His chest felt heavy, weighed down by what he had uncovered – more truth than he was prepared to bear. Every step creaked under his feet as he made his way back through the labyrinthine halls with Elwynn close behind.

Outside, the wind howled like a beast awakened, its fury a stark contrast to the silence within the mansion's walls. Kael breathed in deeply, trying to clear the haze from his mind. As they stepped out into the stormy night, Elwynn's hand found his wrist once more, and he felt her hesitation now laced with something akin to desperation.

"What do we do?" she asked against the wind, her voice strained.

Kael looked down at her, a thought finally taking shape in the turmoil of his mind. He remembered the words of an old Veylanian proverb: "In seeking balance, one must first face the darkness within." For House Veylan, that darkness had been Nyx – a power both sacred and feared, a reminder that balance wasn't achieved but maintained through constant vigilance.

"We find her," Kael called out against the wind, his voice clear.

The storm was a relentless beast, its howls piercing through Kael's resolve as he gazed out into the darkness. He could feel Elwynn's grip on his wrist tighten, her concern for him radiating in the cold air. "We have to find Nyx," he repeated, though it wasn't a question of 'if' but 'where.'

Elwynn nodded, her face obscured by the hood of her cloak. Together they waded through the tempest, their footsteps quiet on the damp stone path leading out of the mansion's grounds. The Hall of the Silent Corrector loomed behind them, its windows dark and impassive, a reminder that secrets were always safer within those walls. Kael's gaze drifted back to Elwynn, his eyes searching for reassurance in the darkness.

"We have no idea where to start," she said, her voice lost in the wind but clear enough to convey doubt. "The old texts didn't—"

"Nyx is not just a goddess," Kael interrupted, his breath clouding around him as he spoke. "She's a principle, Elwynn. A balance point. If we can understand what House Veylan attempted to correct in her name..." His words trailed off into the howling wind, and for a moment, they both seemed lost in thought.

They reached the edge of the forest that bordered the mansion's grounds, its trees swaying ominously as if trying to listen in on their conversation. The darkness seemed to swallow them whole, and Kael felt the weight of his decision bearing down on him –

every step forward, every inch they delved into this mystery, placed more pieces of the world into jeopardy.

A faint light flickered in the distance, a beacon calling out through the storm's chaos. It came from the edge of the forest, where trees thinned and wildflowers pushed their way through cracks in the stone wall that encircled the estate. Kael's heart quickened as he led Elwynn towards it, a spark of hope kindling within him – they were on the right path.

The light grew brighter, illuminating a figure huddled by a small fire. A hood thrown back, revealing a face worn and weathered, with eyes that seemed to hold more than their share of the world's burdens. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as the figure raised its head, recognition flickering across its features before settling into a quiet, haunted gaze.

"Ah, Lord Kael," the figure said in a voice like autumn leaves crumbling underfoot. "I see you've found me."

The figure's words hung in the air, weighed down by an unspoken question: what business did Kael and Elwynn have with her? The wind howled on, but the fire seemed to be drawing all its attention, flames dancing upwards like a supplicant. Kael's gaze swept over the woman's appearance – worn cloak, dusty boots, and eyes that had seen too much. He recognized the weariness of those who walked the edge between the world of men and the darkness that lay beyond.

"Who are you?" Elwynn asked, her voice firm but cautious, not quite a whisper above the wind's din. The woman's gaze flicked to her, then back to Kael, as if trying to decide how much to reveal. "I am Aethera," she said finally, her voice a little stronger now that it had something to say.

Aethera pushed to her feet, her movements economical and practiced. She seemed to be measuring their resolve, weighing the cost of speaking out against the silence that kept secrets buried. Kael's instincts screamed for caution – Aethera was not one he wanted as an enemy – but Elwynn stepped forward, drawing on a thread of determination in her voice. "We've come seeking answers about House Veylan," she said, the wind whipping her words away before they could be fully heard.

Aethera raised a hand, palm outwards, and for a moment, Kael thought it was a gesture of peace, but then he saw the glint in her eye – a spark of challenge. "You shouldn't be here," she said, her voice low now, carrying over the wind's roar. "This isn't a place for those who would speak out loud." Her gaze shifted to Kael, a new question rising in its depths: what did he know of House Veylan's fall?

Aethera's words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael stood firm, his eyes locked on hers. "We're here to find Nyx," he repeated, his voice unwavering. Elwynn stepped

closer, her face set in determination.

The wind died down for an instant, as if it too was waiting for Aethera's response. The woman's gaze narrowed, then she nodded slowly. "You won't find what you seek here," she said, her voice measured. "Not in the open." She turned to Kael, a hint of something like curiosity on her face. "You know the stories, Lord Kael. You've read the texts."

Kael nodded, his mind racing with connections and questions. "We're trying to understand what happened," he said, his voice steady. Aethera's eyes flickered towards Elwynn before returning to him. "The balance was broken," she said, her voice low. "House Veylan attempted to mend it, but at a cost." She paused, as if weighing the words that followed.

"The cost of balance is always paid in darkness," Aethera continued, her eyes locked on Kael's. He felt a shiver run down his spine as she spoke, a sense of foreboding settling over him like a shroud. "And those who pay it are often the ones least expecting to."

The darkness within the forest seemed to press in, making Kael's skin prickle with unease as Aethera's words hung in the air like a challenge. Elwynn's hand tightened on his wrist again, but he stood firm, his eyes locked on Aethera. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice even, though his mind was racing with implications.

Aethera's gaze flicked towards the forest, as if she feared being overheard. The wind had died down to a low moan, an eerie stillness settling over the clearing. She took a step closer to them, her eyes locked on Kael's face. "House Veylan sought to correct the balance," she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. "But in doing so, they disturbed the equilibrium of the land itself." Her words dripped with an otherworldly gravity, making Kael feel the weight of her statement settle into his bones.

Elwynn stepped forward, her eyes shining with curiosity. "What balance?" she asked, but Aethera's expression turned guarded, her eyes darting between them as if weighing how much to reveal. The fire behind her seemed to have burned down to embers, casting flickering shadows on the trees around them. Kael felt a sense of restlessness build within him – they were getting close to something, but Aethera was holding back.

The silence was broken by the distant rumble of thunder, shaking the air like a challenge. Aethera's eyes widened, and she turned towards the sound as if drawn to it. The storm had been gathering strength, its fury momentarily spent on this small clearing. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as he followed her gaze – they were not alone in this darkness. Something was out there, watching them.

"It's time we moved," Aethera said suddenly, her voice firm, and stood up, brushing dust from her cloak. "This is not a place for secrets." Kael hesitated, sensing that she knew something more, but Elwynn nodded, her determination clear on her face. The three of them stood there, bathed in the faint light of the dying fire, as the darkness beyond waited like an expectant audience.

Without another word, Aethera turned and walked into the forest, her movements swift and decisive. Kael followed closely, Elwynn at his side, their footsteps quiet on the damp earth as they plunged deeper into the trees. The storm raged on around them, its power both exhilarating and terrifying, but it was what lay ahead that truly tested their resolve – secrets hidden in the darkness, waiting to be unearthed.

Tags: Era of Expansion, Balance in the Dark, Silent Corrector