

# Thorn Key's Promise, Secret Keepers, House Veylan

Black

## Thorn Key's Promise

The weight of silence hung over House Veylan like a shroud, heavy with secrets. In its midst, Kael Varn stood as an unassuming presence, his eyes never quite meeting yours. It was said he walked where armies couldn't: into hearts, into secrets, into judgment unspoken.

He moved through the dimly lit corridors of Thorn Key, the whispers and hushed conversations parting like ripples on a pond as he passed. The air inside was thick with the scent of old leather and parchment, a musty reminder of the countless documents etched within these walls. Kael navigated this labyrinthine keep without hesitation, his footsteps echoing softly against the cold stone.

His business here was with Lady Eira Veylan, the matriarch of House Veylan. She sat at a polished wooden desk, her slender fingers moving deftly over the pages of an ancient tome. As Kael approached, she raised her gaze, her eyes narrowing behind the frames of delicate spectacles.

"Kael," she said, her voice measured, "the Curators have petitioned for your presence in the Nightforge. They speak of a... delicate matter."

Kael's expression remained unreadable as he inclined his head. The Curators would not have called him unless it was crucial, and crucial matters were rarely delicate. He took a seat beside Lady Eira, his eyes drifting to the documents spread before her.

"What is the nature of this matter?" he asked, though he suspected he knew.

"Information," she replied, "about one who walks the Ashen Roads. A figure seen in whispers and rumors, never quite seen in plain sight."

Kael's interest piqued, not for the information itself, but the manner in which it had come to light. He leaned forward slightly, a small movement that might have gone unnoticed by anyone else.

"Go on," he encouraged.

The silence that followed was oppressive, heavy with secrets and unspoken words. Lady Eira's hands stilled over the parchment, her gaze holding his for an uncomfortable moment before she spoke.

"There are those who believe this figure is connected to the Melosdra—its influence spreading beyond the Broken Writ."

Kael's eyes flickered, a momentary distraction. He recalled the stories of the Black Rose Order, its symbols etched into forgotten battlefields and crumbling monoliths. The Melosdra, a force that hung at the fringes of balance, feeding on chaos and discord.

"Am I to hunt this... figure?" he asked, though he knew the answer already.

Lady Eira's expression turned stern. "You will investigate, yes. But tread carefully. Balance is not always served with blood."

He nodded, a small, sharp pain lancing through his hand as his fingers instinctively clenched into a fist. A cost he would later pay in full, the weight of his own secrets and the ones he kept for others.

With that, the meeting concluded, and Kael left Thorn Key's heavy silence behind. He walked out into a world where balance was a ledger, and every act, no matter how small, was entered against your name.

He carried with him a promise from Lady Eira: that if his quest led him to the truth about the Melosdra's influence, she would see it through personally. And he knew then that his path ahead would be marked by consequences, each step weighing heavier than the last.

Kael navigated the winding streets of Argentum, his footsteps carrying him through the city's heart as he made his way to the Nightforge. The air thickened with the smells of coal smoke and hot metal as he passed beneath the city gates, the sound of hammering and hissing steam enveloping him like a shroud. The Nightforge, an ancient foundry where artificers crafted intricate clockwork devices, was a hub for those seeking precision and innovation.

Upon entering the forge, Kael spotted a figure waiting by the fire pits, its edges casting a warm glow across the room. Arden Vex, lead Curator of the Black Rose Order's archives, stood with his back against a workbench, his slender fingers drumming against the worn wood as he watched Kael approach. His eyes, bright and unyielding, spoke of a man driven by discovery.

"Well met, Kael," Arden said, pushing off from the bench as Kael drew near. "We have news on the... figure in question." He nodded to a small, hooded figure waiting near the fire pits, who stepped forward at his gesture. The stranger's face was obscured by

shadows, their features softened and hidden beneath a hood woven with intricate patterns of silver and black.

"I am Renn," the stranger said, their voice low and measured, as they held out a small pouch made from supple leather. "This contains the information you've requested." Kael's eyes narrowed; he did not take the pouch. "What is this in exchange for the... information?"

Renn's gaze did not waver, their eyes seeming to bore into Kael's very soul as they waited for an answer. Arden Vex shifted uncomfortably, his fingers drumming a staccato beat against the workbench once more, before he intervened. "Kael, this information is... sensitive. We've had reports of strange occurrences in the vicinity of the old windmill on the outskirts of Argentum. People have gone missing, and there are whispers of a figure seen lurking around the site."

Kael's eyes flickered back to Renn, his mind racing with the implications. "What kind of information?" he repeated, his tone firm but measured.

Renn's expression remained impassive as they replied, "The kind that might explain why certain... people are missing." The pouch in their hand seemed to weigh heavy with secrets, and Kael found himself wondering what would happen if he were to take it.

He weighed the risks, his conscience – long silent – stirring within him like a sleeping beast. It rumbled and growled, its presence a low hum that threatened to consume him whole. For a moment, he was lost in its depths, memories spilling forth like blood from an opened vein: the face of a child, eyes wide with fear; a city burning, flames devouring everything in their path; a promise, whispered in a dark alleyway, to keep certain truths hidden.

The past receded as Kael's gaze snapped back to Renn, his eyes narrowing. He knew that look – the one that said you were on the cusp of walking down a road from which there was no return. "I'll need to see it," he said finally, breaking the silence.

Renn's expression didn't change, but a faint flicker of curiosity danced in their eyes before they nodded, tucking the pouch into Kael's hand. "Be warned, this information comes with a price," Renn said, voice low and measured. "One that you may not be willing to pay."

Kael's fingers closed around the pouch, feeling the soft weight of it, and the whispered secrets within. He knew better than to ignore the warning, but he'd made up his mind to see this through. The air in the forge seemed to thicken as he opened the pouch, a small vial of dark liquid and a rolled-up parchment spilling out onto his palm. Arden Vex stepped forward, eyes wide with concern, while Renn's gaze followed Kael's every move.

"What is this?" Kael asked, unrolling the parchment, his fingers trembling slightly as he revealed a crude map etched into its surface. The ink seemed to bleed and seep across the paper, as if drawn by an unseen hand. Renn's voice was detached as they said, "A path, of sorts. It leads to where... things are being kept." Kael's eyes scanned the parchment, the windmill on the outskirts of Argentum appearing at its center. A web of symbols surrounded it, pulsing with a faint blue light that seemed to grow brighter by the second.

Kael's gaze snapped back to Renn, his heart racing as he realized the full extent of what they were dealing with. "What things?" he pressed, voice low and urgent. Renn's expression remained impassive, but their eyes seemed to gleam with a dark intensity in the firelight. "Things that should not be," they replied. Kael's grip on the vial tightened; its contents pulsed with an otherworldly energy, a power he couldn't quite comprehend.

Arden Vex cleared his throat, his voice cutting through the tension. "Kael, we should get moving. Night is falling, and—"

"I'll be fine," Kael said, interrupting, his eyes never leaving Renn's face. "I have what I need." The stranger nodded once, a small movement, before turning to leave. Kael watched them go, the weight of the vial and parchment pressing against him like a promise of secrets yet to be revealed.

He tucked the documents into his belt, his hand lingering on the hilt of his sword as he turned back to Arden Vex. "You didn't tell me what kind of information I'd find in that pouch," Kael said, eyes narrowing slightly. Arden's expression shifted, a fleeting glance at Renn's retreating form before he leaned in close. "We found whispers of an... entity, one connected to the Melosdra. It's feeding on fear, growing stronger with each passing night."

The words sent a shiver down Kael's spine as he recalled Lady Eira's warning about balance not always being served with blood. He knew what that meant - the price he would have to pay for meddling in forces beyond his control. The city gates of Argentum loomed before him, and the windmill on its outskirts beckoned, shrouded in darkness.

Kael left the Nightforge, his footsteps carrying him through the winding streets as he navigated the growing darkness. The wind picked up, whipping dust devils across the cobblestone streets, making it difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. He walked faster, his eyes scanning the surrounding buildings for any sign of Renn, but they were gone.

The air thickened with an unholy energy as he reached the outskirts of Argentum, the windmill looming before him like a monolith. Its sails creaked in the increasing wind, casting eerie shadows across the ground. Kael hesitated at the entrance to the

windmill's courtyard, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Something didn't feel right – the air was heavy with malevolent intent, and he sensed a presence watching him from the shadows.

Kael drew his sword, its familiar weight a comfort as he stepped into the windmill's courtyard. The air inside was stale, thick with dust and the stench of decay. He moved cautiously, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls as he made his way deeper into the structure. The symbols etched onto the parchment seemed to be seared into his mind – a web of protection or warning, he couldn't be sure.

A door creaked in the darkness ahead, pushed open by an unseen force. Kael's heart quickened as he approached it, his sword at the ready. A cold draft swept past him, carrying with it the stench of rot and corruption. He stepped inside, his eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light within.

The room beyond was a cell, its walls lined with rusty iron bars and a single, flickering torch casting eerie shadows on the floor. Kael's gaze landed on a figure slumped in the center of the room, bound by chains that seemed to be rusting away at an alarming rate. The air reeked of decay, and he could feel the weight of death hanging heavy over the prisoner.

As he approached, Kael realized it was Elara Vex, Arden's sister – her face pale and drawn, her eyes sunken into dark circles. "Elara?" he whispered, his voice barely audible over the howling wind outside. Her gaze flickered towards him, a glimmer of recognition in her eyes before they clouded over once more.

Kael's gut twisted with a sense of foreboding as he examined the chains binding Elara – they seemed to be feeding off her life force, siphoning away her vitality at an alarming rate. He knew what he had to do; he had to get her out of there, but something was holding him back. The symbols on the parchment seemed to be pulsing with a strange energy, as if they were guiding him deeper into this nightmare.

The windmill's creaking grew louder, the shadows twisting and writhing across the walls like living things. Kael took another step forward, his eyes locked on Elara's pale form, his heart heavy with the weight of what he was about to do.

As he moved closer, the air seemed to thicken around him, heavy with malevolent energy. Kael's skin crawled, but he pushed on, his gaze locked on Elara's frail form. The chains binding her appeared to be absorbing her life force, draining it from her like a dark, ethereal leech. He could feel its presence, a cold, calculating intelligence that seeped through the bars like frost.

The stench of decay and corruption clung to the air, making his stomach churn. He tried not to think about what was happening here, what kind of creature would feed on a person's life force like this. His hand reached out, hesitant, as if reaching for

something that might burn him. The chains seemed to writhe and twist, as if alive, as he touched the links binding Elara. They were cool to the touch, almost metallic, but they seemed to be siphoning off her vitality at an alarming rate.

Kael's grip on his sword tightened as he examined the chains more closely. He could feel a faint hum of energy emanating from them, a dark resonance that seemed to be feeding off Elara's life force. It was as if they were drawing power from her, using it to sustain themselves or some other, darker purpose. The realization made his gut twist with revulsion, and he knew he had to end this. He drew the vial from his belt, uncorking it carefully – the dark liquid within seemed to seethe and bubble like a living thing.

A surge of trepidation washed over him as he hesitated. Renn's warning echoed in his mind: "One that you may not be willing to pay." The entity feeding on Elara was connected to the Melosdra, an ancient, malevolent force that fed on fear and darkness. What did it want with her? And what would happen if he tried to stop it? Kael took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. He poured a small amount of the dark liquid onto the chains, watching as they seemed to absorb it hungrily.

The air around him seemed to darken, the shadows twisting and writhing like living things. Elara's eyes flickered open, her gaze locking on Kael's with a mixture of fear and confusion. He reached out, taking one of her hands in his, trying to reassure her as he examined the chains more closely. The liquid seemed to be seeping into the links now, its dark energy infusing them like a slow-moving poison.

As he watched, the chains began to writhe and twist in earnest, their links separating with a dreadful slowness as if being torn apart by an unseen force. Kael's grip on Elara's hand tightened, his fingers intertwined with hers as he held her upright against the sudden movement. Her eyes fluttered closed, her head lolling back against his shoulder as she breathed shallowly.

The stench of decay and corruption grew stronger, making his stomach churn in protest. He fought down a wave of nausea, focusing instead on the chains that seemed to be dissolving into nothingness. The dark liquid from the vial had infused them with a deadly potency, and Kael knew he had to act quickly before it was too late. With a surge of adrenaline, he grasped the chains in his free hand, attempting to rip them free from Elara's wrists.

The links parted with a dreadful screech, like ice shattering on stone. Kael hauled Elara towards him, wrapping her in his arms as the chains dropped away, releasing their hold on her life force. The entity feeding off her screamed in rage and hunger, its presence rippling through the air like a living thing. For an instant, Kael felt it brush against his skin, leaving behind an icy chill that spread up his arm like frostbite. He

gritted his teeth, holding Elara close as he backed away from the chains.

The room around them seemed to darken further, the shadows twisting and writhing with a malevolent life of their own. Kael's grip on Elara tightened, his mind racing with the implications of what he'd just done. The entity had been feeding off her, growing stronger with each passing night – but why? And what did it plan to do with the life force it absorbed? He glanced down at Elara's pale face, her eyes still closed, and felt a surge of determination. They couldn't stay here; they had to get out, and find answers.

He turned towards the door, his eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light within the windmill. The creaking of the blades above seemed to grow louder, the shadows on the walls twisting into grotesque, animate forms. Kael knew they didn't have much time – whatever had been feeding off Elara would not take kindly to being cut off from its source. He tucked his sword away, careful not to jostle Elara, and took a deep breath, steeling himself for what lay ahead. The air outside was growing colder, the wind howling through the streets like a chorus of lost souls.

He pushed open the door, his eyes scanning the courtyard beyond for any sign of Renn or Arden. The darkness seemed to swallow everything whole, making it difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. Kael's grip on Elara tightened as he stepped out into the night, the wind buffeting him like a living thing. He squinted against the driving rain, his eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of pursuit.

A faint light flickered in the distance, casting eerie shadows across the ground. Kael's heart quickened, hope rising that they might yet find safety. The light grew brighter, illuminating the dark shapes looming around them – and with it, a figure stepped into view. It was Renn, her eyes fixed intently on Kael as she beckoned him towards the light.

As Kael moved towards Renn, Elara's weight grew heavier in his arms, her breathing shallow and labored. The rain pounded against their skin, making every step a battle to stay upright. Renn's expression was grim, her eyes never leaving Kael as he stumbled closer.

"What happened?" she called out above the wind, her voice husky from disuse. "Is it done?"

Kael hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. Elara's life force was ebbing away, and he couldn't shake the feeling that they'd only scratched the surface of whatever malevolent power had been feeding off her. The air seemed to thicken around him as Renn drew closer, her eyes scanning Kael's face for any sign of what she needed to know.

"It's not over," Kael called back, his voice barely audible above the howling wind. "Whatever was doing this...it's still out there."

Renn's expression darkened further, her gaze flicking towards Elara with a flicker of fear. She reached out, taking the younger woman from Kael as if she weighed nothing at all. Elara's eyes fluttered open, her gaze drifting to Renn before closing again in exhaustion.

"What now?" Kael shouted above the wind, his eyes scanning their surroundings for any sign of danger. "We can't stay here."

Renn's jaw was set, her eyes burning with a fierce determination. She tucked Elara under her arm, holding her close as if she were a child. "We'll get her to safety," she called back, turning towards the light source that still beckoned them from deeper in the courtyard. "Your sister will know what to do."

Kael's gut twisted with unease. Renn meant Lyra, their house's healer and one of the few people Kael trusted without question. He knew what lay ahead - a long, treacherous journey through the city's winding streets, pursued by whatever had been feeding off Elara. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as he turned to follow Renn into the darkness.

Their steps echoed off the buildings as they stumbled forward, the wind and rain battering them from all sides. Kael's vision blurred, his head spinning with the exertion of keeping his footing. He stumbled once, twice, before catching himself on a nearby wall. Elara's weight was crushing him, her life force ebbing away like sand in an hourglass.

He glanced down at Renn, who moved swiftly and silently ahead, her eyes fixed on some point beyond their immediate surroundings. Kael knew he should be doing the same - but his gaze kept drifting back to Elara, her fragile form swaying in Renn's arms as if it were a puppet on strings. He forced himself to focus on the task at hand, squinting through the rain for any sign of pursuit.

The darkness seemed to swallow everything whole, making it impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Kael's stomach churned with a growing sense of dread - they had to move faster, find a safe place before whatever had been feeding off Elara closed in again. He quickened his pace, his boots pounding against the cobblestones as he stumbled forward into the night.

Tags: Silent Conscience, Balance of Blood, Kael Varn