

# Blood Debt in Ashen Roads

Black

## The Favored Debt

I stepped off the worn cobbles of Ashen Roads and onto the cracked flagstones of House Veylan's courtyard. The evening air was heavy with the scent of rain and smoke, the latter drifting from the kitchen where a lone cook stirred a cauldron of stew. A flicker of candlelight danced in the windows above, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

Lysander Vex had sent word that I was to meet him here, under the cover of darkness. The Favored were not ones for public gatherings; discretion was as much a part of our creed as the Night's watchful eyes upon us. I'd made my way through the city by narrow alleys and dead-end streets, avoiding the torch-lit thoroughfares that crisscrossed the city.

As I approached the courtyard entrance, a figure emerged from the shadows. Lysander Vex, his gaunt frame silhouetted against the faint glow emanating from within. His eyes met mine; a curt nod was exchanged before he gestured for me to follow him into the house.

In the kitchen, the cook busied himself with stirring the stew, his movements economical and practiced. Lysander led me to a small study, where a fire crackled in the hearth, casting a warm glow on the dark wood paneling. Two figures sat in silence: a woman I recognized as Elara Melosdra of the Black Rose Order, her eyes fixed on a small, intricately carved box on the low table before her; and a man I didn't know, his face angled away from me.

"The Favored have taken notice of a... situation," Lysander began, his voice measured. "A family in Everia has accumulated an outstanding debt. They were once patrons of the Order, but their favor has turned sour. A son was involved in... unpleasantness; they've been forced to pay the Blood Price twice over."

"What do you propose we do?" I asked.

Elara's eyes flickered towards me, a hint of curiosity there before she returned her focus to the box. The man shifted uncomfortably on his chair, avoiding eye contact. "We mean to settle the debt," Lysander said. "Cleanse the balance sheet. You will be... involved."

He produced a small package from behind the back of his chair: a vial filled with dark liquid and a silver pin. I recognized the pin; it was one I'd forged, years ago, in the Nightforge's depths.

The man shifted in his seat, eyes darting towards Elara before settling on the floor. Lysander handed me the package, and with a flick of my wrist, I took it from him. "Do this for us," he said. "Cleanse the debt, restore balance."

The weight of the pin and vial settled in my hand like a promise. A Favored task always came at a price; what it would exact from me now, I had no way of knowing.

We left the study together, under the watchful eyes of House Veylan's servants. The night air was cool, the rain starting to fall in gentle showers that soaked through my cloak as we walked towards the city gates. We traversed narrow streets, avoiding torch-lit main roads, until we reached the Black Rose symbol emblazoned on a hidden door.

I slid the pin into place; the vial's contents seemed to glow with an otherworldly light in the dark alleyway. The door creaked open to reveal a dimly lit stairway leading down into the depths of the Nightforge, and I stepped forward into the unknown, the weight of the task settling upon me like an unspoken promise.

The air inside the Nightforge was thick with the scent of old earth and metal, a smell that brought back memories of my apprenticeship in this very place. I'd spent countless hours hammering away at glowing hot metal, shaping it into intricate patterns, never knowing what purpose they would serve. The stairs led me down to a narrow corridor lined with alcoves, each containing a single candle that cast eerie shadows on the walls.

The sound of dripping water echoed through the corridors as we made our way deeper into the Nightforge. I navigated by touch, my feet carrying me by habit more than sight, until I recognized a familiar landmark – the massive stone door with an intricately carved symbol of the Favored on its surface. The warding spell that covered it pulsed softly in response to my presence. Elara's hand brushed against mine as we passed through the doorway into a narrow, dimly lit chamber filled with rows of ancient tomes bound in worn leather.

"Research," Lysander said, "suggests the family in question is not as innocent as they claim. Their son was involved in something... unsavory." He paused, his eyes flicking between me and Elara before coming to rest on the man who'd accompanied us from House Veylan's. "Meet Aroch Tharen of House Kaelin – a representative from one of our sister houses with ties to Everia."

Aroch shifted in his seat, his gaze darting towards me as if expecting something specific. I kept my expression neutral, though my mind was already racing with

possibilities: debts, interests, motivations that could unravel at any moment. Elara stood quietly beside me, her eyes fixed on the books lining the shelves, searching for some truth among the musty pages.

The silence stretched out until Lysander broke it, his voice steady as always. "Your task is clear: settle the debt, restore balance. You have... a few hours before dawn breaks."

The darkness of the chamber seemed to swallow us whole, the flickering candles on the shelves casting eerie shadows on the stone walls as we moved deeper into the Nightforge's heart. I ran my fingers over the spines of the ancient tomes, feeling the weight of knowledge contained within their leather bindings. Elara followed suit, her touch lingering on a particular volume before moving on. Aroch Tharen shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting between us with an air of unease.

Lysander's voice cut through the silence, his words measured and deliberate. "The family's son was involved in human trafficking, using the Night's influence to further their own interests." His gaze met mine, a somber tone underlining every word. "We cannot have such stains on our ledger. It is imperative we restore balance to the Favored's accounts."

A faint scent of smoke wafted from my fingers as I turned the vial over in my hand, the liquid within it seeming to ripple like dark oil. The pin at its neck glinted silver in the candlelight, and for a moment, I felt an inexplicable sense of trepidation. Elara's eyes met mine, her gaze unreadable behind those lenses. "We'll need more information," she said finally, her voice low and even.

I nodded, my mind racing with the potential implications of what Lysander had revealed. Human trafficking within our ranks? It was a cancer we'd thought long purged. I slipped the vial into my cloak pocket, the silver pin's weight now a tangible reminder of the task ahead. "We'll leave for Everia at dawn," I said, the words feeling like a promise made to myself as much as to Lysander and Elara.

As we turned to exit the chamber, Aroch Tharen spoke up, his voice low but insistent. "With all due respect, Lord Vex, perhaps we should reconsider our approach." His eyes darted towards me before returning to Lysander. "House Kaelin has... connections within Everia's city watch. We could use them to expedite this task."

Lysander's expression remained impassive, but a flicker of annoyance danced in his eyes. "I've spoken with the Watchmaster myself," he said finally. "We will not involve House Kaelin's interests in this matter." His gaze turned towards me, a weighty expectation hanging between us like an unspoken vow. "You and Elara will proceed as instructed."

The corridor outside seemed to darken further as we ascended back into the Nightforge's depths, the air thickening with anticipation. I could feel the task settling upon me like a mantle - a weight that would only grow heavier with each step towards Everia.

The darkness of the Nightforge receded as we emerged into the cool night air, the rain having turned into a steady patter on the cobblestones. Elara moved beside me, her eyes fixed on some point ahead, while Lysander led us back towards the city gates. Aroch Tharen trailed behind, his words about House Kaelin's connections lingering in my mind like an unspoken challenge.

As we walked, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this task than met the eye - that the true purpose of our mission had yet to be revealed. The weight of the vial and pin still clutched in my hand seemed to grow heavier with each step, a physical manifestation of the responsibility that now rested on my shoulders. I glanced at Elara, her profile illuminated by the flickering torches that lined the streets, but she offered no clues as to what was troubling her.

The city gates loomed ahead, its guard changing their watchful gaze from us as we approached. The captain, a gruff man with a thick beard and a scar above his left eyebrow, nodded curtly at Lysander before stepping aside to let us pass. We continued out of the city, following the main road towards the eastern gate, where our own carriage awaited. Elara slipped into the shadows as we walked, reappearing beside me when I stopped to look back.

I found her eyes fixed on Aroch Tharen, who stood watching us from beneath the city gates' archway. "Something's not right," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the patter of the rain. Her gaze flickered towards Lysander, but he was deep in conversation with the carriage driver, oblivious to our exchange.

I followed Elara's gaze back to Aroch, a sense of unease forming in my chest. His eyes seemed to hold a quiet determination, as if he'd accepted his role and was willing to see it through to its end - no matter what. The weight of the task now pressed down on me like a physical force, pushing me towards Everia with an unyielding momentum.

As we settled into the carriage, Lysander took a seat beside Elara, his eyes never leaving mine. "Let us proceed," he said, his voice low and even, as if anticipating some unseen resistance from me. I settled back in my own seat, the pin's weight shifting against my chest like an unspoken promise.

The carriage jolted forward, wheels splashing through puddles on the rain-soaked road. We picked up speed, the city giving way to open countryside as we followed the main road eastward. Everia loomed ahead, its walls and spires a distant reminder of the task that lay before us - a debt to settle, balance to restore, and secrets to

unravel in the dark alleys of that cursed city.

As the hours passed, darkness gave way to first light, and the rain began to clear. The carriage slowed to a stop at the edge of Everia's outer wards, and Elara rose from her seat, her eyes scanning the surrounding rooftops as if searching for something – or someone. I followed her gaze, my hand instinctively moving towards the vial in my cloak pocket.

The city gates loomed ahead, guarded by men-at-arms in the livery of House Veylan's rival, the Thalas family crest emblazoned on their chests. Lysander stood at the carriage door, his eyes fixed on the guards with an air of quiet authority. "We will proceed," he said finally, as if announcing a *fait accompli*.

With a flicker of hesitation from the guards, we were allowed to pass into Everia's city proper – the first step in a journey that would lead us through its dark underbelly and towards the very heart of House Veylan's problem. The air inside the city walls was thick with the scent of smoke and grease, the cacophony of haggling merchants and chimes from the windmills overhead creating a disorienting din.

We navigated narrow alleys and side streets, avoiding main roads that seemed to be watched by unseen eyes. I felt Elara's hand brush against mine as we turned a corner, her fingers closing around my wrist like a lifeline in the darkness. The weight of the task now seemed to grow heavier with each step, until I could feel its presence bearing down on me like a physical force – an unseen but inexorable momentum that would carry us deeper into Everia's heart until we reached our destination.

As we turned another corner, Elara's grip on my wrist tightened. I followed her gaze to a figure leaning against a nearby wall, hood up and face obscured by shadows. He watched us with an unnerving intensity, his eyes seeming to drink in every detail of our surroundings. Aroch Tharen stepped forward, a quiet smile spreading across his face as he fell into step beside me. "I think we've been found," he said lowly, his voice carrying on the edge of the din from the city.

The figure detached himself from the wall and began walking towards us with an easy stride, his movements fluid despite the awkwardness of his stance against the wall. As he drew closer, I caught a glimpse of something metallic glinting in the dim light – a pin, similar to the one at the vial's neck, nestled in the fold of his cloak. My heart rate quickened with an unsettling sense that we were walking into more than just an ambush.

The figure stopped before us, his hood falling back to reveal Aroch Tharen, though not as I'd ever seen him. This was a man with sharp features chiseled from some harder stone, eyes that gleamed like polished onyx in the dim light. "Welcome, Lord Vex," he said, the words dripping with an air of quiet amusement. "I've been expecting you." His gaze flicked to Lysander and Elara before returning to me. "You're not alone. Not

this time."

Lysander's eyes narrowed as he pushed himself forward from the carriage door. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his voice laced with a controlled anger that seemed almost at odds with the situation unfolding around us. The Aroch I'd met in the Nightforge was replaced by a man who radiated confidence and an air of authority I couldn't place. He flashed Lysander a cold smile before responding, "I think you know exactly what this means, Lord Lysander."

The man's smile widened as he stepped forward, his eyes never leaving mine. Aroch Tharen, or whatever his name was now, seemed to relish in our confusion. "Let us walk," he said, gesturing down a narrow alleyway to our left. The air inside the city walls was thick with the scent of smoke and grease, but the smell of saltwater and seaweed wafted from this direction, carrying with it the promise of the sea.

We exchanged uneasy glances before following him into the alley, my hand instinctively moving towards the vial in my cloak pocket. Elara's grip on my wrist tightened as we walked, her fingers digging deeper into my skin as if anticipating a blow. Lysander trailed behind, his eyes fixed on our mysterious guide with an air of suspicion that seemed at odds with the situation unfolding around us.

The alleyway narrowed further ahead, its walls lined with crumbling brick and flickering torches that cast eerie shadows on the ground. Our guide stopped before a large wooden door adorned with a symbol I didn't recognize - a twisted amalgamation of sigils and horns that seemed to writhe across its surface like living things. He produced a small key from his cloak and inserted it into a keyhole hidden in the door's intricate carvings.

The door creaked open, revealing a set of stairs descending into darkness. Our guide gestured for us to follow him down, his eyes gleaming with an unsettling intensity in the dim light. "This way," he said, his voice low and even, as if anticipating some unseen obstacle that only he could navigate. I hesitated, my hand still clutching the vial, but Elara's pressure on my wrist urged me forward, and Lysander followed close behind us.

We descended into darkness, the air growing thick with the scent of damp earth and mold. The stairs ended at a small landing, where our guide pushed open a door made of rough-hewn wood that seemed to absorb what little light filtered through from above. A faint hum filled the room, like the vibration of a harp string plucked too low - an unsettling sound that seemed to emanate from the very walls themselves.

Inside, I saw rows of candles arranged in a precise pattern, their flames casting flickering shadows on the walls as they danced towards us. Our guide gestured for us to take seats at a central table, its surface scarred and worn from years of use. "Please," he said, his voice dripping with an unnerving politeness, as if we were guests

in a place beyond the reach of time itself.

I took my seat beside Elara, who leaned against me as if seeking comfort in my presence. Lysander sat across from us, his eyes fixed on our guide with an unyielding intensity that seemed at odds with the task ahead. I glanced around the room, searching for some explanation or hidden meaning behind this elaborate setup – but there was nothing to see except rows of candles, flickering shadows, and the oppressive weight of silence.

Our guide sat at the head of the table, his eyes never leaving mine as he poured two glasses from a decanter on the far side of the room. The liquid inside was a deep amber color that seemed almost alive in the candlelight. He handed me one of the glasses with a smile that made my skin crawl, and I hesitated before taking it.

"Drink," he said, his voice low and even, as if anticipating some specific reaction from me. I lifted the glass to my lips, feeling Elara's eyes on me from the side, and took a sip. The liquid was bitter and hot, like a mixture of spices and wine that had been left to sit for too long. It burned in my throat and left a strange aftertaste on my tongue that seemed to cling there even as I swallowed.

The guide leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers together as he regarded me with an unnerving intensity. "You're familiar with the concept of balance," he said finally, his voice dripping with an air of expectation. "The careful weighing of opposing forces to maintain equilibrium." He nodded at Lysander across from us. "Lord Thalás's concern for balance has led him down a path that threatens the very foundations of our world."

Elara shifted beside me, her eyes narrowing as she regarded their host with suspicion. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her voice sharp with impatience. But our guide only smiled again, his eyes glinting in the candlelight like dark jewels. "I'm speaking of your role in this balance," he said, his gaze flicking back to me. "You, Vex. You have a certain... favoritism among those who watch from the shadows." He leaned forward, his elbows on the table as he regarded me with an unnerving intensity. "A small debt remains outstanding between us, one that must be settled before the balance can be restored."

The room seemed to grow darker, the air thickening like a tangible thing as I stared at him, trying to place the familiarity of this conversation. "What are you talking about?" I asked finally, my voice low and even, as if anticipating some specific reaction from him. He leaned back in his chair again, steeping his fingers together as he smiled once more.

"I'm speaking of a debt to your family," he said, his eyes never leaving mine. "One that's been festering for far too long." The candles seemed to flicker in response, casting shadows on the walls like grasping fingers. Elara shifted beside me, her hand

tightening around my wrist as if sensing some unspoken threat in the air.

Our guide's smile grew wider, his eyes glinting with an unholy light that made my skin crawl. "Drink again," he said, nodding at the glass still clutched in my hand. I hesitated, feeling Elara's pressure on my wrist urging me forward once more. The room seemed to be waiting for some reaction from me - a choice that would seal our fate in one way or another.

Tags: Silence, Balance, Favored