

# When Loyalty Demands Blood

Black

## The Silent Due

Kael Varn stepped into the flickering torchlight of Nightforge's eastern gatehouse, his footsteps quiet on the stone flags. No one challenged him. The portcullis creaked open as he approached, and a lone figure in Thalos black emerged.

"Ambassador," Kael said, with a nod to the knight.

"Kael Varn," the knight replied, voice firm but weary. "You've been summoned by Her Majesty. She awaits you in the throne room."

In Nightforge's depths, the air thickened with the weight of iron and history. Kael descended into the city's heart, his footsteps guided by memories of a dozen prior visits. The last time he'd stood before the Queen had been three years ago, when a Thalos assassin was found dead on her doorstep, accused of attempting to kill her child.

This time, an unspoken expectation hung in the air like fog: Kael had not returned since the incident. His absence earned him no reprimand but also no welcome. He'd made his choice clear – to take on the role of a 'silent due,' owing Her Majesty and Nightforge nothing more than he could fulfill quietly.

As he entered the throne room, Her Majesty sat with her back to the fire, Queen Everia's hand supporting her elbow. The air was heavy with the scent of smoke from last night's incense burnings.

"Kael," she said without turning, "I have a task for you."

Kael inclined his head, ready. "Name it, Your Majesty."

"It seems one of our Curators in Melosdra has gone missing. Our records indicate a debt to be paid, and we suspect she may have attempted to settle it through...unconventional means."

He nodded, making a mental note: pay attention to the specifics on this case. Thalos Knights would not concern themselves with settling debts for Curators.

"Your Majesty," he said, "might I ask why this Curator's disappearance warrants my involvement?"

Everia's profile was sharp in the firelight. "It involves a Sinsong member – their leader, if rumor holds true. We don't want our relations with Melosdra strained further."

Kael nodded once more. He'd worked closely with the Black Rose Order before; his involvement would signal to them that Nightforge wasn't backing away from disputes. Yet.

"Your task," he said, "is to find this Curator and bring her back safely. Her Majesty believes your...particular set of skills will be invaluable in negotiations."

With a quiet sense of foreboding, Kael realized the path ahead was fraught with unspoken consequences – consequences that would demand more than just skill and stealth.

He turned to leave, but not before catching sight of something: Queen Everia's left hand clutched her right arm above the elbow; it seemed she'd hurt herself on the throne. Perhaps during or after incense burnings? Kael didn't pry; in Nightforge, secrets were currency, and he was still owing.

Before descending into Melosdra, Kael prepared for what lay ahead: a night of silence and observation, punctuated by careful questions and perhaps an unsettling debt to pay later.

The cold dawn air clung to Kael as he descended into Melosdra, the city's morning silence broken only by the distant ring of hammers on metal. He'd been here before, but his last visit had been a hurried affair – a Thalos knight sent ahead to verify rumors of an assassination plot against the Queen's child. Now, as he navigated the narrow streets, he sensed a change in the air: fewer soldiers patrolled the upper levels, and market stalls were sparse and hastily set up. Rumors swirled that the city's debt to Nightforge was becoming increasingly... complicated.

The sound of whispers and hushed laughter led him to a small inn on the lower levels, its sign creaking in the wind – the emblem of a raven perched atop a lantern, surrounded by an aura of faded grandeur. Kael pushed open the door and stepped inside, his eyes adjusting to the dim light within. Smoke wafted from the hearth, but patrons huddled at tables or stood at the bar, speaking in low tones. He scanned the room for any familiar face, eventually locking onto a figure hunched over a mug of ale in a corner booth.

It was Jax Vex, a local informant Kael had used on occasion – and one who'd grown accustomed to working with him without questions. Their gazes met, and Jax raised his mug in a silent greeting as Kael made his way towards the booth. The air inside reeked of stale ale and something more: desperation.

"Good morrow," Kael said, sliding into the booth opposite Jax. "I've been sent to find a missing Curator from Nightforge. Anything heard about it?"

Jax set his mug down with a quiet clink, wiping a hand across his mouth. "You're not here for social visits, I reckon. The local Thalos knights have been poking around, but this Curator's gone missing since before they arrived. Strange thing is, no one saw or heard anything out of the ordinary – just that she vanished in the night." He leaned forward, lowering his voice further still. "Rumor is...this might not be her first time in trouble."

Kael's eyes narrowed as he sipped his own ale, mulling over the weight of unspoken words. In Nightforge, Curators worked under a strict code – if one was 'troubled' twice, their bond with the Order would've been severed long ago.

Kael's eyes met Jax's, probing for confirmation on the rumor. "What do you know about her troubles?" he asked, the sound of the inn's patrons muted in his mind.

Jax's gaze darted around the room before focusing back on Kael. "There was a... situation, months ago. She'd been seen with a man from Sinsong – one of their higher-ups, I think. We've heard rumors they're expanding into new territories, and Nightforge wants to keep them at bay." He paused, voice barely above a whisper. "Some folks say this Curator had other interests too – the kind that'd get her in deep with the wrong people."

Kael's mind worked over the connections, but one thing stood out: Sinsong's expansion, and a leader being involved. A task for him to find a missing person now seemed less about retrieval than unraveling a web of Nightforge's interests in Melosdra.

He signaled the innkeeper with a nod, his thoughts still tangled around Jax's words. As he waited for his drink to arrive, Kael's eyes scanned the patrons once more – searching for anyone who might be connected to Sinsong or the missing Curator. That was when he spotted her: standing at the bar, ordering a drink with an air of quiet confidence that didn't quite fit.

A raven-haired woman, skin as pale as alabaster in the dim light, turned toward him and their eyes met for a brief moment. Kael's gut tightened; there was something about her he couldn't place – a familiarity that hinted at shared experiences, yet remained out of reach. He leaned back into the booth, intrigued, as the woman stepped away from the bar and disappeared into the crowd.

A few minutes passed before she reappeared by his table, her raven-black hair now tied back in a loose braid. "Kael Varn," she said, voice husky as she slid into the booth beside him. Her hand slipped across the space between them, settling on the back of his neck, a touch that sent shivers through his skin.

"Who are you?" Kael asked, a hint of tension in his voice, as he turned to face her.

"I'm someone who knows your business, Kael Varn," she said, her fingers tracing small circles on his skin. The air was thick with unspoken meanings as Jax watched from across the table, an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

Kael's eyes narrowed, the connection to this stranger unsettling. He shifted away from her touch, trying to place where he'd seen her before or why she seemed so familiar. "What do you want?" he asked brusquely, his voice a stark contrast to the subtle tension between them.

The woman smiled – lips that shone like moonlit stone in the dim light of the inn – and leaned back into the booth. "A simple conversation, nothing more," she said, her voice dripping with an air of nonchalance that Kael didn't quite believe. Jax's eyes had grown wide with a mix of excitement and wariness as he listened to their exchange.

Kael raised his mug, taking a long drag on the ale before responding. "I'm in the middle of something," he said slowly, trying not to tip his hand. The woman, however, just laughed – her raven hair rustling with the movement – and reached into her tunic for a small pouch, pulling out a silver coin. She tossed it across the table, where it clinked against the mug. "I think we can spare an hour," she said.

Kael picked up the coin, recognizing the crest embossed on its surface as the emblem of Sinsong – the same faction the missing Curator had dealings with. He raised an eyebrow at the woman, trying to gauge her intentions. "What's in it for you?" he asked, weighing the risks and benefits of engaging with someone tied to the very organization they were investigating.

The raven-haired woman slid back into the corner of the booth, a smile still playing on her lips. "Let us say I have an... interest in your Curator," she said, "and perhaps in the troubles that seem to be following you." Her eyes locked onto his, and Kael felt a shiver run down his spine as their gazes held.

Kael sipped his ale once more, considering this sudden turn of events. "You're connected to Sinsong's leader," he said, a statement rather than a question. The woman nodded almost imperceptibly, her eyes never leaving his face. "A connection I'd rather not make public just yet," she replied, the air thickening with tension in the small space between them.

He set his mug down, the silence heavy as Jax pushed to his feet and stepped away from their table, a mixture of fascination and fear on his face. Kael followed him with a glance before turning back to the woman, whose gaze now seemed almost... calculating. He leaned forward, voice dropping to a whisper. "What's your name?"

The air in the inn seemed to thicken as she replied, her voice husky and intimate. "I'm Lyra – one of those who sees beyond the veils."

Lyra's words hung in the air like a promise, her eyes never leaving Kael's face as he searched for any sign of deceit or gamesmanship. He found none, only an unnerving calm that made his skin prickle.

"I see," Kael said slowly, weighing the meaning behind her words. "You're...one who sees beyond the veils." It was a phrase that usually meant someone with minor magical abilities, those who could discern hidden patterns or predict subtle outcomes. But there was something more to Lyra - an aura of power that didn't quite fit.

Kael leaned back into the booth, his mind racing with possibilities as he watched her. Jax slid back into the table, his eyes darting between them with a mix of curiosity and wariness. Kael nodded for him to sit, but Jax hesitated before finally taking his seat.

"Lyra," Kael said, his voice low and even, "what's your interest in the missing Curator?" He kept his gaze locked on hers, searching for any hidden meaning behind her words, as she replied with a measured tone:

"The Curator was involved in something... delicate. A Sinsong operation went awry, and we lost contact. I'm here to recover what was lost - and perhaps prevent a war." Her eyes seemed to bore into his soul, searching for something he wasn't sure he wanted her to find.

Kael's gut twisted at the mention of a war, his mind flashing back to the countless battles he'd seen ravage Melosdra. He rubbed the back of his neck where Lyra's hand had rested earlier, trying to shake off the unease that lingered. "A Sinsong operation?" he asked slowly, weighing her words against the rumors Jax had shared.

Lyra leaned in closer, a hint of tension between them as she spoke, her breath whisper-soft against his ear: "Let's say... our interests align for now. Together, we can prevent something much worse than war."

Kael's eyes narrowed as Lyra's words hung in the air, her breath lingering on his skin like a promise unfulfilled. He turned to Jax, who watched with an intensity that bordered on obsession, his eyes darting between Kael and Lyra as if weighing their every move. "What's your connection to this Curator?" Kael asked Lyra, refocusing the conversation away from Jax's scrutiny.

Lyra settled back into the corner of the booth, her raven-black hair a stark contrast against the dim light of the inn. "We... had an understanding," she said, her voice dripping with hesitation. "A mutual benefit that involved certain... acquisitions." Her gaze drifted to Jax before returning to Kael's face. "I believe you understand what I'm saying."

Kael did indeed understand. Sinsong was known for their ruthless pursuit of resources and knowledge - and the missing Curator was likely caught in the crosshairs of their ambitions. He pushed his mug away, the weight of the silver coin still resting on the

table between them a constant reminder of Lyra's true intentions. "What do you plan to do with what you recover?" he asked, the curiosity piqued despite his reservations.

Lyra leaned forward, her eyes burning with an intensity that made Kael's gut twist in response. "We'll stop it," she said, her voice a low growl. "The Curator's project was about to destabilize the balance - we can't let that happen." She slid back into the corner of the booth, her hand reaching into her tunic for another silver coin, which she dropped onto the table alongside its twin. "Together, we can take what you're looking for and put an end to Sinsong's plans."

Kael's mind worked to untangle Lyra's words - did she want to stop a war or merely contain the damage? He shifted his gaze toward Jax, who watched with an unreadable expression, before returning his attention to Lyra. "You expect me to believe that?" he asked, the skepticism clear in his voice.

Lyra's smile was as enigmatic as ever - her eyes glinting like moonlit water in the dim light of the inn. "Not my expectation," she said, a soft touch on the back of his hand drawing his attention. "A mutual interest, Kael Varn - one that might just bring us what we need."

Lyra's hand lingered on his, the warmth of her touch sending a shiver down Kael's spine as he searched her face for any sign of deception. He found none - just an unnerving calm that made his skin prickle with unease. He pulled his hand back, clearing his throat before asking the question that had been plaguing him since their arrival at the Red Griffin: "What do you mean by a mutual interest?" His voice was steady now, though his mind reeled with possibilities.

Lyra leaned forward once more, her eyes glinting in the dim light of the inn. "I believe your Curator's research might be more valuable than I initially thought," she said, her words dripping with an unspoken meaning that made Kael's gut twist with anticipation. He watched as she slid a hand into her tunic and produced a small vial filled with a shimmering liquid - the same strange energy he'd seen emanating from the Curator's workshop. The glass seemed to absorb the faint light of the candles, holding it captive within its depths.

Kael's eyes locked onto the vial as Lyra set it on the table between them, her movements economical and precise. "What is that?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper - the words tumbling out before he could rein himself in. He'd seen enough to know that this energy was tied to the very fabric of Melosdra's power, something that could be harnessed for unimaginable purposes.

Lyra's smile grew wider, but her eyes betrayed no warmth. "We'll get to that soon," she said, the phrase dripping with an unspoken promise as she leaned back into the booth, her movements fluid and deliberate. Kael felt Jax's gaze flicker between them, his friend's face a mask of curiosity. "Tell me what you want from me," Kael said

slowly, his mind reeling with the implications of Lyra's appearance – and this mysterious vial.

Lyra's eyes never left his as she leaned in once more, her voice taking on an intimate quality that made his skin prickle with discomfort. "I need your help to retrieve something from the Curator's workshop," she said, her words dancing on the edge of a proposal rather than a demand – though Kael sensed the latter lurking beneath. He felt Jax's weight shift forward in his seat as Lyra spoke, a faint growl rumbling in his friend's throat.

The air in the inn seemed to thicken with anticipation as Kael met Lyra's gaze – their words hanging between them like an unspoken understanding. He searched her face for any sign of deception, but Lyra's mask remained firmly in place. "I'll do it," he said finally, the decision made before he could think it through. The weight of his own desires and motivations crashed down on him – a hasty vow made to keep Lyra from finding what she was looking for, at least until they had more information.

Jax slid forward in his seat, a look of surprise mingling with wariness as Lyra smiled again, her eyes seeming to bore into Kael's very soul. "We'll leave at dawn," she said, the words laced with an unspoken promise that sent a shiver down his spine.

Kael's decision was made, sealed with a swift nod as Lyra's eyes sparkled in the dim light of the inn. He turned to Jax, who still watched him with an unreadable expression, before rising from his seat. "I'll be up early," he said, shouldering his pack and tucking his sword hilt into its scabbard.

The streets outside were quiet as Kael made his way back to the small room he'd rented in a nearby building. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just sealed his fate – or at least the fate of those who mattered to him. His mind reeled with thoughts of Lyra's mysterious vial, and what it might be used for. He rubbed the weariness from his eyes, lying down on the narrow bed as the night wore on.

The hours passed slowly, Kael's dreams a jumbled mix of visions from battles past and present. He woke to find the first light of dawn creeping into the room – Jax already up and dressed, sitting at the foot of the bed with a pack slung over his shoulder. "You sure about this?" Jax asked, his voice low as Kael rose from bed.

Kael shrugged, shouldering his own pack. "I didn't promise anything except finding my Curator," he said, the weight of his decision settling onto his shoulders like a physical burden. Jax's eyes narrowed as they set out into the chill dawn air – Lyra and her men already waiting at the city gates.

They walked in silence for a time, the sounds of the waking city gradually growing louder as they made their way toward the Curator's workshop. The buildings seemed to grow taller as they neared the heart of the quarter – narrow alleyways giving way

to grander streets lined with ornate stone facades. Kael spotted Lyra's men ahead, their faces expressionless as they formed a tight guard around their employer.

As they turned onto a broad street, Kael caught sight of the Curator's workshop, its wooden sign creaking in the morning breeze. A small group of guards stood outside, their hands on the hilts of their swords – a heavy lock secured to the door. The silence was oppressive as Lyra led the way forward, her men parting to let her pass.

"We'll need to take out the lock," Kael said, his mind already racing with ways to disable it without alerting anyone inside. Jax gave him a nod, their eyes meeting in a silent understanding before Lyra spoke up – her voice low and husky, the sound sending a shiver down Kael's spine as she turned to him. "Let me do that," she said, a small smile playing on her lips.

A faint hum began to build in Kael's ears as he watched, his mind reeling with unease as Lyra approached the door. She reached into her tunic and produced a small vial of liquid, similar to the one in her earlier appearance. This one seemed darker, its contents swirling like oil on water as she applied it to the lock.

Tags: Oaths, Sins, Unpaid