

When Vows are Made to be Broken

Black

Vows of Winter

The first snows had already started to fall in the city when I stepped out of my quarters and onto the frozen cobbles of Nightforge's courtyard. The air was crisp, heavy with the scent of woodsmoke and damp earth. I breathed it deep into my lungs, feeling the familiar ache of cold spreading through my chest.

The Lady of Everia had summoned me to her chambers. I'd expected as much; I was her instrument of balance, after all. My specialty was not the bloody work of the Black Rose Order's knights, but rather the subtler corrections – whispers in the darkness, silences that could curdle blood.

As I walked the corridors of Nightforge Castle, the stone beneath my feet seemed to hum with the weight of generations past. The walls bore witness to every vow made and broken, every promise sealed in blood. My own oath was one such testament: a bond sworn in secrecy to the Order, to walk the shadows and maintain balance where armies could not tread.

I knocked on the Lady's door; a soft voice bid me enter. Her chambers were dimly lit, but I navigated them easily by heart – a habit formed from years of service. The Lady sat behind her desk, fingers steepled together as she gazed at me over the rim of a cup. A thin line of steam rose from it.

"Kael Varn," she said, "I have a task for you."

It was rare for her to call me by name, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. "Speak, Your Highness."

"The Curators at Ashen Roads are concerned about a certain knight's... enthusiasm. He has taken it upon himself to enforce the Order's codes with zeal beyond our agreement." She set the cup down, her eyes never leaving mine. "I would have you speak with him, remind him of his oaths and the balance we strive for."

The task was simple enough – and I had a feeling the knight in question was one Brother Arcturus, whose zealotry often bordered on recklessness. I nodded and took my leave.

My footsteps echoed off the castle walls as I made my way to Ashen Roads, where the Curators oversaw the Order's less... martial pursuits. It was a cold walk, but not an

uncomfortable one; I'd walked such roads before, alone and at night. The city beyond the castle gates seemed darker than usual, though – a shadow that clung to every alleyway and rooftop.

The Curators' manor was small compared to Nightforge's grandeur, its stone façade worn smooth by time. Inside, Brother Arcturus paced behind his desk, his eyes flashing with an unyielding fervor. I entered silently, my presence unnoticed until he spun around.

"Kael Varn," he said, and his gaze flickered with curiosity. "I was told to expect you."

I walked into the room, my footsteps steady, and took a seat opposite him. "The Lady of Everia sent me. She's concerned about your... methods, Brother Arcturus."

He laughed, the sound like the snapping of twigs. "Methods? I'm merely upholding our oaths, Kael – keeping the balance as it should be kept!"

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, and spoke in a measured tone. "Brother, your zeal has led to bloodshed. Not just the blood of those we correct, but the blood of those who would have been corrected through words alone."

Arcturus's face reddened; his fists clenched, though he controlled himself with effort. I could feel the weight of the Order's codes on me, a promise that demanded restraint. "I swear to you, Kael," he spat, "this is what our oaths demand!"

I took a deep breath, feeling the cold seep into my chest like ice through stone. "Brother Arcturus, I've walked these roads for years, seen many vows made and broken. Balance isn't about spectacle or bloodshed; it's about understanding, patience, and correction without violence when possible."

The air in the room thickened with unspoken tension. My voice carried a quiet weight, one that usually commanded attention. The silence stretched out until Arcturus finally looked away, his jaw working as he spoke low and slow, "I... I'll remember, Kael."

"See that you do," I replied, rising from my seat. As I stood, the room seemed to darken around me – the shadows cast by the fading light of day deepening into dark wells.

It was done. I knew the road ahead for Arcturus; a narrow path, fraught with quiet struggles and whispered truths. Balance would be maintained, though not as he envisioned it.

As I left the Curators' manor, the cold night air enveloped me once more, carrying the whispers of Nightforge's ancient stones into my mind. The snowflakes began to fall harder now, casting a veil over the city that clung to every windowpane and chimney pot. I walked back through the castle gates, the guards giving me a nod as I passed.

The Lady of Everia awaited me in her chambers once more, though the fire had burned down to embers now. She sat with her eyes fixed on me, her expression unreadable behind a mask of composure. "Kael Varn," she said, "I see you've spoken with Brother Arcturus."

"Yes, Your Highness." I took a seat beside her, my gaze drifting over the room's shadows. "He understands his duty now – for the moment, at least."

The Lady nodded once, a small movement. "I have another task for you, one that may prove more... delicate. Our scouts in Valtoria report a series of unexplained disappearances in the outer villages. The villagers are growing restless, and I fear it's only a matter of time before they take to the streets."

"The Order hasn't had a presence in those villages since the great war," I said, my mind racing with possibilities. "We've kept our distance, maintaining the balance through... subtle means."

The Lady leaned forward, her eyes snapping into focus. "This is no simple case of bandits or wild beasts, Kael. Our own brother, a knight named Marcellus, was last seen in those villages two nights ago. His saddle and gear remain, but his body has not been found – nor have any signs of struggle."

I felt a spark of unease ignite within me. A missing knight, in the depths of winter, with no sign of what might've happened to him? This was far from ordinary, and my mind already ticked off possibilities: accident, kidnapping, or something darker still. The Lady's request had just become a matter of great importance – one I couldn't ignore.

I set my cup of tea aside, the warmth spreading through my fingers as I leaned forward to better understand the Lady's concerns. "What makes you think Marcellus was taken, rather than... lost or succumbed to accident?"

The Lady's eyes were narrow slits now, her expression a mask of calculation. "Several reports from villagers speak of strange noises in the dead of night – whispers and the clash of steel on steel, though no one has seen anything concrete. Our scouts also discovered a faint trail leading out of the village, into the nearby woods." Her gaze drifted away for an instant, then snapped back to me. "And I've had word from the Lord of Valtoria himself – he's not pleased about this development. He wants results."

I nodded, making a mental note to pay attention to any information that might trickle down from Valtoria's court. The more tangled this thread became, the greater the potential for complications – or opportunities. "Tell me," I said, "have we received anything from Marcellus before his disappearance?"

The Lady leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers once more. "Only a single letter, sent a fortnight ago. He wrote of... unease in the villages, rumors spreading

that the land itself was cursed. His words were cryptic, but they hinted at something brewing – something he felt we should be aware of."

My gut told me this went beyond simple coincidence. Marcellus had been an old man, not one for fancy notions or tales; if he sensed something amiss in Valtoria's villages, I needed to see it for myself. "I'll leave immediately," I said, standing.

The Lady's eyes followed me as I rose from my seat, her expression unreadable. For a moment, our gazes locked – an understanding passed between us, though neither of us spoke the words aloud: in situations like these, some tasks required hands-on investigation; others needed... the delicate touch of one who knew how to navigate the shadows.

As I turned toward the door, she called out, her voice carrying over the soft whisper of the fire. "Kael? Be cautious. Whatever it is that's taken Marcellus, it may not be the first sign of trouble in those villages – or anywhere else."

I stepped out into the chill of night, the snowflakes dancing in the torchlight like tiny spirits. The castle's gates were open, its guards nodding as I passed through them once more. My horse, a tall gray stallion named Ashen, was waiting patiently by the gatepost, his eyes gleaming with expectation.

As I mounted him, the wind stung my face, and I pulled my cloak tighter around me. The Lady's words echoed in my mind: "whatever it is that's taken Marcellus, it may not be the first sign of trouble." I guided Ashen through the castle gates, into the night-shrouded streets beyond. Valtoria was a small village, its houses huddled together like sentinels; I had to navigate narrow alleys and keep to the main road, which wound through the heart of the settlement.

The moon was new, but the air was full of an expectant hush, as if the very trees leaned in to listen. I spurred Ashen on, our hooves clicking against the cobblestones. The wind was rising, whipping my cloak about me like a dark wing, and I held tight to the reins as we rode through the village's center. It was late, but people stirred in their homes – a few windows lit up, casting warm glows onto the snowy expanse.

As I passed the great stone well at the village square, a hooded figure emerged from the shadows, moving with an almost fluid ease. Our eyes met for an instant before Ashen shied, sensing something amiss. The rider drew back on their reins, and I saw, in that brief glimpse, the faint glint of silver on their wrist – a mark of the Nightwatchers.

I urged Ashen on, and he responded with a nervous snort, his ears folding back against the wind. We swept past the stranger, our pace quickening as we left the village behind. The darkness swallowed us up, and I guided Ashen deeper into the forest, where the trees towered above like sentinels, their branches creaking in an

eerie rhythm.

As we rode, I pondered the strange encounter – who was that rider, and what business did they have in Valtoria? My mind turned over the Lady's words: "Be cautious. Whatever it is that's taken Marcellus..." Had I stumbled into a thread of intrigue, one tied to something greater than simple theft or banditry?

The forest deepened, its shadows growing darker still, until Ashen and I came upon a narrow stream. Its surface was slick with ice, reflecting the moon's absence like a sheet of silvered glass. We forded it carefully, our hooves making gentle crunching sounds in the silence.

Beyond the stream, the trees parted, revealing a clearing – and within its center, the faint glow of a fire. My heart quickened as I reined Ashen to a stop, my gaze drawn to the warmth emanating from that central flame.

I slid from Ashen's back, my boots sinking into the snow as I drew closer to the fire. The warmth seeped through my skin, a welcome respite from the cold wind that cut like a knife. As I approached, I saw it was a small blaze, barely knee-high, surrounded by a ring of smooth stones. The flames danced in an odd pattern, casting shadows on the surrounding trees.

A figure sat cross-legged beside the fire, their back to me. They were huddled under a thick cloak, and at first, I thought they might be a traveler or a hermit, lost in the woods. But as I drew closer, I saw the glint of armor peeking out from beneath the folds – a Knight's emblem, though it was one I didn't recognize.

I cleared my throat to announce my presence, and the figure slowly stood, its movements economical and precise. As they turned, I saw it was a young woman, her features chiseled like the stone of the forest itself. Her eyes were an unnerving shade of gray, almost white, and they seemed to bore into me as she regarded me with an unreadable expression.

"A stranger," she said finally, her voice husky from disuse. "I wasn't expecting visitors tonight." Her gaze flicked to Ashen, then back to me. "You ride the Lady's colors. What brings you to these woods?"

I hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. The Lady's words echoed in my mind – "whatever it is that's taken Marcellus..." – but I couldn't tie this woman to the disappearance yet. "I'm searching for a missing brother," I said carefully, "one of our own. His name is Marcellus."

The young woman's expression didn't change, but her eyes seemed to narrow ever so slightly as she regarded me. "Marcellus," she repeated, her voice low and measured. "I've heard of him. He was... a visitor here, once." Her gaze drifted away from mine, focusing on the fire instead.

As I watched, she reached out a hand and gently stirred the flames with a stick, sending sparks dancing upward into the night air. The gesture was almost... soothing, yet it sent a shiver down my spine – a sense that I was being slowly unraveled, thread by thread. "Tell me," I pressed on, my voice firm but polite, "what do you know of Marcellus? Was he here when you arrived?"

Her eyes snapped back to mine, and for an instant, I thought I saw something there – a flicker of emotion, perhaps, or a hint of unease. But it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving her expression a mask once more. "I don't know what he was doing here," she said finally, her voice even. "He didn't speak to me directly, but I saw him talking with... others." Her gaze flicked toward the trees, as if searching for something beyond my sight.

A shiver danced down my spine at the mention of "others". Who were they? What had Marcellus gotten himself entangled in? "What others?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral. The woman's eyes returned to mine, and this time, I thought I saw a glimmer of... something. Fear, perhaps, or wariness. But it was quickly suppressed, leaving her expression a smooth mask once more.

"I don't know their names," she said again, her voice firm. "But they were hooded, and they spoke in low voices. Marcellus seemed... uneasy around them." Her eyes dropped back to the fire, and for an instant, I thought I saw a flicker of something there – a hint of pain, perhaps, or sorrow.

I sensed that she was holding back, but I wasn't sure why. And yet... I couldn't shake the feeling that this young woman might be the only one who could shed light on Marcellus's disappearance. "Tell me more about these 'others'," I pressed on, trying to keep my tone gentle but insistent.

The woman's gaze flickered back to mine, and for an instant, our eyes locked in a silent understanding. Then she stood, her movements economical and deliberate, as if she were weighing each step carefully. "I'll show you," she said finally, her voice low and even. "But first, you have to understand – the forest has ears, stranger. And what we speak here tonight will not stay hidden."

I watched as she moved to gather a nearby cloak, wrapping it around her shoulders with a practiced ease. The fire crackled on, casting flickering shadows on the surrounding trees as I dismounted Ashen, my footsteps sinking into the snow as I followed her deeper into the forest.

We walked in silence for what felt like an eternity, the only sound the crunch of our boots in the snow and the distant creaking of branches. The woman led me to a point where the trees parted, revealing a small glade surrounded by a low wall of rough-hewn stone. Within its center stood a massive ancient tree, its trunk twisted with age and gnarled with deep lines.

She halted before the tree, her eyes never leaving mine as she pushed back her hood, revealing a fall of silver hair that cascaded down her back like a river of moonlight. The gray of her eyes seemed to deepen, and for an instant, I thought I saw something there – a spark of power, or perhaps a warning.

"Speak softly," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "The forest has ears, as I said, but it also has... sentinels." She raised a hand, and the air around us seemed to vibrate with an energy I couldn't quite explain. The trees creaked in response, their branches swaying in a slow, almost deliberate rhythm.

I swallowed, my mind racing with questions. What kind of sentinels? What power was this that she wielded so easily? But before I could ask, she turned to the tree itself and reached out a hand to touch its trunk. The wood seemed to shudder beneath her fingers, and a low rumble shook the air – a sound that seemed almost... alive.

The woman's eyes snapped back to mine, and for an instant, I thought I saw something like fear in their depths. But it was quickly replaced by a mask of calm. "This is the Heartwood," she said, her voice measured. "A place where the forest remembers. What you ask, stranger – what you seek about Marcellus – may be here."

The Heartwood's trunk seemed to hum beneath her hand, a vibration that echoed through my entire body. I felt a shiver run down my spine as she leaned in, her voice barely above a whisper, "Tell me what you're looking for, stranger." Her words seemed to be laced with an unspoken warning – that the truth might not be easy to bear.

I hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. The Lady's words echoed in my mind – "whatever it is that's taken Marcellus..." – but I still couldn't tie this woman to the disappearance. Yet, something about her mannerisms, her voice, made me trust her. Perhaps it was the way she spoke of the forest as a living being, or the way her eyes seemed to hold a depth of knowledge that went beyond simple innocence.

"Marcellus," I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper. "He was taken, and the Lady believes he may have been forced into a... a contract."

The woman's hand stilled on the trunk, and for an instant, her eyes seemed to flash with a hidden understanding. But it was quickly replaced by a calm, almost detached interest. "A contract," she repeated, her voice measured. "That's not something we hear often in these woods." Her gaze drifted away from mine, toward the branches above, as if searching for some unseen observer.

The air seemed to grow heavier, thick with an unspoken question – what kind of contract could Marcellus have entered into that was so grave? I sensed she knew more than she let on, but I couldn't quite grasp it. The forest creaked and groaned around us, as if the very trees were listening, waiting for our conversation to unfold.

She turned back to me, her eyes locked onto mine with an unspoken warning. "I can take you to a place where we may find more answers," she said finally, her voice even. "But be warned, stranger - what we seek is not for the faint of heart."

Tags: Oaths, Loyalty, Dues