

The Judge's Long Shadows

Black

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Kael Varn slipped into the cramped, smoke-filled tavern as silently as a specter. His eyes scanned the crowd, homing in on a pair of figures huddled near the fire: two Knights of the Order of Nightforge, their silver-and-scarlet tabards a stark contrast to the dimly lit surroundings.

He slid onto a stool beside them, his leather gloves creaking softly as he shifted. "Ales for the trio," he said to the barkeep, his voice low and even.

The bartender raised an eyebrow but moved to fill the order without a word. The Knights eyed Kael with interest, their gazes flicking from his worn black armor to the hood slung over his shoulder.

"You're the one they call Kael Varn," said the taller of the two Knights, her voice crisp as polished steel.

"The same," Kael replied, taking a sip of his ale. "You're here about the Writ, I assume."

The younger Knight leaned forward, his eyes shining with a zeal that bordered on fanaticism. "We have word that you've been... quiet for too long, sir. There are whispers in Everia of your involvement with the Broken Writ."

Kael's expression remained impassive, but he felt the familiar tingle of unease at the mention of the cursed text. He'd walked away from its influence years ago, but his involvement had been... complicated.

"I've not touched the Writ," he lied smoothly. "Nor do I wish to."

The Knights exchanged a skeptical glance, but before they could press the issue further, a hooded figure slid onto the stool opposite them, their eyes locked on Kael with an unnerving intensity.

"You speak of shadows," the figure said, their voice barely above a whisper, "but the truth lies in the light. Come to the palace tonight. I will show you."

Kael's instincts screamed warning, but his curiosity got the better of him. He nodded once, accepting the invitation.

As the figure slid off into the night, Kael finished his ale in silence, the Knights' expectant gaze lingering on him like a challenge. The weight of their scrutiny settled heavy on his shoulders as he rose to leave, but he met it with a steady gaze, accustomed to bearing burdens.

Under the city's pale moonlight, he made his way through winding alleys and shadowed courtyards to the palace. The hooded figure waited for him in a deserted courtyard, their eyes gleaming like lanterns in the dark.

In the heart of the palace, they led him to a room hidden behind a tapestry. Shelves lined the walls, laden with ancient texts bound in cracked leather and strange artifacts that seemed to hum with an otherworldly energy.

The hooded figure revealed itself as a member of the Curators, their robes embroidered with intricate silver threads that pulsed softly. "These are the remnants of the Old Kings," they said, touching a dusty tome. "A testament to Everia's forgotten past."

Kael's gaze roved over the room, taking in the texts and relics. He'd heard rumors of such archives hidden within the palace walls.

"This is not what I've been summoned for," he said carefully.

The Curator's smile was a thin line. "Your involvement with the Broken Writ still casts a long shadow, Kael Varn. You have been chosen to walk in the light of our discovery. This archive holds secrets that could restore balance to Everia. Will you not seize this chance?"

Kael hesitated, the words echoing within him like whispers from the past. He recalled the weight of his Order's oaths and the cost of his actions: the lives he'd taken, the paths he'd altered.

He turned away from the Curator, eyes scanning the room as if searching for an escape from the memories that haunted him. "I am not one to walk in the light," he said finally. "Least of all now."

The palace fell silent around them, the shadows deepening as the night wore on.

The Curator's smile remained, though Kael couldn't quite discern what it concealed. "You are mistaken, Judge," they said, their voice low and even. "This is not about walking in the light or claiming any power for yourself. This is about restoring balance to a world torn apart by the very oaths you swore to uphold." The words were laced with a subtle venom, one that hinted at long-standing animosity.

Kael's eyes narrowed, his mind racing with implications. He'd heard whispers of Curators who harbored a deep-seated resentment for the Orders, viewing them as tyrannical institutions enforcing dogma over justice. It seemed this Curator was

among their ranks. "Balance," he repeated, his tone measured, "is a code I've dedicated my life to upholding. What makes you think these relics can tip the scales in our favor?"

The Curator's eyes gleamed with an unnerving intensity as they stepped closer, their voice taking on a persuasive quality. "You were chosen for your reputation, Judge. Your... extrajudicial activities have left a mark. We believe that mark may be exactly what we need to unlock these relics' secrets."

The Curator's words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael stood firm, his mind racing with the implications of their proposal. He'd walked this path before, balancing the weight of his duties as Judge against the demands of justice. The Orders had always been at odds with the Curators, who saw themselves as custodians of knowledge and the past.

"I've heard such claims before," Kael said finally, his voice measured. "But I need proof that these relics hold more than just dusty secrets. What makes you think they're connected to the Broken Writ?"

The Curator's smile twisted, a faint mockery dancing in their eyes. "You were among the first to grasp its power, Judge. You know as well as I do that the Writ's influence seeps into the very fabric of reality. These relics... they're a key to understanding its true nature." The Curator reached for a small, ornate box on a nearby shelf, its lid opening with a soft creak.

Inside, a delicate crystal orb pulsed with an otherworldly energy, its facets glinting like a thousand tiny knives. Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as the Curator handed him the box, the orb's power washing over him like a cold wind. He felt memories rising to the surface - fragmented visions of battles fought and lost, of lives altered by the Writ's dark magic. The weight of those memories threatened to consume him, but he pushed back, drawing on his training as Judge.

"Enough," he growled, handing the box back to the Curator. "I've seen enough." The orb's power receded, leaving him gasping, his mind reeling with the implications. He knew what this relic was - a fragment of the Writ's power, forged in the heart of a long-lost city where the very fabric of reality had been twisted by the text's influence.

"This could be the key to unraveling the mystery," the Curator said, their voice laced with an unnerving intensity. "Will you walk this path, Judge? Together, we can unlock the secrets of the Broken Writ and restore balance to Everia."

Kael's gaze locked onto the Curator, a shiver running down his spine as he recalled the cost of his involvement with the Writ in the past. He'd walked the razor's edge between light and darkness, always struggling to uphold his vows while the shadows whispered tempting truths in his ear. The prospect of walking that path once more

sent a cold dread through him.

"You're asking me to choose between oaths I've sworn," he said finally, his voice low and measured. "I will not betray my duty as Judge."

The Curator's smile twisted, their eyes glinting with an unspoken promise. "We'll see about that, Judge."

The Curator's words hung in the air, a challenge that left Kael's skin crawling. He turned to leave, but the figure caught his arm with a surprisingly firm grip. "You misunderstand, Judge," they said, their voice low and urgent. "This isn't about choosing between oaths, but rather finding a new path. The Orders have failed Everia; it's time for a different approach."

Kael's eyes narrowed, his mind racing with the weight of their words. He'd seen enough schemes and manipulations to recognize the faint whiff of desperation in the Curator's tone. "What makes you think I'm the right man for this... new path?" he asked, his voice measured.

The Curator's smile returned, though it seemed laced with a hint of sorrow now. "Because you've walked among the shadows, Judge. You know what lurks in the darkness, and you've lived with the consequences. We believe that knowledge can be our greatest asset in unraveling the mystery of the Broken Writ."

Kael's grip on his temper tightened as he tried to process the Curator's words. He'd never been one for playing politics or navigating the complex web of alliances between the Orders and the Curators. His duty was clear: uphold justice, serve the people, and maintain order. The weight of those oaths still hung heavy on him, a constant reminder of his failures.

The Curator released Kael's arm, their hand leaving a faint mark on his skin. "Come," they said, leading him through winding corridors to a secluded garden hidden behind a secret door. The air was heavy with the scent of blooming flowers and damp earth. In the center of the garden stood a small fountain, its waters reflecting the stars above like a tiny mirror.

Kael's eyes adjusted to the dim light, and he saw that they'd been brought here for more than just conversation. A figure stood beside the fountain, hood upraised, their face obscured by shadows. The Curator gestured toward them, a silent introduction that left Kael with more questions than answers.

The figure beside the fountain didn't move as Kael approached, their silence a stark contrast to the Curator's effusive nature. He could sense a power emanating from them, one that felt... different from the relics they'd been examining. This was not the same gentle hum of energy he'd experienced before; this was a raw, living force that seemed to be straining against its constraints.

"You see, Judge," the Curator began, their voice weaving a hypnotic pattern as they led him closer to the fountain, "our research suggests that these relics are connected not just by their power, but by the intentions of their creators. They were all forged in the heart of a reality distorted by the Broken Writ's influence." The air seemed to vibrate with tension as Kael's gaze locked onto the figure beside the fountain.

As he drew nearer, he noticed that the water from the fountain appeared to be rippling, as if the very surface was reflecting the turbulent emotions emanating from the hooded figure. Kael's grip on his temper relaxed fractionally; something about this power felt almost... familiar, like a memory he couldn't quite grasp. The Curator's words still lingered in his mind, a puzzle that refused to fit into place. What did they mean by "intentions of their creators"?

The hooded figure didn't flinch as Kael drew closer, but he sensed a deep unease emanating from them, like the stillness before a storm. The Curator's words dripped with an unspoken intensity, drawing Kael into the mystery like a moth to flame. He felt his own unease grow, the weight of his duties and oaths bearing down on him like a physical force.

"What do you mean by intentions of their creators?" he asked again, trying to keep his tone neutral, but the Curator's words had set off a chain reaction in his mind. Memories long buried began to resurface: the whispers in the darkness, the weight of the Writ's power, and the burden of making impossible choices.

The hooded figure shifted ever so slightly, their movements economical and deliberate, like a predator stalking prey. The water from the fountain rippled in time with their steps, as if mirroring the turmoil within. Kael's eyes were drawn to the movement, his mind racing with questions: Who was this person? What secrets did they hold? And what lay at the heart of these relics?

"You see, Judge," the Curator began again, their voice weaving a spell of persuasion, "the Broken Writ is more than just a text - it's a doorway to other realms, a keystone to understanding the fabric of reality. These relics are its keys, forged in the crucible of distorted worlds. We believe that by unlocking their secrets, we can repair the damage done."

Kael's gaze snapped back to the hooded figure as the Curator's words sparked a connection in his mind. He recalled fragments of an ancient text, one that spoke of artifacts created in harmony with the Writ's power - creations born from darkness and forged for a purpose: balance. The memories swirled in his mind like a whirlpool, drawing him deeper into the mystery.

The hooded figure took a step forward, their movements fluid and precise, as if drawn by an unseen force. Kael sensed a power building within them, one that resonated with the relics and the Writ itself. His gut twisted with foreboding; he knew that

power, had walked alongside it before. He tried to speak, but his words caught in his throat like dust.

The Curator's voice rose above the silence, a gentle prod to Kael's wavering resolve. "We can show you, Judge. We can give you proof of the Writ's influence, and the role these relics play in its power. Will you trust us?" The air seemed to thicken with tension as Kael hesitated, his mind reeling with the implications of their words.

The Curator's words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael's attention remained fixed on the hooded figure, his mind racing to connect the fragments of memory that were resurfacing. He sensed a power emanating from them, one that felt both familiar and yet utterly alien - a mix of wonder and trepidation swirling within him.

As if in response to his hesitation, the hooded figure reached out a gloved hand and placed it on the edge of the fountain's basin. The water stilled, its surface reflecting the stars above like a mirror. Kael felt a jolt run through him as the figure's eyes met his, their gaze piercing through the shadows. He saw a glimmer of recognition there, a spark that reignited a memory long buried.

"Ah, the balance," he whispered, his voice barely audible over the pounding of his heart. The hooded figure didn't respond, but their hand tightened on the basin's edge, as if holding onto something just out of sight. Kael took another step forward, his mind racing with the implications of what he was seeing - the echoes of a world where balance had been lost, and the remnants of that loss still lingering in the fabric of reality.

The Curator's voice broke through his thoughts, their words drawing him back to the present. "We have reason to believe that one of these relics is particularly significant, Judge," they said, their tone laced with an air of caution. "One that can unlock the secrets of the Writ and bring balance to the world once more." Kael's eyes snapped back to the hooded figure as the Curator gestured toward them, a subtle nod indicating this was the key.

The air seemed to thicken with anticipation as Kael approached the figure, his senses on high alert. He could feel the weight of their power calling to him, drawing him in like a moth to flame. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice low and measured, as if trying to hold onto reason amidst the growing turmoil within.

The hooded figure inclined their head, ever so slightly, but it was enough for Kael to see the faintest glimmer of recognition in their eyes - a spark that spoke of a shared history, one that lay beyond the shadows.

The hooded figure's eyes held his, a piercing blue gaze that Kael had thought lost to him forever. A memory long buried rose to the surface, like a ship breaking free from the icy grip of winter. He remembered the feel of cold stone beneath his fingers, the

scent of damp earth and ash. "Aster," he whispered, his voice barely audible over the pounding in his chest.

The hooded figure's head dipped further, their gaze never leaving Kael's. The Curator's words, once a distant whisper, now receded into the background as Kael's attention became fixed on the familiar yet strange name. Aster – a person he'd thought lost to him forever, a soul torn from his grasp by the very power they now stood alongside.

Kael's memories, fragmented and broken as they were, began to coalesce around Aster's presence. He recalled walking through a city shrouded in perpetual twilight, their laughter carrying on the wind as they navigated narrow alleys and dark courtyards. The weight of his duties, the burden of making impossible choices, had been lighter with Aster by his side. Kael's thoughts spun back to the present, his eyes locked onto the hooded figure as he struggled to comprehend what he was seeing.

The Curator's soft clearing of their throat broke the spell that held Kael transfixed. "Aster, if you'd like to explain," they said, their tone gentle but expectant. The hooded figure's gaze finally wavered, their eyes dropping from Kael's as they stepped back from the fountain's edge, their movements economical and deliberate.

Aster's voice, low and husky, spoke out of the shadows, a murmur that sent shivers down Kael's spine. "I was lost, Judge," they said, their words barely audible over the silence that followed. "Lost in a world where balance had been shattered. I've spent years searching for a way back – to restore what was taken from me, and from you."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael's mind was reeling with memories long buried. He took a step forward, his eyes locked onto Aster's, searching for answers that lingered just out of reach. The Curator's gentle prod had fallen away, and in its place, an expectant silence had settled over the courtyard.

"You were lost," Kael repeated, his voice low and measured. "And you think one of these relics can help us restore balance?" He forced the words out, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind as he pieced together fragments of a shared past. Aster's gaze met his once more, their eyes filled with a deep sorrow that echoed through Kael's very soul.

Aster took another step back, their movements economical and deliberate, like they were navigating a minefield of unseen danger. The water in the fountain lapped gently against its edge, as if trying to mirror the turbulent emotions within them. "I was taken," Aster said, their voice barely above a whisper. "Taken by the Devourers, consumed by the very power we seek to control." Kael's gut twisted with foreboding as he recalled the whispered rumors of those dark entities – creatures born from the shadows, feeding on the fabric of reality.

The Curator's eyes darted between them, their expression a mixture of curiosity and concern. "Tell him, Aster," they urged, their voice soft but insistent. Kael's gaze remained fixed on Aster, his mind racing to connect the fragments of memory that were resurfacing. He remembered the feel of cold stone beneath his fingers, the scent of damp earth and ash – memories that seemed to belong to a life long lost.

Aster's eyes dropped, their gaze falling to the ground as if weighted by the secrets they carried. "I was torn from the world," they said, their voice barely audible over the pounding in Kael's chest. "Left with nothing but the echoes of what once was. And now...now I'm here, seeking a way back." The words trailed off, lost in the silence that followed, as if the very weight of Aster's memories threatened to consume them whole.

The Curator's hand reached out, a gentle gesture toward Aster, and Kael felt a pang of recognition – a spark of compassion that mirrored his own. He took another step forward, his eyes locked onto Aster's, searching for the answers that lingered just out of reach. "Tell me what I need to do," he said, his voice firm, as if trying to anchor himself amidst the turbulent emotions that swirled within.

Aster's gaze met his once more, their eyes filled with a deep longing. "The relic," they whispered, their voice barely audible over the lapping water. "Find the artifact known as Elyria's Tear. It's said to hold the key to balance – and to our past." The words hung in the air like a challenge, but Kael knew he had no choice; he was bound to Aster by threads of memory, and together they had to find their way back.

Tags: Era of Expansion, Justice, Secrecy