

Ink on My Hands

Black

The Price of Art

Kael Varn stepped out of the cold drizzle, his boots squelching against the wet cobblestones. Ashen Roads had always been a place for penitents and those who sought balance without fanfare. He navigated through alleys, eyes adjusting to the dim light that clung to the city like a damp shroud. Kael's thoughts turned to the letter from the Curators of Nightforge.

The tavern ahead was a dingy, unassuming place, one among many in Ashen Roads. Candles flickered behind grimed windows, casting a sickly glow on the rain-soaked cobblestones. Kael entered without drawing attention; the regulars barely registered his presence as he slid onto an empty stool at the bar.

"The Red Vixen," he ordered in a low tone.

The bard sitting across from him, strumming on his lute, gave no indication of noticing the subtle correction that had just been made. Kael watched him with a practiced gaze – music was not magic, but it could be an instrument for balance.

A gruff voice called out from deeper in the tavern. "Kael Varn! Long time, Kael."

The Knight-Curate approached, hands clasped behind his back, face inscrutable. A faint thread of gold embroidered the hem of his cloak – the Mark of the Order's highest rank within the Nightforge. They sat down beside the bard.

"Still tending to balance, then," the Curate said, no further explanation needed. His eyes flickered toward the lute and back to Kael.

Kael nodded in response. "Art without intention is just noise."

The Curator's expression turned contemplative. "Some would say your specialty is 'subtle correction,' not noise. The Red Vixen you mentioned, it has a certain... resonance."

A faint smile – almost imperceptible – played on Kael's lips before disappearing like smoke in the wind.

He gestured to the lute player, who shifted his rhythm slightly, incorporating a new, mournful melody into the performance. This change had cost the bard some memory, the song altering to reflect an absence of something he'd never truly known.

Kael turned back to the Curate. "Resonance can be a double-edged thing, my friend."

A small, solemn pause.

"When do you plan on departing?" the Curate asked.

"As soon as I've concluded my matters here," Kael said.

They shared another quiet moment before the bard finished his set. People in the tavern applauded, the noise breaking the silence that hung like a challenge between the two.

Outside, rain began to let up. Ashen Roads' alleys seemed less oppressive in the dim light of daybreak.

Kael walked toward the eastern gate of Nightforge, his footsteps echoing off the walls. For now, balance had been achieved – not with grand action, but through correction and a subtle touch.

The eastern gate loomed ahead, a massive wooden monolith guarded by two stone statues of forgotten saints. Kael walked beneath their watchful gaze, his thoughts drifting to the Red Vixen's significance in Ashen Roads. He'd seen her play only once before – a performance that had been both captivating and unsettling, like a puzzle with too many pieces missing.

Inside Nightforge's walls, he navigated through the narrow streets, passing by the city's various guildhalls and inns. The air was thick with the smell of baking bread and roasting meats. Kael walked purposefully, heading toward the small alley where he'd left his pack and cloak. A chill ran down his spine as he pushed open the door to his lodgings – it had been broken into while he was at the tavern.

Clothing lay scattered on the bed, drawers yanked open with a careless savagery that made Kael's stomach twist. The room reeked of cheap perfume and desperation. He moved quickly, checking for anything taken or destroyed, but his attention was caught by a small piece of paper on the floor, tucked beneath the edge of the bed. It bore a message scrawled in hasty letters: 'Meet me at the old windmill on the outskirts – come alone.'

He recognized the handwriting – a nervous scrawl he'd seen on notes and letters from an old acquaintance, Arin Vex, a master craftsman who had lost his way in the city's underbelly. Kael tucked the note into his cloak and moved through the lodgings with a quiet urgency, checking for any other signs of disturbance before shutting the door behind him.

In the alley outside, the smell of rain-soaked earth mingled with the acrid tang of smoke from the nearby chimneys. Nightforge's early risers were already stirring, their morning routines filling the narrow airways with the sounds of hammering and

laughter. Kael navigated the streets with a practiced ease, avoiding the bustle as he made his way toward the eastern gate.

Beyond the city walls, the open fields beckoned – a sea of green stretching toward the horizon where the windmills stood, their long wooden arms creaking in the morning breeze. The old windmill on the outskirts loomed ahead, its faded red paint a testament to better days. Kael's eyes narrowed as he approached the structure, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger.

A figure waited by the door, hood up and face obscured – Arin Vex's nervous energy seeped from every line of their stance. Kael stepped into the windmill, eyes adjusting to the dim light within. The smell of old grain and dust filled his nostrils as he approached Arin, who turned with a quiet air of desperation.

"Kael, thank the Saints," Arin whispered, relief washing over their features. "I knew you'd get my message – it's not safe for us to meet in public."

Arin's hands were shaking as they clutched a leather satchel, its contents rustling against each other with an anxious urgency. "I need your help, Kael. I've been doing some... side work for someone in Nightforge, and it's gotten out of hand." Arin's eyes darted around the windmill, as if fearful of being overheard.

Kael watched his acquaintance with a calculating gaze, the flickering torchlight casting eerie shadows on their face. "What kind of side work?" he asked, his voice even but wary. The air inside the windmill was heavy with dust and the scent of decay, and Kael's instincts told him that Arin was hiding something.

Arin hesitated before answering, their voice barely above a whisper. "A local merchant has commissioned me to... acquire certain items. Rare materials for one of his projects." They rummaged through the satchel, producing a small pouch filled with a glittering powder. "This is what I'm talking about – Nightstone, some kind of magical ore that's been rumored to grant immense power to its wielder. I was supposed to meet him tonight to hand it over, but now I think he's double-crossed me."

Kael's eyes narrowed as he took the pouch from Arin, weighing its contents in his palm. Nightstone – a notorious and volatile substance, said to drive users mad with ambition. He'd heard whispers of it being used in secret rituals, but never thought he'd see it up close. "Who's this merchant?" Kael asked, his mind racing with possibilities.

Arin's eyes darted around the windmill once more before focusing on Kael. "His name is Marcellus Fels – a wealthy trader with connections to some of Nightforge's... influential families." The last word hung in the air like an accusation, and Kael knew that Arin was right – Fels's involvement didn't sound good.

Kael tucked the pouch into his cloak, his grip on his dagger tightening. "I think you've gotten in over your head, Arin." His thoughts turned to the Red Vixen and her enigmatic performance, but he pushed the connection aside for now. "We need to be careful – Marcellus Fels doesn't sound like someone to underestimate."

Arin nodded hastily, relief written across their face. "Thank you, Kael. I knew I could count on you." Their eyes dropped to the floor as they continued in a softer tone, "I'm sorry about your lodgings... I didn't mean for that to happen."

Kael's gaze lingered on Arin's downcast expression before he replied, "It's not your fault, friend. We'll get to the bottom of this, together." He turned toward the windmill door, his mind racing with plans and possibilities. The sun was climbing higher in the sky, casting long shadows across the fields, but Kael knew that in Nightforge's underbelly, darkness waited around every corner.

As they exited the windmill, Kael spotted a figure watching them from a distance – a hood up, face obscured. He recognized the stance, the way the person shifted their weight on one foot. A familiar sense of unease crept over him as he approached Arin. "Wait," he whispered, his grip on his dagger tightening. "I think we have an audience."

As Kael turned to face the figure, Arin's eyes followed his gaze, a thread of fear weaving through their voice. "Who is that?" The wind rustled the grass as the figure took a step forward, revealing a slender woman with skin like polished obsidian and hair as black as the night sky. Her features were chiseled, almost austere, and her eyes seemed to bore into Kael's very soul.

"Malvina," Kael said flatly, a mix of wariness and unease creeping into his tone. Malvina was a member of an enigmatic clan that inhabited the city's shadows – a group rumored to possess knowledge and secrets no one else dared touch. Their reputation for ruthlessness and cunning preceded them, and Kael had crossed paths with her only once before, during a tumultuous night in the city's underbelly. She'd helped him then, but at a steep price.

Malvina's eyes never wavered from Kael's face as she drew closer, her movements almost fluid, like a snake gliding across the sand. "Kael Varn," she said softly, her voice husky and low-pitched, "I see you're involved in Fels's little scheme." Her gaze flickered to Arin, who took a step back, their eyes darting wildly between Malvina and Kael. "Arin Vex, I presume?"

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened as he watched the scene unfold. What was Malvina doing here? Did she know about Fels's involvement with Nightstone, or was this merely coincidence? He took a step forward, eyes locked on Malvina. "What do you want?" The tension between them was palpable, like the moment before a storm unleashes its fury.

Malvina smiled, her lips curving into a gentle, almost sympathetic smile. "Oh, Kael," she said softly, "I think we can help each other. Fels's little game has attracted unwanted attention – the sort that could spell disaster for all of Nightforge. You and Arin Vex here... you're well-positioned to uncover more about this project."

Malvina's eyes sparkled with an unspoken promise, but Kael remained wary. He glanced at Arin, who still seemed on edge, their eyes darting between Malvina and himself as if searching for a lifeline. "What kind of attention?" he asked, his tone neutral.

"Dark energies are stirring in Nightforge," Malvina replied, her voice dropping to a whisper. "A force, hidden from the sun's light, is growing restless. Fels's meddling has... complicated things." Her gaze flickered to Arin, and for an instant, Kael thought he saw a glimmer of curiosity. "Arin Vex, I'm told you've been in contact with someone who knows about Nightstone's properties."

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, his mind racing with connections. This was more than just Fels's scheme; there were deeper players involved, ones who would stop at nothing to claim the Nightstone. He glanced at Arin, who seemed just as lost as he was. "Who is this someone?" he asked Malvina, trying to keep the conversation on track.

Malvina's smile deepened, and she leaned in, her voice barely audible above a whisper. "A figure from your past, Kael Varn. One you thought you'd left behind in the ashes." Her words sent a shiver down his spine as memories long buried began to stir. He remembered the night the Red Vixen's performance had sparked something within him – a connection he couldn't quite explain.

The words spilled out of Malvina like a slow-moving river, weaving a subtle spell around them. Kael felt himself drawn in, his thoughts racing with the implications. "You know I've dealt with her," he said tightly, trying to keep his composure.

"Of course I do," Malvina replied, her tone dripping with an understated confidence. "I'm aware of your... arrangement with her." Kael's eyes narrowed as he sensed a hidden current beneath her words – one that threatened to capsize the fragile balance they'd achieved in this deserted windmill.

Kael's grip on his dagger faltered, a spark of unease igniting within him as Malvina's words conjured images he'd tried to suppress. Memories of the Red Vixen's performance still lingered in his mind – her music had awakened something deep within him, but it was her enigmatic presence that haunted him now. He pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the present. "What do you know about Fels and Nightstone?" he asked curtly, attempting to keep the conversation centered.

Malvina's eyes never wavered from his face as she replied, "Fels is merely a front man, Kael. A pawn in a larger game. The true players are the ones who've been searching for this Nightstone – and they won't stop until it's theirs." Her gaze flickered to Arin, who still seemed lost, their eyes darting between Malvina and Kael as if seeking reassurance.

Malvina took another step closer, her movements fluid and deliberate. "You see, I think Fels was trying to acquire Nightstone for a specific purpose – one that would've granted him considerable power in the city's underworld." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she continued, "But there are those who would stop at nothing to claim it, even if it means eliminating anyone who stands in their way."

Kael felt a cold dread creeping up his spine as he realized the stakes. This wasn't just about Nightstone; it was about the very fabric of Nightforge's power structures. He glanced at Arin, but they seemed oblivious to the gravity of the situation. "What makes you think Fels is out?" Kael asked Malvina, trying to keep his tone even.

Malvina's smile returned, but this time it seemed tinged with a hint of sadness. "We've received... intelligence that suggests Fels has lost interest in the Nightstone. His patrons have grown impatient, and he's become a liability." Her eyes sparkled with an unspoken promise as she added, "But there's another player who's willing to take his place – someone who shares our... mutual interest."

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened, his mind racing with the implications. This was escalating faster than he'd anticipated, and Malvina's cryptic words hinted at a complex web of alliances and rivalries. "Who is this new player?" he asked her, trying to keep up.

Malvina leaned in closer, her voice barely audible over the wind rustling through the grass. "Someone you'll want to meet, Kael Varn – someone who shares your... connection to the Red Vixen."

Malvina's words hung in the air like a challenge, her eyes locked onto Kael's as if daring him to ask the questions she knew he would. The wind picked up, rustling the dry leaves around them, but Kael remained frozen, his mind racing with the implications. He thought back to the night the Red Vixen had performed at the Black Rose Tavern – the way her music had awakened a deep, long-dormant spark within him.

"What do you mean?" he asked finally, his tone tight with restraint.

Malvina's smile returned, and she took another step closer, her movements hypnotic. "I think it's time you understood your... involvement in this," she said softly, her eyes never leaving Kael's face. "The Red Vixen is not just any performer, Kael. She's a thread in a larger tapestry – one that connects to the Nightstone and its true

purpose."

Kael felt a cold sweat trickle down his spine as memories began to surface – memories he'd long suppressed. He recalled the way the Red Vixen's music had seared itself into his mind, the way it had awakened a part of him he thought was dead. "What do you know about the Red Vixen?" he asked Malvina, his voice barely above a whisper.

Malvina's gaze drifted to Arin, who still seemed oblivious to the weight of their conversation. "Arin Vex here has been in contact with her," she said softly. "I believe they've formed... an arrangement."

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened as he turned to Arin, who looked up at him with a mixture of confusion and fear. "What arrangement?" Kael demanded, his tone harsher than intended.

Arin's eyes darted between Kael and Malvina before they spoke up, their voice barely audible over the wind. "I... I was just trying to help," Arin said, their words laced with desperation. "She told me about Nightstone – about its properties, its power."

Kael felt a jolt of understanding, but it wasn't enough. He turned back to Malvina, who watched him with an unreadable expression. "What's going on?" he asked her bluntly. "Who is this new player you mentioned?"

Malvina's eyes seemed to bore into his very soul as she replied, "A figure from your past, Kael – someone who'll stop at nothing to claim the Nightstone and use its power for their own purposes."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, leaving Kael with more questions than answers. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized that his connection to the Red Vixen was far deeper than he'd ever imagined – and that he was now entangled in a web of intrigue and danger from which he couldn't escape.

The wind picked up, whipping the loose pages of parchment from Malvina's cloak as she took another step closer to Kael. "I think you should meet her," she said, her voice low and husky, the words carrying a weight that made his skin crawl. "She'll be able to explain everything – including why Fels lost interest in Nightstone."

Kael's mind reeled as he struggled to keep up with the complex web of alliances and rivalries Malvina was weaving. He glanced at Arin, who looked like they were about to collapse under the weight of their own secrets. "What do you know about this new player?" Kael asked Malvina again, his voice grating against the dry air.

Malvina's eyes never wavered from his face as she replied, "Her name is Lyra," and a shiver ran down Kael's spine at the mere mention of it. The sound echoed in his mind like a whispered secret, conjuring memories he'd thought long buried. He felt a spark of unease ignite within him as Malvina continued, "She's been searching for

Nightstone for years – and she'll stop at nothing to claim it."

Kael's grip on his dagger tightened as the implications sank in. A figure from his past, driven by a singular focus, was now the key player in this deadly game of cat and mouse. He thought back to the Red Vixen's performance, and how it had awakened something within him – something he'd tried to keep hidden even from himself. Lyra, the name echoed in his mind like a curse.

Malvina's voice cut through his thoughts as she said, "Lyra is... someone you've known before, Kael. Someone who understands your... unique talents." Her eyes seemed to bore into his very soul as she added, "She'll be willing to help you acquire Nightstone – but only if you agree to her terms."

The words dripped with an unspoken warning, and Kael felt a cold dread creeping up his spine. He knew he was getting in over his head, that this was a path from which there was no return. But the allure of Nightstone's power, and the connection it represented to the Red Vixen, drew him inexorably forward like a moth to flame.

"What are her terms?" Kael asked Malvina warily, his mind racing with the implications. He knew that agreeing to work with Lyra would mean taking on a liability – one who might have her own agenda, and who could ultimately use him for her own purposes.

Malvina's smile seemed to grow wider as she replied, "Ah, Kael, you'll find out soon enough. But rest assured – Lyra is not someone you want to cross."

Tags: Kael Varn, Price of Art