

# A Debt in Black Ink

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Kael Varn stepped out of the rain-soaked alleyway and onto the worn cobbles of Nightforge's main street. He nodded to the lone figure waiting at the corner, a tall woman with eyes that seemed to absorb the dim light around her.

"What brings you here?" he asked, his voice low and even.

"The Order's letter arrived yesterday," she said, not meeting his gaze. "A matter requiring... delicacy."

Kael's hand instinctively went to the small pouch at his belt, the weight of which was a reminder that one contract remained unpaid. He followed her into the nearby tavern, the sign creaking above the door announcing its presence as the Silver Stag.

The woman led him through winding corridors and narrow stairways until they reached the private chambers hidden beneath the tavern's main floor. Inside, a figure stood by the window, shrouded in shadows.

As Kael approached, a faint scent of sandalwood wafted from the figure, a fragrance associated with the Melosdra order – those sworn to maintain balance and secrecy. This, however, was not one of their ranks.

"Riven Orlos," Kael said, acknowledging the individual. "Your reputation precedes you."

Orlos turned, revealing an older face etched by time and experience. His eyes were deep and knowing, like a well worn book left open on a dusty shelf.

"A pleasure, Kael Varn," he said. "I see the Broken Writ has found use for you once more."

Kael shifted his weight, a subtle gesture to signal the presence of that contract still unpaid. Riven Orlos nodded almost imperceptibly, as if acknowledging the unspoken weight that bound them together.

"The task," Orlos began, producing a small scroll from his sleeve, "involves an... acquaintance of mine. Her name is Elwira Veylan, and she has fallen into financial difficulties."

"A Veylan?" Kael raised an eyebrow. House Veylan was known for their intricate web of commerce and influence.

Orlos nodded, his eyes dropping to the scroll as if studying it once more before meeting Kael's gaze. "Yes. They've loaned her a significant sum, which she now cannot repay."

Kael watched Riven Orlos carefully, weighing the offer against the cost of refusal. His hand went back to the pouch at his belt, feeling the weight of that remaining contract. This could be an opportunity to settle another debt, one that would ease his own burdens.

"I accept," he said finally, and took the scroll from Riven's outstretched hand.

In return for his services, Kael knew Orlos would exact a payment in coin - and something more. Something no less tangible, but just as binding.

As they parted ways, the rain outside seemed to intensify, casting shadows on the walls that seemed to writhe like living things.

Kael followed Riven Orlos through the winding corridors, the air thickening with the scent of old parchment and stale air. They eventually arrived at a door hidden behind a tapestry, adorned with the sigil of House Veylan. The sign creaked as it swung open, revealing a dimly lit room filled with rows of ledgers and documents. A figure hunched over a desk, her shoulders slumped in a manner that seemed more fatigue than defeat.

"Elwira Veylan?" Kael repeated, though he knew the answer.

The woman looked up, her eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. Her gaze drifted past him to Riven Orlos before returning to his face, a mixture of wariness and desperation etched on her features. "Kael Varn," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't think... you'd take the contract."

Riven Orlos cleared his throat, his deep voice a counterpoint to Elwira's hesitant tone. "We both know what is required, Kael. I expect nothing less from one bound by the Broken Writ." He nodded at Elwira Veylan. "Your situation is... complicated, but with Kael's assistance, I believe we can find a solution."

Elwira Veylan hesitated before rising from her chair, her movements slow and deliberate. As she walked towards him, Kael caught sight of the intricate silver threads woven into her sleeve - a subtle marking of House Veylan's standing among the merchant houses. The air seemed to thicken further as they closed in, their steps heavy with unspoken weight.

Riven Orlos cleared his throat once more, breaking the silence. "Let us proceed. Elwira has certain... assets which require Kael's attention." He turned to a nearby chest,

lifting the lid to reveal a collection of ornate trinkets and small treasures. "These items are tied to specific contracts, each one bearing the mark of their respective creditors. Your task, Kael, is to retrieve or settle these debts - before they attract unwanted attention from those who would rather take a more... aggressive stance."

Kael's hand instinctively drifted back to his pouch as he accepted the chest, feeling the weight of his current situation settle onto his shoulders.

He opened the chest, the lid creaking in protest as he lifted the lid once more to peer inside. Trinkets of gold, silver, and gemstones glinted in the dim light, each one a small window into a debt that had been incurred by Elwira Veylan or those she represented. Kael's fingers brushed against a delicate silver locket, its surface adorned with tiny engravings of an arrow piercing a flower. A note attached to it read: "To be settled with Lirien Ironwood." He tucked the note into his pocket, alongside several others, feeling the weight of each obligation growing.

The air was heavy with unspoken words and the weight of promises yet to be fulfilled. Kael's gaze flicked to Elwira Veylan, her expression a mixture of anxiety and resignation as she watched him gather the contracts. Riven Orlos stood by the window, his eyes fixed on some point beyond the room, a faint smile playing on his lips. "These... assets are tied not only to specific debts," he continued, "but also to individuals who might be willing to offer... alternatives." He paused, as if selecting each word with care. "You'll need to negotiate, Kael - and swiftly."

Kael's fingers closed around the locket, a small thrill of unease running down his spine at the realization that he was taking on not just individual debts but also the potential risks associated with dealing with their respective creditors. He nodded, turning his attention back to Elwira Veylan, who had stepped closer, her eyes locking onto his as if searching for reassurance. "You'll need to settle these before they attract unwanted attention," she said quietly, the words hanging in the air like a challenge. "My brother... there's been trouble. The debt to House Garmore is mounting." Her gaze dropped, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elwira Veylan's words hung in the air, a weight that seemed to settle upon Kael as he processed her tone - concern for her brother mingling with desperation. He glanced around the room, taking note of the scattered papers and ledgers, the faint scents of ink and parchment hanging heavy over them all. His gaze returned to Elwira Veylan, searching for a hint of what lay beneath her words. "The debt to House Garmore?" he repeated, his voice firm but even.

Riven Orlos shifted from his position by the window, his movements fluid and economical as he stepped closer. "Yes," he said, his voice low. "A substantial sum, accumulated through... unfortunate business ventures." He paused, a flicker of something in his eyes - a calculation or concern? Kael couldn't quite place it. "It's a

pressing matter, one that requires swift resolution. If you fail to settle this debt, House Garmore will not hesitate to call in their markers, and the consequences... would be severe." His voice trailed off, leaving an unspoken threat lingering in the air.

Kael nodded once, accepting the gravity of the situation. "I understand," he said finally, his mind already turning over the details of what lay ahead. He focused on Elwira Veylan, meeting her gaze with a resolute expression. "Tell me more about your brother and this debt to House Garmore." Her eyes dropped once more, but Kael pressed on, sensing there was more to the story than what she'd shared thus far.

A hesitant breath escaped her lips before she spoke, her words spilling out in a rush. "He's... he's always been involved with them, even though Father forbade it. He loaned them money for his ventures, and now... I don't know how to help him." A fragile edge crept into her voice as she continued, her words barely above a whisper. "If House Garmore calls in their marker, they'll take everything - our trade posts, our family's reputation... it will ruin us."

Kael absorbed the weight of her words, his mind racing with the implications. He knew the name of House Garmore - their reputation for ruthless business practices and an uncanny ability to acquire debtors' assets at whatever cost. This situation had all the makings of a powder keg waiting to ignite. His thoughts turned to Lirien Ironwood, the silver locket now nestled in his pocket, tied to yet another contract he'd need to settle.

With each passing moment, Kael's understanding of the web he was about to navigate grew more complex. Multiple debts, multiple creditors - and one misstep could have catastrophic repercussions for Elwira Veylan and House Veylan as a whole. His gaze met Riven Orlos', seeking reassurance or confirmation that they'd be forthcoming with whatever information or aid might be needed. But Riven's expression remained unreadable, an enigma shrouded in shadows.

"You'll need to move swiftly," Elwira Veylan said once more, a pleading note creeping into her voice as she stepped closer, her hands grasping for his arm. "Please, Kael - help us." The touch of her fingers on his skin sent a jolt through him, but he steeled himself against the sensation, focusing instead on the task ahead.

Kael's grip on the chest tightened as he processed the depth of Elwira Veylan's desperation. He'd seen his share of debtors' auctions, the shame etched on their faces as they watched their families' livelihoods stripped bare. The thought of House Garmore swooping in, taking control, was a grim reminder that even those with power and influence were not immune to financial ruin.

As he stood there, a plan began to take shape in his mind - one that required delicate balance and quick thinking. He had to settle this debt before it drew unwanted attention from the likes of House Garmore, and Riven Orlos seemed willing to provide

any necessary guidance or resources. The question was whether Kael could trust him. His gaze met Elwira Veylan's once more, searching for any hint of deception, but her eyes only betrayed a deep-seated fear.

With a quiet nod, he accepted the challenge. "I'll do what I can," he said, the words tasting bitter on his tongue as he thought of the complications ahead. Riven Orlos stepped forward, a small smile playing on his lips, and Kael wondered if he'd find himself bound to this family's troubles, tangled in the same web of obligations and debts that ensnared Elwira Veylan.

As they began discussing the details of the debt and possible avenues for repayment, Kael realized that Riven Orlos was not one to be underestimated. His knowledge of the merchant houses and their inner workings was impressive, and he spoke with a level of authority that brooked no argument. With Riven's guidance, Kael started to formulate a plan, one that would require finesse, caution, and perhaps a dash of outright luck.

"I'll speak with Lirien Ironwood," Kael said, his fingers closing around the locket as he pulled it out of his pocket once more. "He might be willing to negotiate or release Elwira's brother from the debt." Riven Orlos' eyes narrowed, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a flicker of something – concern, perhaps, or calculation. But when he spoke, his tone was neutral. "If you think it will help, yes. We'll need to tread carefully around House Ironwood; they're not the most... trusting sort."

As they delved deeper into the intricacies of the debt and potential solutions, Kael couldn't shake off the feeling that Riven Orlos' true intentions were shrouded in shadows. His involvement felt calculated, a move made with some hidden purpose. The question was what lay beneath Riven's reserved exterior – loyalty to House Veylan or his own agenda.

As the conversation continued, Kael couldn't help but steal glances at Riven Orlos, searching for any sign of deception or hidden motives. The air in the room seemed to vibrate with an undercurrent of tension, a palpable sense that the words being spoken were only half the story. Elwira Veylan's brother was a gambler, Riven explained, and had loaned House Garmore a significant sum for one of his ill-fated ventures – a merchant fleet lost to a storm off the coast of Argentum. The interest on that loan had grown exponentially, making it nigh impossible for the Veylan family to pay it back.

The weight of those words settled heavy on Kael's shoulders. He knew House Garmore all too well; their contracts were always shrouded in fine print, their expectations and penalties hidden behind a façade of courtesy and politeness. Elwira Veylan's desperation had finally found an audience with him, but at what cost? His own interests and loyalties were already strained, tangled in the threads of the Broken Writ, and the last thing he needed was to become embroiled in the affairs of House

Veylan.

"I think we should speak with Lirien Ironwood as soon as possible," Riven Orlos said, his voice low and measured. "If anyone can help us negotiate or release Elwira's brother from this debt, it's him." The words hung in the air, a statement rather than a question, but Kael raised an eyebrow nonetheless. Something beneath the surface didn't sit right with him – the way Riven spoke of Lirien Ironwood with a tone that bordered on reverence.

Kael's thoughts were interrupted by Elwira Veylan's quiet interjection. "We should also speak to Father," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "He's... not well, and this news will only upset him." A flicker of concern passed across Riven Orlos' face before he nodded curtly, as if agreeing with something unspoken. Kael sensed the weight of Elwira Veylan's words, the gravity of her situation hanging heavy between them like a challenge.

"We'll need to tread carefully," Riven said once more, his eyes narrowing as he studied the papers scattered across the table. "House Ironwood is not one for idle chatter or frivolous promises." He paused, his gaze meeting Kael's, and for an instant, their eyes locked in a silent understanding. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the moment passed, leaving Kael to wonder what had been conveyed between them.

With the plan in motion, Kael knew he needed to set out immediately for House Ironwood. He tucked the locket away once more and stood up, his movements deliberate. "I'll see what I can do," he said finally, trying to convey a sense of reassurance without promising more than he could deliver. The air in the room seemed to lighten slightly at his words, but Kael knew that only bought them time – time for him to navigate the treacherous waters of the Broken Writ and hope against all odds that Elwira Veylan's brother would be spared from the ravages of House Garmore.

He pushed aside the worn wooden chair, its legs scraping against the stone floor as he stood up straight. A hint of weariness still lingered in his eyes, a reminder that last night's visit to the Black Rose had left him running on fumes. Yet, with Elwira Veylan's desperation echoing through his mind, he knew there was no time for rest. He gestured towards Riven Orlos, a curt nod acknowledging their plan of action.

"We'll need to be quick," Kael said, the words spoken as much to himself as to the others in the room. He glanced at Elwira Veylan's pale face, her usually bright eyes now sunken from worry and fatigue. Her brother's predicament weighed heavily on her shoulders, and he knew she'd carry this burden for a long time to come. Riven Orlos' expression remained impassive, but Kael detected a faint flicker of understanding – the unspoken agreement that the hours ahead would be grueling and fraught with peril.

With the weight of their plan settling upon him, Kael took a final glance around the cramped room, committing every detail to memory. The half-filled inkwells on the desk, the scattered papers bearing symbols and codes, the faint scent of old parchment wafting from the shelves – all these things might serve as a reminder of his promise to Elwira Veylan and her brother. Outside, the soft glow of lanterns cast an eerie light across the deserted streets, an eerie prelude to the day that lay ahead. Kael felt the chill of morning's approach on his skin, a cold wind picking up from the east.

He moved swiftly towards the door, Riven Orlos following closely behind. Elwira Veylan hesitated, a hand on her brother's shoulder as if unwilling to let him go. "May the gods watch over us," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the sound of his own breathing. Kael offered a curt nod in return, his expression unyielding, and stepped out into the morning's gray light.

The streets were still quiet, save for the distant sound of merchants and traders beginning their day in the lower districts. Kael navigated through the narrow alleys with practiced ease, his eyes adjusting to the dim light as he moved towards the main thoroughfares. Riven Orlos kept pace beside him, his footsteps silent on the stone pavement.

As they walked, the sound of their footsteps and the murmur of early risers created a sense of normalcy in the city's usually frenetic rhythm. Kael's thoughts turned to Lirien Ironwood, wondering if his words had been laced with sincerity or calculation. The Ironwoods were known for their ruthlessness, but Riven Orlos' mannerisms suggested a level of deference that bordered on reverence.

Their route took them through the bustling central square, where market stalls and food vendors began to stir from their night's slumber. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air, mingling with the acrid tang of coal smoke and sweat. Kael wove through the crowd with a practiced air, his eyes scanning the rooftops for any signs of unwanted attention.

As they approached the grand estates of House Ironwood, Kael felt a sense of trepidation settle in the pit of his stomach. He knew the layout of the sprawling complex, the intricate network of courtyards and walkways that made navigation both challenging and fascinating. Elwira Veylan's words echoed in his mind – her father not well? The weight of that phrase hung heavy on Kael, a reminder that he was about to walk into the lion's den with more at stake than just a simple debt.

Riven Orlos pushed open the massive wooden gates, its creaking a stark contrast to the silence within. They stepped through the threshold, and Kael's gaze swept across the manicured gardens, taking in the intricate topiaries and precisely pruned hedges that surrounded the estate. A sense of unease crept up his spine as he realized they

were being watched – discreetly at first, but with increasing intensity.

As they approached the main entrance, a figure emerged from the shadows. Lirien Ironwood's face was as imposing as Kael remembered, his features chiseled from granite and steel. His eyes narrowed behind wire-rimmed spectacles, an expression of measured interest replacing the bland politeness he'd shown to Riven Orlos earlier.

"Kael Darksong," Lirien said finally, his voice a low rumble that seemed to shake the foundations of the estate. "I had not expected your presence at this hour." His gaze flicked towards Riven Orlos before returning to Kael, an eyebrow raised in subtle inquiry.

Tags: The Broken Writ, Contracts of Blood