

# Thorn Key's Lost Child

Black

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Kael Varn stood outside the ornate gates of House Veylan, his eyes fixed on the intricately carved wooden door that led to the inner sanctum. He wore the simple grey robes of a Curator, its familiar weight a reminder of the burden he carried within himself - not just the secrets, but the scars.

"Wait," said the senior Knight stationed at the entrance, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "The mistress has forbidden any visitors today."

Kael nodded, his voice low and measured. "Inform her that I come in service to Melosdra. The balance demands it."

The Knight's expression wavered for a moment before he stepped aside. Kael entered, moving silently through the halls as he made his way to the private chambers.

In the dimly lit room, Lady Veylan sat with her back to him, her slender hands weaving intricate patterns on a small loom. Her dark hair cascaded down like a waterfall of night, framing the pale skin that seemed almost translucent in the faint candlelight.

"Kael," she said without turning, her voice barely above a whisper. "I expected you."

"You requested my presence," he replied, his footsteps quiet as he approached her side.

She raised a hand, beckoning him closer, and Kael hesitated for an instant before sitting beside her on the couch. Her fingers continued their gentle dance across the loom's surface as she spoke in hushed tones.

"A child has gone missing from Thorn Key. A young one, barely past toddlerhood. The guards are at a loss."

Kael's face remained impassive, but his gaze dropped to the floor. "A Lost Child," he repeated.

"Your specialty, Kael," she said, her voice tinged with a hint of sadness. "One that calls for... correction."

He nodded once before rising and moving towards the door. The weight within him stirred, like embers coalescing into flame, and he knew what he was about to do

would exact its price.

At Thorn Key's northern edge, Kael found himself standing before a cluster of trees that seemed to writhe in agony. He knelt among their tangled roots, fingers spreading over the damp earth as he let his presence seep into the land. The trees groaned softly, their pain and fear like a palpable mist.

His hands, now heavy with the weight of this place, reached out and claimed the connection to Thorn Key's heart – and found it thrumming with an uneven cadence. Something had torn at its core, leaving behind a dark resonance that echoed like a cold wind.

As he followed this resonance into the depths of the land, Kael began to sense the faint trail left by the Lost Child – its presence a flickering candle in a darkened room. He pursued it until they reached an old ruin deep within Thorn Key's interior, a place where time seemed to have forgotten itself.

There, he found the child cowering behind a pile of rubble, wide eyes reflecting terror and loss. Kael stood over her, his hand extended in a gesture meant to soothe, but the price of correction was already collecting: every heartbeat throbbed through his temples like hammer blows, and with each step back towards Lady Veylan's mansion, the echoes of Thorn Key's pain deepened.

Upon returning, he found the mistress pacing before her loom. Her fingers paused mid-weave as she watched him approach, her gaze seeking confirmation without a word. He nodded once, then turned to leave – but paused at the threshold.

"Corrected?" she asked softly, her voice a gentle breeze.

He swallowed, wincing as if each word hurt his throat. "The balance is restored."

A moment of silence passed before Lady Veylan inclined her head in approval. Her fingers resumed their dance on the loom, the room filling with an unsettling sense of order and stillness that felt like a promise yet to be fulfilled.

"The debt," she whispered, turning back to him. "Do not forget it."

Kael's hand instinctively went towards his throat where, hidden by the folds of his robes, the small silver chain holding the token of Melosdra hung, its weight and reminder of what he had done – or undone. He nodded silently before stepping out into the grey evening light, leaving the mansion to a darkness that would haunt him for seasons to come.

Kael walked the familiar streets of El'gorth, his eyes scanning the crowded marketplaces for a glimpse of familiarity. The smell of roasting meats and fresh bread wafted through the air, mingling with the cacophony of merchants hawking their wares. He navigated through the throngs with a practiced ease, avoiding eye contact

that might lead to unwanted conversation.

A few streets away, he ducked into a narrow alleyway, seeking solitude among the cramped wooden stalls and canvas awnings. His fingers instinctively went to the token's chain at his neck, the weight of it settling like a promise against his skin. He thought of Lady Veylan's words – the debt – and wondered what price he would have to pay for this correction. Memories of the Lost Child's terror lingered, making his hands restless.

A soft rustling sound drew his attention to a small figure perched atop a nearby crate. A young girl with matted brown hair and eyes like two bright stars stared at him from beneath a messy tangle of blankets, her gaze piercing as she began to hum a gentle tune that echoed the trees' own pain. The air seemed to vibrate with a soft power as she finished singing, her words lost in the city's din. Kael felt it – the power she wove was not unlike his own, though its price might be far steeper.

The girl slid from the crate and padded towards him, her bare feet making barely a sound on the cobblestones. "Mama said I shouldn't talk to strangers," she said, her voice husky but wary. Her eyes never left his face as she reached out a grimy hand, palm up, and whispered, "Thorn Key's got a price, you know."

As Kael watched her, his gaze drifted towards the girl's hand still extended, the gesture almost childlike in its trust. He hesitated for a moment, recalling Lady Veylan's words – "the debt" – before slowly wrapping his own fingers around hers. The connection was immediate and unsettling, like grasping a hot coal. Her small face contorted in a wince as the power surged through him, but she didn't let go.

"You shouldn't be out here," Kael said gently, tucking her hand into his robes for some semblance of safety. The city's sounds receded, replaced by an uncomfortable silence that seemed to press upon them from all sides. He knew he should keep moving, not draw attention to himself with this... manifestation of the land's power. Yet something in her eyes kept him there, questioning.

"You're a Weaver," she whispered, her breath cold against his wrist as he led her through the alleyway's narrow path. "Like Mama." Her small voice seemed carried away by the market's sounds before it returned, steady and resolute. "Thorn Key's heart beats in you." Kael's gaze flickered to hers; it was a statement not a question. "You're like me," she added, her eyes welling up with tears.

The girl's words cut through his resolve like a scythe, memories he thought long buried threatening to resurface: of Eira, her laughter, and the threads that bound them together until the land itself rent them apart. He couldn't meet her gaze, but his grip on her hand tightened in reflex as the alleyway darkened around them, a physical manifestation of the turmoil within.

He led her through winding alleys, away from the market's gaze, but her words echoed within him like a persistent drumbeat. Like Eira. The comparison stung, a burn that had long since healed into scar tissue, yet now felt raw and tender once more. He couldn't bring himself to ask why she'd called him that, his mind racing with questions he dared not speak aloud.

As they navigated the narrow passageways, Kael noticed people parting around them without apparent reason, as if sensing an unspoken understanding between him and the child. It unsettled him – no one should be aware of such things in this place. They finally emerged onto a quiet street lined with small, cramped shops, each bearing hand-painted signs that seemed to glow in the fading light. She stopped before one of these shops, a sign reading "Moonwhisper's Curios" above its door.

The child stepped inside, her head ducking beneath the low doorway as she led Kael into the dimly lit interior. The shop reeked of old books and dust, but a soft fire crackled in the corner, casting shadows that seemed to writhe on the walls like the twisted trees outside Thorn Key's walls. An elderly woman with silver hair braided down her back regarded them from behind the counter, her eyes narrowing as she took in Kael's face. The air was thick with an unnatural silence, as if the very air vibrated with power – and debt.

"Moonwhisper," the girl said softly, before running forward to the woman's skirts. The older one enfolded her close, a smile spreading across her lined face. "I see we have a visitor."

Moonwhisper's gaze lingered on Kael, her expression unreadable behind a mask of curiosity. "And who might you be?" she asked, her voice low and melodious.

"I'm...just someone passing through," Kael replied, feeling like an outsider in the warm intimacy of the shop. The fire crackled, casting shadows that danced across the walls as he shifted uncomfortably, aware that he didn't belong in this quiet space. "I was brought here by a child," he added, nodding towards the girl, who was now occupied with arranging small trinkets on a shelf.

Moonwhisper's eyes never left his face, but her expression softened as she turned to the child. "Aela, dear one, I think it's time for your tea." The girl looked up from her task, a hint of disappointment in her eyes before nodding and moving towards the back room. Moonwhisper's gaze lingered on Kael as the girl disappeared into the shadows.

"You're not like most visitors," she said, her voice low and deliberate. "The power about you...it's familiar." Her eyes seemed to bore into his very soul, searching for answers he was no longer certain of himself. "You bear a mark, one I've seen before, but it's been many years since I last saw its like."

Kael's hand instinctively went to the token at his throat, the weight of Melosdra's promise settling heavy against his skin. He tried to shake off the feeling that Moonwhisper was seeing more than she should – that the debt he'd incurred with Lady Veylan was beginning to unravel in ways he couldn't control. "I'm just a...a Weaver," he repeated, trying to keep his tone light, but it sounded hollow even to himself.

The shop fell silent once more, the only sound the soft crackle of the fire as Moonwhisper's gaze seemed to hold him suspended in time. Aela returned with a steaming cup and saucer, her eyes fixed on Kael with an unnerving intensity before she placed the tray on a nearby table. The room waited, as if holding its collective breath, until Kael forced himself to take a sip of the scalding liquid, his eyes meeting Moonwhisper's in a fleeting moment of understanding that left him shivering.

The silence was oppressive, heavy with secrets and unspoken knowledge. "You want something," Moonwhisper said finally, her voice dripping with an unspoken accusation. "But I think you should know what you're getting yourself into." She paused, studying Kael as if searching for answers to questions he wasn't even sure of himself.

Moonwhisper's words hung in the air like a challenge, and Kael felt his grip on the cup tighten, the ceramic biting into his palm as he struggled to keep his composure. "What are you talking about?" he asked, though he knew full well she wasn't referring to the tea or the silence.

Moonwhisper's gaze didn't waver, her eyes boring into his like a sharp knife. "You came in here with Aela, and I know what she's told me about you. But there's something more, something that doesn't feel...natural." Her voice dropped to a whisper, drawing Kael in despite himself. "Something from Thorn Key."

Kael's eyes flicked towards the girl, who was watching him with an intent gaze, her small hands grasping the rim of the saucer as if for balance. He forced his attention back to Moonwhisper, a sense of trepidation building within him. How much did she know? And how had Aela gotten to her so quickly?

"The girl's words have disturbed me," Kael said slowly, trying to deflect the line of questioning without revealing too much. "She reminded me...of someone I knew." His throat felt tight, and for a moment, he thought he'd pushed the thread of his past too far. Moonwhisper's expression didn't change, but Aela's eyes locked onto his with an unspoken understanding, as if sensing the weight of the memories that threatened to surface.

"I see," Moonwhisper said finally, her voice dripping with a mixture of intrigue and wariness. "And you've come seeking something? Something connected to Thorn Key?" She stepped closer, her movements deliberate and measured, her hands cradling the edge of the counter as if holding back against some unseen tide. Kael felt himself

shrinking back, the air around him thickening with an otherworldly power that seemed to seep from the walls themselves.

Aela's voice cut through the tension, "Mama, tell him what you said about the heartbeats." Moonwhisper's gaze flicked towards her daughter before returning to Kael, a measured calm settling over her features. "Yes," she said softly, as if the weight of the words was too much for her to carry alone. "I told Aela that when a child is born, their heartbeat weaves into the land, leaving behind...a thread." Her eyes locked onto his, and he felt a shiver run down his spine as she continued. "And sometimes, if the threads align just so, you find yourself bound to another - by blood, by heart, or even by debt."

Kael's grip on the cup tightened, the ceramic threatening to shatter in his hand as the words echoed within him. He remembered the stories of the land's heartbeat - how it was said that a person could only truly grasp its rhythm if their own heart beat in time with the earth itself. How could Aela possibly know about this? And what debt did she mean?

The silence that followed Moonwhisper's words was like a held breath, the air thick with unspoken secrets and ancient power. Aela watched him with an unnerving intensity, her small face set in a determined expression. Kael felt himself shrinking back from the weight of their combined gazes, his mind reeling with questions and fragmented memories that refused to coalesce.

Moonwhisper's words hung like a challenge, and he knew he couldn't keep running from them any longer. "You're saying...that I'm bound to someone by debt?" he repeated, his voice barely above a whisper as the implications dawned on him. The child's heartbeat weaving into the land? Threads aligning in some ancient pattern?

Aela nodded, her eyes shining with an unspoken understanding, but Moonwhisper's expression remained impassive, her hands cradling the edge of the counter as if holding back against some unseen tide. "I'm saying that you've been marked, Kael," she said slowly, her voice dripping with a quiet intensity. "And I think I know why."

Moonwhisper's eyes seemed to bore into his very soul, as if searching for some hidden truth he himself had yet to uncover. Kael shifted uncomfortably, feeling the weight of her gaze like a physical force. "What do you mean?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady despite the growing sense of unease.

"The mark at your throat," Moonwhisper said, her voice low and deliberate. "It's not just any token, Kael. It's a symbol of a debt incurred by someone close to you, one that spans generations." Aela watched him with an unnerving intensity, as if sensing the turmoil brewing within him. "I think it's connected to the child who...died," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kael felt his mind reel at the mention of the child. The weight of Melosdra's promise settled heavy against his skin, and he knew that Moonwhisper was right – the token was more than just a symbol of his vow to Lady Veylan. It represented something deeper, a bond forged in blood and sorrow. He thought back to the memories he'd suppressed for so long, the ache in his chest growing as the truth began to unravel.

Moonwhisper's expression turned solemn, her eyes filled with a deep understanding. "You see, Aela told me about your past," she said quietly. "About the loss that drove you from Thorn Key." Her gaze locked onto Kael's, and he felt himself shrinking back from the weight of her knowledge. How did she know? And what did she truly understand about his lost child?

The silence that followed was like a held breath, as if Moonwhisper's words had conjured a weighty presence into the room. Aela's eyes never left Kael's face, her expression an unspoken mirror to her mother's solemnity. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, the rhythm of it matching the thrumming of the fire in the hearth. Moonwhisper's gaze seemed to hold him suspended, as if searching for the threads she'd spoken of – the connections that bound him to someone, or something.

"It's time," Moonwhisper said finally, her voice a soft rustle in the stillness. "For you to understand what it means." Her eyes never wavered from his, their intensity enough to make Kael's skin prickle. He swallowed hard, the effort of speaking feeling like a battle to be won. "What do you know?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady despite the turmoil brewing within him.

Moonwhisper took a step closer, her movements deliberate and unhurried. Aela slid off the stool, her small body seeming to merge with the shadows as she moved towards the door. "A debt that's been accumulating for years," Moonwhisper said, her voice low and measured. "One tied to the land itself. Your child...died, didn't they?" Kael felt a cold dread creep up his spine as he nodded, unable to deny it. Moonwhisper's eyes dropped, as if acknowledging a shared pain. "The threads are tangled now," she said softly, "and I think I know what caused them."

Kael's mind reeled with the implications – the child, the debt, and the threads that bound him to someone, or something. He thought of Melosdra's promise, and the token at his throat, and how it seemed to be more than just a symbol of his vow. Moonwhisper's words hung in the air like a whispered secret, their weight pressing down upon him. "Who is it?" he asked, the question barely above a whisper.

Moonwhisper's gaze lifted, her eyes holding an unspoken understanding. "I think it's time you knew," she said slowly. "Aela's father...was involved in the child's passing."

Tags: Redemption, Loyalty, Betrayed