

Veylan's Price

Black

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I stood beneath the flickering candelabras of Ashen Roads' Grand Plaza, one hand resting on the worn hilt of my Nightforged blade. As a Vaylenshire knight, I'd come to terms with the subtle weights that bound me: secrecy, loyalty, and the silent costs of balance. Today's visit wasn't about righting some grand injustice; just a whispered rumor of a Veylan favor.

I sidled past haggling merchants and curious onlookers into the Plaza's eastern wing, toward the Nightforge's Curators. Among their ranks stood Lady Eluned Thalos, Veylenshire's appointed judge for the Order. A quiet smile, her eyes watched me approach.

"Brother Kael," she said, not rising from her chair. "A rare visit. We've been expecting you."

I lowered myself onto the adjacent bench, surveying the dimly lit room. The heavy scent of aged parchment and forgotten memories clung to these hallowed halls. I leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Loyalty can't be bought with promises only, Lady Eluned. Veylan's price is due."

A flicker of recognition danced across her face before she set a folder in front of me. Faded documents contained the details: my grandfather's name, his debt to House Veylanshire - in blood and secrecy. The weight of it bore down on me like an unspoken sentence.

"You'd be surprised what they can exact," Eluned said softly, her gaze drifting toward some invisible point beyond the candles. "Even from favored ones."

It was there: a hint of an offer, or perhaps a warning. I pushed back my chair, the wooden legs screeching against the stone floor. "If this is to be settled, we speak with Veylanshire's emissary."

As if summoned, a hooded figure emerged from the room's shadows and approached our table. The familiar scent of worn leather clung to their garb - that of a Vaylenshire Curator.

"Brother Kael," the hooded figure said in hushed tones, "your grandfather's balance is... complicated."

A cold dread seeped into my chest as they slid a small pouch onto the table. Its contents – three golden coins – glinted softly under the candles' light.

"For your debt to Veylanshire," Eluned added, her voice measured, "the price of silence and loyalty has been decided."

I lifted the pouch's weight in my hand, metal clinking within. This was the cost I'd known would come due someday – for the favor extended by House Veylanshire. In this dimly lit room, beneath the watchful eyes of Ashen Roads' patrons, I understood that every balance exacted a price, and mine was paid in full.

In a city bound by unspoken rules, where Nightforgers wielded their tools with silent purpose, and loyalty hung on the threads of debt, the coin's weight became another reminder of what it means to be favored: Veylan's Price.

I opened the pouch, revealing the coins within. The weight of them was a promise, a tangible symbol of what I'd given – and what they expected in return. "What's the nature of my grandfather's balance?" I asked, trying to keep my tone even, though my mind reeled with questions.

The hooded figure shifted beside me, their gloved hand brushing against mine as if to ensure I didn't bolt. "He forged a pact with House Veylanshire when he was still in the Order," they said, voice low and gravelly. "A favor for a favor. The terms were sealed in blood, Brother Kael – your grandfather's and several others'. You see, it seems one of those... sealed contracts has come due."

The figure slid a parchment from their cloak, extending it toward me. I took it, the worn leather crackling as I unfolded it. A crude drawing adorned the page – an illustration of my grandfather's face, surrounded by symbols that seemed to writhe and twist in the candlelight. "This is... what you're referring to?" I asked, a sense of foreboding growing inside me.

A nod from Eluned Thalos was the only response needed. I looked up at her, searching for answers that refused to be given. The weight of my grandfather's debt felt like an anchor tied to my ankle, holding me back in these dimly lit halls of Ashen Roads.

"The Nightforgers have reason to believe this contract may be connected to your own... line," the hooded figure said, voice devoid of emotion. "A test, you might say. One that requires your presence at the Red Vespers tonight."

Eluned Thalos rose from her chair, her gaze meeting mine. "We can't guarantee your safety, Brother Kael. If this is indeed connected to your family's pact, we'd be wise to tread carefully." She handed me a small note with an address on it – a location that matched the Red Vespers' entrance.

I stood, shoving the parchment back into my belt, feeling the weight of my grandfather's debt and the coin's weight settle uncomfortably against each other in my pocket.

I took a final glance at Lady Eluned, her expression unreadable behind the mask of courtly courtesy. The hooded figure stood back, awaiting my response. Outside, night had fallen on Ashen Roads – a darkness that would soon be matched by the shadows within the Red Vespers.

Without a word, I pushed away from the table and led the way out into the Grand Plaza's evening bustle. We navigated through the crowds with purpose, leaving behind the hallowed halls of the Nightforge Curators. A fleeting glimpse of curiosity crossed the face of a young Nightforged woman as we passed, but her eyes lingered on me, not Eluned or the hooded figure.

Eluned joined our procession, her long cloak billowing behind her like an echo of my own dark attire. As we wove through the winding streets, the grand architecture gave way to narrower alleys, their walls seeming to lean in as if sharing a secret. The scent of woodsmoke and evening meal wafted from nearby windows, mingling with the Nightforgers' distinctive tang – an oil-based polish applied to their tools.

We eventually arrived at a nondescript door hidden behind a tapestry merchant's stall. A small brass plaque on the door read "Red Vespers" in an elegant script, no hint of its true nature beyond the name. I raised a hand to knock, and Eluned covered it with her own, holding my gaze.

"You have that right," she said softly, as if I might forget. "For your family's sake."

The door swung open on a warm spill of candlelight, revealing an expansive hall filled with hooded figures, their faces hidden in shadow. The air was heavy with the scent of incense and what I could only describe as burning secrets.

I entered first, my footsteps echoing off the stone walls, before following the silent procession into the heart of the Red Vespers.

We descended into the depths of the Red Vespers, the air thickening with an almost palpable sense of anticipation. The room's walls seemed to absorb the sound of our footsteps, leaving only the faint hum of whispered conversations and the soft clinking of glassware. I followed Eluned, my eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light, as we wove through the sea of hooded figures.

The Nightforgers were here, their presence marked by the gleam of their polished tools and the subtle scent of their oil-based polish. Some stood in clusters, their hushed conversations punctuated by gestures that spoke of secrecy and urgency, while others sat alone at small tables, nursing cups of dark liquid that seemed to absorb the light around them. I spotted a young Nightforged woman, her eyes locked

onto mine for a fleeting moment before she looked away, her gaze drifting back to her cup as if drawn by an unseen force.

At the far end of the room, a raised dais supported a figure cloaked in darkness, their features obscured by a hood that seemed to swallow the light around them. The air seemed to vibrate with an almost palpable energy, as if this individual was the focal point of the gathering. A shiver ran down my spine as I caught the glint of metal on the figure's wrist – the silver curve of a Nightforging seal.

Eluned nudged me forward, her gentle push urging me toward the dais. I moved with reluctance, my heart sinking into my boots as if trying to escape the weight of the debt and the unknown that lay ahead. The Red Vespers was not a place for comfort or reassurance; it was a venue where secrets were bartered and debts settled in blood and darkness.

As we approached the dais, the figure slowly raised its head, the hood sliding back to reveal a face I knew all too well – my sister, Lirien. Her eyes, once bright with laughter and warmth, now seemed dull and lifeless, as if the very spark within her had been extinguished. A silver cord circled her wrist, binding the Nightforging seal to her skin like a brand.

The room fell silent as I stood frozen in shock, Eluned's hand on my shoulder the only reminder of our presence in this dimly lit space. The weight of my grandfather's debt seemed to grow heavier, pressing down upon me like an unseen force, and I knew in that moment that I was being pulled into a darkness from which there might be no return.

I took a step forward, my voice caught in my throat as if unsure whether to speak or scream. Lirien's gaze locked onto mine, her eyes sunken and empty, yet I saw a flicker of something – recognition, perhaps, or a desperate plea for help. The hooded figure behind her shifted, their presence seeming to grow larger, darker, like a shadow coalescing into reality.

"What do you want?" I managed to ask, my voice barely above a whisper, as the room's silence seemed to swallow my words whole. Lirien's eyes never left mine, but her gaze faltered, and for an instant, I thought I saw the ghost of my sister, trapped beneath the surface, crying out for rescue.

"Ah," Eluned said softly, her voice breaking the spell, "I think it's time you knew, Brother Kael. This is not a night for questions or pleas for help. It's a night for facing what has been owed."

I took another step forward, my boots scraping against the stone floor, as if I could somehow bridge the distance between us. Lirien's gaze remained fixed on mine, her eyes searching for something – a glimmer of recognition, perhaps, or a shred of hope.

The room seemed to spin around me, its silence oppressive, like a weight pressing down upon my shoulders.

"What do you want from me?" I asked again, this time louder, the words echoing off the stone walls. The hooded figure behind Lirien shifted, its presence growing more defined, like a shadow coalescing into a living thing. I felt a surge of anger, a fierce protectiveness rising up within me, as if I could somehow shield my sister from the darkness closing in around her.

Eluned's hand on my shoulder tightened, her voice a gentle counterpoint to the turmoil within me. "You'll learn soon enough, Brother Kael," she said, her words a reminder that I was here to serve, not to ask questions. The hooded figure stepped forward, its presence eclipsing Lirien's, as if it had been waiting for this moment all along.

A chill ran down my spine as the figure reached out with gloved hands and grasped Lirien's arm, pulling her closer to the dais. She didn't resist, her eyes still locked on mine, a plea for help written across her face like a desperate cry. I took another step forward, my heart pounding in my chest, but Eluned's grip on my shoulder held me back.

"You've been brought here tonight because of your family's... arrangements," the hooded figure said, its voice low and gravelly, the words dripping with an unspoken weight. "A debt has come due, one that cannot be paid in gold or silver, only in blood and pain." I felt a jolt of fear, my mind racing to comprehend what was being said. A debt? What debt?

I thought back to my grandfather's words, his hushed conversations with Eluned Thalos, the look of worry etched on his face when I mentioned my own... peculiar abilities. This had something to do with me, didn't it? The weight of my grandfather's debt, the coin in my pocket – was it more than just a simple payment for services rendered?

The hooded figure continued, its words spilling out like dark water. "Your sister has been chosen, Brother Kael, chosen to pay the price for your family's transgressions." The words sent a shiver down my spine as Lirien's eyes never wavered from mine, a silent cry of desperation locked within them.

I took another step forward, my hand rising to my side, as if I could somehow shield her from the darkness. "No," I said, the single word echoing off the stone walls, but it was too late. The room had already shifted, the shadows coalescing into a living, breathing entity that seemed to press in upon me from all sides.

Eluned's grip on my shoulder tightened, holding me back as I strained forward. "It's too late for refusals," she said, her voice soft but firm. "Tonight, we pay the price."

The hooded figure's words dripped with an unspoken menace, their presence seeming to fill the room as if darkness itself had taken a shape. I felt Eluned's grip on my shoulder like a vice, her hand biting deep into my skin. The Nightforgers around us watched, their faces obscured by the shadows, their eyes glinting in the dim light.

I took another step forward, but it was too late. Lirien was being pulled closer to the hooded figure, her movements eerily calm as if some part of her had surrendered long ago. The Nightforgers parted, a path opening up before them like a dark ribbon leading to some hidden destination. I strained against Eluned's grip, but it held fast, pinning me in place.

"What debt?" I demanded, the words bursting from my lips like a cry of defiance. The hooded figure raised its head, its gaze flicking toward mine as if searching for something within me – fear, perhaps, or resignation. "The debt of your family's favor," it replied, its voice dripping with an unspoken weight.

I knew then that I was in the presence of the Order itself, the very heart of the Black Rose. The Nightforgers had brought us here to collect what was owed, and I realized with a cold dread that my grandfather had made a bargain with these people, trading something precious for a favor he never could have understood. Lirien's eyes locked onto mine once more, her gaze pleading for something I couldn't quite comprehend.

The hooded figure raised its hand, and the Nightforgers parted further, creating a space around us that seemed to grow darker by the second. The air was heavy with anticipation, the shadows coalescing into living things that watched our every move. Eluned's grip on my shoulder tightened, her breath whispering against my ear as she spoke.

"It's time you understood the price of your family's... generosity," she said, her voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart. I turned to her, my eyes pleading for some glimmer of understanding or hope, but her face was a mask, unreadable and cold. The hooded figure raised its head, its presence looming larger than before.

"The price is paid in blood," it said, its voice dripping with an unspoken weight, "and the collector has come to collect." Lirien's eyes never left mine as she was pulled closer to the dais, her movements eerily calm as if some part of her had given up long ago. I strained against Eluned's grip, but it held fast, pinning me in place as the darkness closed in around us like a living thing.

The hooded figure reached out with gloved hands and grasped Lirien's wrist, its touch sparking a shiver down my spine. "Tonight," it said, its voice dripping with an unspoken menace, "you will learn what it means to owe the Black Rose."

The hooded figure's grip on Lirien's wrist tightened, its fingers like cold metal closing around her skin. She didn't flinch, but a flicker of something crossed her face, a faint

glimmer of fear or desperation that I'd never seen before. The Nightforgers seemed to lean in, their shadows deepening as if they were trying to get closer to the scene unfolding before them.

"Take it," Eluned said, her voice low and even, but with an undercurrent of something sharp. She pulled on my shoulder, urging me forward, but I refused to budge. The hooded figure's eyes flicked to mine, its gaze cold and unyielding, like the winter night outside these walls.

Lirien's eyes locked onto mine once more, a silent message passing between us that only we could see. It was a reminder of the bond between us, forged in blood and shared secrets. I felt a jolt of anger, a fierce protectiveness rising up within me as if I could somehow shield her from what was about to come.

The hooded figure raised its hand, and Lirien's eyes widened for an instant, as if she'd seen something ahead that filled her with dread. "Don't," I said, the word bursting from my lips like a cry of warning, but it was too late. The figure's gloved fingers closed around her wrist like a vice.

The air seemed to thicken around us, heavy with anticipation and foreboding. The Nightforgers watched, their faces obscured by shadows, as if they were mere spectators at some grim spectacle. Eluned's grip on my shoulder tightened, holding me back as I strained forward, trying to reach Lirien. But she was being pulled inexorably toward the dais, her movements eerily calm as if some part of her had given up.

A faint scent wafted through the air, a tang of metal and smoke that seemed to sear itself into my nostrils. It was the stench of old blood, fresh blood, and something else I couldn't quite place – a smell that spoke of rituals long past and debts unpaid.

The hooded figure's gloved fingers closed around Lirien's wrist like a vice, its grip tight enough to make her wince. I felt a jolt of fury at the sight, my body tensing as if ready to lash out against the Nightforgers and break free from Eluned's grip. The air seemed to thicken around us, heavy with anticipation, and I knew we were mere moments away from some irreversible change.

The hooded figure raised its head, its gaze flicking toward mine with an unspoken challenge. "You know what you owe," it said, its voice dripping with an unspoken weight, as if the very fabric of our lives was being weighed against some unknown balance. I felt Eluned's grip on my shoulder tighten, her breath whispering against my ear as she spoke in a voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart. "This is what it means to owe the Black Rose," she said, her words like a cold blade cutting through any hope.

The hooded figure raised its hand once more, and Lirien's eyes widened as if she saw some unseen horror looming ahead. The Nightforgers seemed to lean in, their shadows deepening as if they were trying to get closer to the scene unfolding before them. I felt a surge of panic, my heart racing with every passing moment as I strained against Eluned's grip, but it held fast, pinning me in place.

A faint rustling sound came from Lirien's direction, and I turned to see her hand rising, her fingers grasping for something – or someone. Her eyes never left mine, a silent message passing between us that seemed to convey a world of meaning. The hooded figure raised its head once more, its gaze flicking toward me with an unspoken question, as if it sought to gauge my will in the face of the unknown.

The air seemed to vibrate with tension as the silence stretched out, heavy with anticipation and foreboding. I could feel the weight of the Nightforgers' gaze upon us, their faces hidden in shadows that seemed to writhe and twist like living things. Eluned's grip on my shoulder tightened, her breath whispering against my ear as she spoke once more. "This is what it means to be bound to the Black Rose," she said, her voice a cold reminder of our situation.

The hooded figure raised its hand, its gloved fingers closing around Lirien's wrist like a vice. A faint tremor ran through her body, and I felt a jolt of fury as I strained against Eluned's grip, but it held fast. The Nightforgers seemed to lean in closer, their shadows deepening as if they sought to witness the unfolding drama.

In that moment, something within me snapped, and I knew I had to act – or risk losing everything.

Tags: Secrecy, Debt, Favored