

THE BURDEN OF UNFULFILLED OATHS

Black

The Weight of Unfulfilled Oaths

I recall the night I first met Kael Varn, in a cramped tavern above the Black Rose Order's crypt. The air reeked of cheap ale and desperation. It was the kind of place where those who'd abandoned all hope came to drown their troubles. He sat with his back to the wall, eyes fixed on me like a hawk sensing its prey.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice low and even.

Kael Varn didn't look up from his mug. "You're the one they call 'Nightstalker'. I've heard stories."

I shrugged. "Some people have sharp tongues, others can't tell their right hand from their left." The words hung between us like a challenge.

Varn finally raised his gaze. His eyes were like two cold stars in the dim light – hard to meet, easy to get lost in. "You're here for the Order," he said, his voice laced with an edge that cut through the fumes.

I nodded once. "For the Order."

Varn leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Do you know what they say about broken promises? That unfulfilled oaths are chains around a soul's neck, growing heavier with each passing day."

The phrase echoed in my mind as I stood to leave. Kael Varn's eyes locked onto mine once more before releasing me into the darkness outside.

Days turned into weeks, and then months. The weight of my own oath began to press on my chest like a physical force. The Order's crypt was always cold, but this winter felt different – as if it seeped into my bones from within. I'd been tasked with eliminating a Nightforged spy in the Everian royal court. Yet, every time I thought of moving against him, my hands remained still.

Kael Varn resurfaced months later at an abandoned windmill on the outskirts of Thalos' lands. His presence was like a whispered rumor; you sensed it before seeing it. We spoke in hushed tones about the order's orders and my lingering doubts.

"You're not the only one with unfulfilled oaths," he said, eyes glinting in the fading light. "The weight of them can drive a person mad, or worse – make them believe

they've no choice but to keep walking further down that path."

Varn handed me a small pouch containing an intricately crafted needle. Its metal seemed blacker than anything I'd ever seen before.

"What's this for?" I asked, my voice barely audible over the wind.

"Thread of Melosdra," he said with an almost imperceptible bow of his head. "Use it to remind yourself of your promise – and its cost."

The needle's weight felt heavier in my hand than any sword I'd ever wielded. Its presence was a constant, like the beat of my own heart.

That night, in the shadow of Thalos' castle walls, I watched the spy leave the queen's chambers. The thread of Melosdra hummed with dark power as I tied it around my wrist. My first move would be clean; swift and silent. A whispered rumor spread through the castle corridors that 'Nightstalker' had finally been hired for a task.

With every step, the pressure built within me – the weight of what I was doing versus what I'd promised. The thread seemed to grow tauter with each passing moment, as if it sought to cut into my very skin.

A hooded figure in the shadows watched me slip back into the night. They moved forward only when the sound of the spy's fall reached them – a soft thud on cold stone.

I'd fulfilled one part of my oath, but at what cost? Varn's words came back to me like a cold wind: "The weight of unfulfilled oaths is chains around a soul's neck." My breath caught in my throat as I realized the true burden lay not in keeping promises, but in living with their consequences.

In the dark, amidst the silence, I made another promise – one that weighed heavier than any oath.

I moved swiftly through Thalos' castle, shedding my persona as 'Nightstalker' with each step. My boots echoed on the cold stone corridors, a stark contrast to the silent footsteps of those who truly knew its secrets. I pushed aside the hood that had protected me from prying eyes and let out a slow breath. The weight on my wrist – the thread of Melosdra – still vibrated with an unsettling energy.

I navigated the castle's winding passageways until I reached the queen's chambers, where my patron awaited. She sat before the hearth, shrouded in shadows as if trying to avoid being seen herself. Her eyes gleamed like polished onyx as she spoke without preamble. "So, Nightstalker, you've fulfilled part of your task." The word dripped with a subtle acidity that hinted at a deeper calculation.

I knelt before her, the thread of Melosdra tugging against my skin. "It's done, Your Majesty."

She beckoned me closer, and I approached, senses on high alert. Her hand settled on the back of my neck, fingers spreading from my shoulder blades to the base of my skull. A fleeting touch that sent shivers down my spine, a reminder of what drove this pact.

"You're not who I thought you were," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "The Nightforged spy was merely a test - and one you passed with ease." The pressure on my neck increased, making me flex against the force. "I require a new task, more... delicate."

The queen's fingers dug deeper into my skin, a subtle warning of what would happen if I failed this new task. I gritted my teeth, trying to maintain some semblance of control as she outlined the requirements: eliminate a prominent merchant's son who'd been dabbling in illicit alchemy. The catch was that the young man had connections within the castle walls - and his father had friends among the knights sworn to protect him.

As the queen spoke, I couldn't shake the feeling that Varn's words were seeping into my bones like cold water, weighing me down with every passing moment. My hand instinctively went to the thread of Melosdra on my wrist, a constant reminder of the price I'd paid for this life. The queen's eyes gleamed with an intensity that made me wonder if she knew more about the needle and its power than I did.

I stood, leaving her fingers to slide from my neck like autumn leaves dropping from a tree. "Where is the merchant's son?" I asked, trying to keep my tone even despite the unease crawling up my spine. The queen smiled - a fleeting thing that vanished in the flickering candlelight. "In the market district. He's scheduled to meet with his father this evening. You have until then to prepare." Her gaze locked onto mine, and I felt the weight of her expectations settle upon me like a physical force.

I left the castle chambers and made my way through the winding corridors, trying to process the new task and the thread's power still humming on my wrist. The merchant's son was either very brave or very stupid - not just dabbling in illicit alchemy but also openly defying his family's wishes. I navigated the bustling market district with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. People knew me as Nightstalker, and whispers spread quickly through the crowds. Some gave me wide berth; others followed at a safe distance, their eyes filled with a mixture of awe and fear.

The sound of vendors hawking their wares and the smells of fresh bread and roasting meats filled the air, but I tuned it out as I homed in on the location specified by the queen. A small, cramped shop caught my eye - its sign creaking in the gentle breeze bore an image of a retort flask. A hooded figure waited outside, eyes scanning the crowd with an air of quiet alertness. They pushed back their hood as I approached, revealing Kael Varn's familiar face.

"You're not following orders," I accused, my hand on the hilt of my sword. The windmill meeting had been weeks ago; I'd expected him to be long gone by now. "I've received new instructions from my... patron," he replied, his voice low and even. Varn's eyes flicked toward the shop behind him before settling back onto me. "It seems our paths continue to cross. The merchant's son is inside, but we need to move carefully - there are others within."

As I followed Varn into the shop, the sign creaking in the gentle breeze seemed to whisper a different message - one of secrets and hidden intentions. Inside, rows of alchemical equipment lined the shelves, and the air reeked of chemicals and burning coal. The merchant's son, Alaric, stood at a workbench, surrounded by various glassware and retorts. He was hunched over, his sleeves rolled up to reveal pale arms covered in tiny scars - mementos from countless experiments gone wrong.

"Leave it alone, Alaric," Varn said softly, his voice barely audible over the hissing of steam pipes. The young man looked up, startled, and our eyes met for a moment before he turned back to his work. "I don't want you involved in this," I continued, trying to keep my tone neutral. Alaric's eyes darted between us before settling on Varn, who gave him a curt nod.

"It seems we have unwanted company," Varn said, glancing at the windows, where two figures had appeared - guards clad in the livery of the merchant's household. "I've been expecting you," he continued, his words aimed at me rather than the guards. Alaric's eyes widened as he took in the scene unfolding before him. "You're not who I thought Nightstalker was," he said, a thread of suspicion creeping into his voice.

The guards advanced cautiously, hands on the hilts of their swords. Varn moved to intercept them, his hand resting lightly on my shoulder. "No need for bloodshed," he said, his voice steady and even. Alaric's eyes flickered between us, weighing our intentions. The queen's words echoed in my mind: I require a new task, more... delicate. How much did Varn know about this task? And what lay hidden behind his calm exterior?

The guards hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Varn took advantage of the momentary confusion to whisper something in my ear - a plan that involved misdirection and escape routes through the narrow alleys surrounding the shop. Alaric's eyes followed our conversation, a calculation forming on his face as he weighed the odds of his own survival.

With a nod, I fell into step behind Varn, leaving the merchant's son to fend for himself in this fragile moment. We weaved through the crowded market stalls, dodging curious onlookers and merchants calling out their wares. The windmill meeting came back to me - Varn's cryptic words about our shared past and the queen's true

intentions. A connection that went beyond mere coin and job.

We reached a secluded entrance between two buildings, an alleyway so narrow it seemed more like a vertical crevice than a passageway. Varn motioned for me to follow, disappearing into the shadows ahead. The guards were close behind us, but I knew this part of the city – the streets twisted and turned in ways that would lead even the most seasoned pursuers astray.

As we moved through the winding alleys, the city's sounds faded away, replaced by the sound of our footsteps and the faint hum of conversation from within the buildings. We navigated narrow bridges spanning alleys, crossing over gutters filled with stagnant water and trash. My senses went on high alert – it was here, in these forgotten corners of the city, that Nightstalker operated best.

Varn halted at an intersection, glancing around cautiously before signaling me to follow him into a nearby tavern. A sign creaked above the door, bearing an image of a snarling lion's head. The wind outside seemed to pick up as I pushed open the door, ushering us into a dimly lit room filled with patrons huddled in shadows.

Inside, the air reeked of smoke and stale ale. Our footsteps echoed off the stone floor, drawing attention from the scattered tables. A hooded figure at the bar turned toward us – Alaric's father, I realized with growing unease. The atmosphere within seemed heavy, weighed down by secrets and unspoken intentions.

"I see you've brought Nightstalker," he said, his voice dripping with a mixture of relief and suspicion. "I had feared... complications." Varn's eyes flicked to me before returning to Alaric's father, a subtle warning to tread carefully.

Varn pushed open the door at the far end of the tavern, revealing a narrow stairway leading down into darkness. "It seems we have unfinished business," he said, his voice low and even. The weight of my own secrets pressed upon me as I followed Varn down into the unknown – Alaric's father behind us, the thread of Melosdra still vibrating against my skin like a constant heartbeat.

Down in the hidden room below the tavern, we found ourselves amidst a network of narrow corridors, lit only by flickering torches. The air was stale and musty, thick with the scent of damp earth. Varn's plan began to unfurl – using Alaric as leverage to uncover the extent of his father's involvement in the illicit alchemy.

We moved through the cramped corridors, our footsteps echoing off the cold stone walls. Alaric's father followed closely behind us, his eyes darting between Varn and me with a mixture of wariness and calculation. The air grew thick with the stench of mildew and rot as we descended deeper into the earth. I could feel the weight of the city above us, pressing down on my shoulders like an unseen hand.

Varn stopped before a door made of heavy iron, its surface etched with intricate symbols that seemed to shimmer in the flickering torchlight. He produced a key from his belt and unlocked the mechanism with a soft click. The door creaked open, revealing a small chamber filled with rows of dusty shelves and workstations. Alaric's eyes widened as he took in the array of alchemical equipment, his gaze lingering on a large retort in the center of the room.

"This is it," Varn said, his voice low and even. "This is where your father's true work begins." I stepped forward, my hand on the hilt of my sword, as Alaric's eyes locked onto me with a mixture of fear and suspicion. His father moved closer, his hands extended in a placating gesture. "Please, Nightstalker – you don't understand. My son is innocent, caught up in a... misunderstanding." The words hung in the air like a challenge, and I could feel Varn's eyes on me, waiting for my response.

I scanned the room, taking in the array of equipment and the faint scent of chemicals in the air. Something didn't add up – Alaric's father seemed too calm, too collected. And then I saw it: a small, leather-bound book lying open on a nearby workbench. The pages were yellowed with age, filled with handwritten notes that seemed to dance across the page like flames. I recognized the script – it was the same hand that had written the queen's missives.

A shiver ran down my spine as I approached the workbench, my eyes fixed on the book. Varn moved beside me, his voice a low whisper in my ear. "It seems we've stumbled into something much bigger than you or I anticipated."

The leather-bound book lay open, its pages rustling in the faint breeze from a nearby ventilation shaft. I felt Varn's eyes on me, waiting for my response to Alaric's father's words. I turned back to the merchant, my gaze piercing through the shadows that seemed to cling to him like a shroud.

"Your son's innocence isn't what I'm concerned about," I said, my voice steady and even. "I'm more interested in what he knows – and what you're hiding." Alaric's father took a step back, his eyes darting between Varn and me with growing unease.

The merchant cleared his throat, a faint tremble visible in his hands. "I swear to you, Nightstalker, my son is a pawn in this game. I've had nothing to do with the queen's plans – or the alchemy." His words seemed hollow, lacking conviction. I turned back to Varn, who raised an eyebrow, asking silently if we should press on.

Varn nodded almost imperceptibly, and I returned my attention to Alaric's father. "The queen's missives were clear," I said, my voice firm but controlled. "She wanted you to acquire a specific... substance. The notes in that book suggest your son is more involved than you let on." Alaric's eyes flickered with fear as he took in the sight of his father's white-knuckled hands.

Alaric's father's expression changed, from desperation to something akin to calculation. "You have no idea what you're dealing with," he said, a hint of menace creeping into his voice. "The substance... it's not just any ordinary material." His words were cut off as Varn moved forward, his hand closing around my wrist like a vice.

"We'll discuss the details later," Varn said, his eyes locked onto Alaric's father with an unnerving intensity. "For now, I think we've uncovered enough." He released my wrist, but not before giving me a subtle warning - don't press for more information just yet.

The air in the room seemed to thicken, heavy with unspoken intentions. Alaric's eyes darted between us, his gaze lingering on the retort at the center of the room as if searching for an escape route. His father's words echoed in my mind - what did he mean by "the substance"? And what was Varn holding back? The questions swirled through my thoughts like a tempest, but I kept my focus locked onto the present moment.

Varn turned to me, his expression unreadable. "We need to leave," he said, his voice low and even. "Now."

We retreated from the hidden chamber, the air growing thick with unspoken tensions as we ascended back into the tavern. The patrons seemed to blur together as we made our way through the crowded room, Alaric's father lingering at the top of the stairs, his eyes fixed on me with an unnerving intensity.

As we emerged onto the streets, Varn led me to a secluded alleyway, its entrance hidden from the main thoroughfare by a tattered awning. He stopped beneath the flickering torch that cast eerie shadows on the walls, his voice low and even as he turned to me. "We need to be careful, Nightstalker - you've stirred up trouble with your questions." His eyes searched mine for understanding, but I was still reeling from the secrets we'd uncovered.

"What did his father mean by 'the substance'?" I asked, trying to keep my tone even despite the turmoil brewing inside me. Varn's expression remained enigmatic, but a flicker of something akin to unease danced in his eyes. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice measured. "But we'll find out - together." The promise seemed to hold an unspoken weight, one that made my skin prickle with awareness.

As I stood there, the shadows in the alleyway seeming to writhe and twist around us like living things, I became aware of Alaric hovering at the edge of our little group. His eyes darted between me and Varn, a mixture of fear and uncertainty reflected in his gaze. "I'll help you figure out what's going on," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "If you swear to keep me safe." I hesitated for a moment, weighing the risks against the stakes. My promise to Alaric, one that had long since become a double-edged blade, still weighed heavily upon my conscience.

Varn's eyes locked onto mine, a silent question hanging between us - what was I to do with this new development? And what of our original mission, the one that had brought me to this forsaken place in search of answers and justice? The world seemed to be shifting beneath my feet, like sandcastles built upon quicksand.

Tags: Redemption Measured, The Weight of Loyalty, Broken Promises