



Dorian Vale

The Merchant of the Last Tomorrow

A Trader in Futures Sells the Day His Daughter
Was Meant to Die. Someone Comes to Collect the Debt.

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FANTASY

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INTRO

Taren Voss knew his daughter would die tomorrow because three people had valued her death at exactly eighty-seven crowns.

The first was a healer from the southern district, who examined the bluish marks beneath her fingernails, listened to her uneven breathing, and said the fever had already gone too deep.

The second was a priest from the Temple of the Last Hour. He did not try to heal her. He merely placed two fingers against ten-year-old Lina's forehead and, for a moment, listened for something Taren could not hear.

- She'll still be with you until dawn - the priest said. - After that, she won't.

The third man was a merchant.

And he was the only one who offered a price.

His name was Orven Sahr, and he ran a futures exchange in the cellar of an unnumbered house, down an alley that did not appear on city maps. Taren had known the place for years. He himself had led clients through its doors - people richer than he was, poorer than he was, and far more desperate.

He had never imagined that one day he would sit on the other side of the table.

Orven placed a thin plate of silvery glass in front of him. Its surface remained dull until the merchant touched it with his thumb.

Then a date appeared.

Tomorrow.

No month. No year. No hour.

In the trade of futures, details sometimes cost more than the future itself.

- Is that her day? - Taren asked.

Orven did not answer immediately. He had a habit of letting silence work for him. Clients usually began talking too much, and anyone who spoke too much at a bargaining table always lost.

Taren knew that rule.

That evening, it did not matter.

- I'm asking whether that is the day she dies.

- Yes.

A log cracked in the fireplace behind Orven.

Taren stared at the plate.

- If I sell it?

- It will no longer belong to her.

- That isn't an answer.

- It's the only answer I can give you.

Taren clenched his hands beneath the table. That very morning he had been capable of bargaining over a shipment of pepper for three hours, until the caravan owner cursed the day he had learned to speak. Taren could recognize false gold by the weight of a coin balanced on his fingernail. He had seen contracts sealed with blood, memories, names, and years of life.

But the future was a different kind of commodity.

You could not inspect it.

You could only see the price.

- Who's buying?

Orven looked up.

- You shouldn't ask that.

- I did.

- And I'm answering you as a man who still wants to do business with you. Don't ask.

Taren leaned back in his chair. A single lamp hung from the ceiling. The flame beneath its glass flickered unevenly even though there was no draft in the cellar.

- Eighty-seven crowns - he said. - For one day of my daughter's life?

- No.

Orven pushed the plate closer.

- For her tomorrow.

The distinction should have interested him. In any other contract, that was exactly the kind of word that would have made him stop.

Her tomorrow.

Not her life.

Not her death.

Not her rescue.

But several streets away, upstairs in their home, Lina was breathing so quietly that every few minutes Taren leaned over her bed just to make sure her chest was still rising.

- What happens in the morning?

- If the transaction is accepted, nothing that was meant to happen to her tomorrow will belong to her anymore.

- Will she live?

Orven said nothing.

Taren struck the table with his open palm.

- Will she live?

- Probably.

That word cost more than eighty-seven crowns.

Taren felt something cold tighten around his stomach.

- Probably?

- We trade in futures, Taren. Not gods. We do not create days. We do not cure disease. We do not reverse death. We transfer the right to what has not happened yet.

- So the buyer gets her death?

This time Orven looked directly into his eyes.

- The buyer gets her tomorrow.

Taren should have stood up.

He should have gone home and spent the final hours beside his daughter's bed. He should have held her hand when dawn came and made sure the last thing she saw was not a ceiling stained by smoke from the street braziers.

Instead, he asked:

- Where do I sign?

For a moment, Orven looked older than he really was.

He pulled a dark leather-bound ledger from beneath the table.

- You don't sign.

- Every contract requires a signature.

- Not this one.

The merchant opened the ledger to a blank page. He laid the silvery plate on top of it, then placed a small brass knife beside it.

- It requires one drop of blood from the person who has the right to sell the child's future.

Taren looked at the blade.

- I'm her father.

- That's why you're sitting here.

He cut his thumb.

The blood fell onto the plate and did not spread across its surface. It sank into the glass as though falling into very deep water.

The date vanished.

For a moment, Taren saw only his own reflection.

Then three words appeared.

SALE ACCEPTED.

Orven slammed the ledger shut.

The lamp above the table went out.

Taren heard his own breathing and the distant clatter of wheels on the street overhead.

- Is that all? - he asked.

- No.

Orven moved away from the table.

For the first time since Taren had known him, there was fear in his voice.

- You need to remember one thing.

- What?

The merchant looked at the dark plate.

- A future doesn't disappear just because someone sells it.

Taren waited.

- It changes owners - Orven finished.

By morning, Lina's fever had broken.

She opened her eyes shortly after sunrise and asked for water. Before noon, she ate half a piece of bread. By evening, she was able to sit up in bed on her own.

Three days later, the healer called her recovery a miracle.

Taren did not correct him.

He told no one about the exchange, the silvery plate, or the day that had ceased to belong to his daughter.

For the next nine years, he convinced himself the price had been paid.

Until one winter evening, someone knocked on his door three times.

When Taren opened it, a woman in a gray coat stood on the threshold. She carried neither weapon nor luggage. In one hand, she held only a piece of silvery glass.

A date from nine years earlier was written across its surface.

The day Lina Voss was supposed to die.

- Taren Voss? - she asked.

He did not answer.

The woman turned the plate over.

On the other side was a single word.

DEBT.

- I've come for the tomorrow you sold - she said.

Chapter 1 - The Price of an Ordinary Day

For nine years, Taren Voss had built his life around the belief that the worst thing he had ever done was also the best.

The belief rested on solid foundations.

Lina was alive.

That morning she sat at the table in his office, nineteen years old, with an ink stain along the side of her hand and the expression of someone who had just discovered a mistake worth more than most people in the lower city earned in a month. She pushed the ledger toward her father, tapped one of the columns with her finger, and said:

- If you pay Jerm what he wrote here, he'll fleece you for seventeen crowns.

Taren did not even look up from the shipping letter.

- Eleven.

- Seventeen.

- Eleven, if you know how to read his handwriting.

- I know how to read numbers. Usually that's enough.

- Jerm writes his sevens like ones.

Lina bent over the ledger, narrowed her eyes, then sighed.

- I hate people who invent their own rules for numbers.

- That's why trade is more interesting than priesthood.

- Priests invent their own rules for numbers too. They call them offerings.

Taren smiled before he could stop himself.