



AGE OF FANTASY

BINDING OATHS

SHORT STORY



"How much farther, Shalathu?" A young Scourge whispers, trampling a scarab underfoot.

"Not far now, Hisholu. Our scouts reported traces of the mists just over the next hill." Shalathu responded. He was an older Scourge, battle-hardened with scarred skin.

Behind Shalathu and his group, a warband of other Shadow Stalkers travelled quietly but steadily along the ruins that marked the oasis hidden in the sea of sand. With the half-moon blazing in the sky, Scourges and Reapers alike moved from dune to dune, favouring the shadowed side to avoid the blistering moonlight.

Shalathu slowed as they approached a small oasis lined with tall stone ruins. He held up a hand, the warband halting behind him.

"We will rest here, but not for long. The night is still young, but we cannot squander it." He spoke loudly enough for those behind him to hear.

Hisholu nods, and the warband began grouping beneath the columns to sit down. Shalathu held up his censer, scanning the surrounding forest without turning his head. Without eyes, Shadow Stalkers instead used the mists emitted by their censers to sense the world around them.

Satisfied, Shalathu sat and took off his pack as well, pulling out three reeds, each mutated in a way that made them grow into an odd L-shape. He held one up and inhaled, watching it rot slightly as he drew away a small part of its arcane essence.

He held out another one of them to Hisholu. "Take this. Do not let yourself go into battle unnourished."

Hisholu nodded, accepting the gift and feeling its resonance as he inhaled.

He then surveyed his warband through the mists of his censer, noting other objects being pulled from their packs: a long strip of bark, a geometric piece of sandstone, and a carcass of a calico cat. The latter was shared between a group of three. Many carried a censer of their own in one of their four arms.

"To have the mists emerging on their own here," Hisholu said in a curious tone, breaking the silence and stealing Shalathu's attention. "Do you think it could be a Voidgate, which might lead us home?"

Shalathu scowled but answered. Crickets from the oasis almost drowned out their voices. "Unlikely. There are many Voidgates which cut across our realm but do not open the way for us. They touch upon the Labyrinth, Hisholu, but they do not lead us there."

"I know... But is it not possible that one of these many gates might connect to our people's home?"

Shalathu rested his censer between them, pursing his lips. "Why do you ask me about this?"

Hisholu hesitated as a few other Scourges tilted their heads to listen in. After a few moments, he spoke again, a little louder.

"We have walked this plane for a long time, Shalathu. It has been many years since we have heard any whisper of our ancestral home. Will there ever be a time when our work is considered...done?"

He was mincing his words; Shalathu could tell. "The mists we sense now tell us we still serve a purpose here. The people of this Plane still cut carelessly and still draw out our mists, the lifeblood of our Plane."

"So, we are to spend our lives here, and our children are to spend theirs forever?" Hisholu spoke, seeming to gain confidence. "If these gates touch the Labyrinth to draw in the mists, then it may be possible to find a way home--"

Shalathu stood up, interrupting. "So you would abandon your oaths and leave our plane to bleed out slowly?"

"Oaths?" Hisholu asked. "We should not be bound here by the oaths of our ancestors."

Many more Scourges put down their objects and turned their attention to the discussion. Even the wind seemed to quiet itself as he spoke.

"Our ancestors sacrificed everything to save our home," Shalathu snarled. "Would you throw that all away for fleeting comfort before a slow death? Without us here to protect our people, the Labyrinth is doomed."

Another Scourge cleared her throat from a nearby group. "It has been generations since our ancestors arrived. What if the threat is not as severe as it once was?"

Shalathu stood, dumbfounded. "You too, Zosas? Who else shares this way of thinking?"

Only a few hands raised in response. Shalathu again stood, surprised by their insolence. He was sure there were more, but they were less willing to reveal themselves. At least they had some sense.

He turned back to Hisholu, directing his anger.

"I thought you understood the weight of the oath that binds us. Perhaps I was mistaken..."

Hisholu bowed his head, but Shalathu didn't wait for another response. He strode towards a fallen column, which loomed over the warband. He wanted everyone to hear what he had to say next.

He addressed the entire warband. "I remind everyone here of the oath we have inherited. Those who first took the oath knew the corruption which the Voidgates brought to our home: life around them dying, animals growing weak and ill... Our purpose is here, ensuring that our people may live!"

Shalathu turned back to Hisholu again. "Hisholu, think about what you have said. Do not dare to address to me again until you know better."

"Shalathu," Hisholu's voice trembled, "I only intended to--"

"No more of your poison," Shalathu screeched. "Be grateful that I have not banished you from the fold."

Disturbed by the Scourge Champion shouting, dozens of dark-winged shapes broke into flight, scattering from the surrounding ruins. Their wingbeats moved the mists; the Shadow Stalkers felt the large birds flying out to encircle them.

"Vultures!" A Reaper yelled, swinging her halberd into the air. The creatures dove, creating a torrent of beaks and feathers that scrambled the mists of the warband's censers.

The warband sprang to their feet, grabbing their weapons. The Vultures swooped low to attack, and the Scourges hurried to defend themselves.

The Shadow Stalkers scouted in alarm and tried to coordinate, but the Vultures drew blood, scratching and wounding many of their band.

The Vultures then took off into the night, fleeing before the disoriented Scourges could organise themselves. Soon, all that could be felt among the mists was stillness and quiet.

After a pause, Shalathu called out, breathing heavily. "Is everyone alright?"

A few nods and responses confirmed everyone was still alive.

"Shalathu!" A Reaper said, approaching. It was the same one who called out originally. "These are no ordinary Vultures. Can you feel the strange gold girding them?"

Shalathu reached out to touch the dead Vulture in the Reaper's hand. Cloth was bound lightly around its wing, and it bore a strange collar around its neck. Its body was cold as death, though it had only just fallen from the sky.

"Mummified Undead employ such birds." Shalathu said aloud.

Murmurs echoed through the warband at the revelation.

"The enemy has revealed themselves! Mummified Undead await us at our destination. We do not know their intent, but one thing is certain: their Vultures have found us and now fly back to report our location. If we want any element of surprise on our side, we must hurry."

He looked back to the Reaper. "Kothakas, you and your unit lead us!"

More scrambling as the warband resumed their advance through the ancient columns, leading to their censors.

Shalathu strode past Hisholu with a moment's pause. He did not worry about the Scourge fulfilling his orders; he would either fall in line or be dealt with.

Less concerned about the noise they were making, the warband rushed through the ruins and crested the next dune. Familiar mists perforated the area below, not unlike the censors they held. This greatly expanded their senses, giving them a precise picture of the Rift and the gathering of Undead in the clearing below.

The Vultures seemed to emerge from a camp built in the shadow of an old Imperial watchtower, a mix of old structures and quickly erected tents.

"What can you sense?" Shalathu called to Kothakas.

She focused her attention. "Skeletons and Snakemen. Perhaps a Giant Scorpion."

"What of the Voidgate?" Shalathu asked.

Kothakas peered more towards the large fissure in the ground: the Rift. Sitting vicariously on the edge was a twisting of stone, magic permeating from its centre like a spotlight. But the magic seemed odd...like it was being pulled in one direction.

"Yes!" She responded.

"That is our target. We must seal it as soon as possible."

Kothakas nodded and repeated the order back to the warband. She heard it repeated a few more times as the order echoed to the rear of the group.

Most of those who dwelt in Tyria were most active under the light of their cruel sun, allowing the Shadow Stalkers an advantage beneath the moon. The Mummified Undead, however, were night-dwellers as well; it was unlikely that they could catch such foes off guard.

Vultures flew up ahead of them, tossing the mists into disarray with the beating of their wings.

"Incoming!" Shalathu called out, the warband now nearing the base of the hill where the camp was located. Sensing the Vultures coming this time, they were better prepared.

Scourges held up their shields as the dark bodies pelted them; the high-reaching glaives of the Reapers cut down dozens of Vultures in wide arches.

The Vultures left their marks on a handful of Shadow Stalkers as well, their ferocious bites and scratches leaving some bleeding out on the desert sands.

"Forward!" Shalathu hissed, knowing that they had been discovered. His warband did not hesitate; they were eager to take their revenge upon the Vultures and their masters.

As they moved forward, the mists shifted. Skeletons emerged in a defensive formation, brandishing crossbows. Their bolts rippled through the mists as the Scourges hurried to form up their fields to block.

As they came closer, Snakemen leapt out towards them, screeching as they scratched out with their toxic claws.

From the rear, Hisholu felt the mists twisting as arrows flew and bodies fell. He hurried to crest the hill.

The mummified servants were relatively few; a handful of guards and their servants. Shalathu, Hisholu suspected, was planning to push the attack before their foes could organise themselves or call for aid.

"Is that...?" Hisholu said.

"Yes, a Voidgate." Zosas replied, "But it's strange. Its strands seem to twist and turn in one direction. I have never experienced magic of this nature..."

"Yes. What could that mean?"

"I have no idea." Zosas inhaled sharply, showing her uncertainty. "I've never sensed the mists dancing like this."

But even then...there may still be a possibility...an opportunity, no matter how small. He thought.

"Come on," Hisholu said, "We have to get closer!"

Zosas and the others nodded as they picked up their pace and veered to the side.

Shalathu slit the throat of one of the Snakemen, rolling to the side as the body fell with a gurgled howl. Standing up, he used the momentum to swing his censor around and knock off the head of a nearby Skeleton Warrior.

There are no Priests among them, as he had feared; these were merely a band of warriors. His warband made quick work of these pitiful undead, trampling over their camp to get closer to their quarry.

Shalathu looked ahead again to the Voidgate, the magic seething from it like a ripening storm. The rocks underneath, however, were cracked; piled together to add stability. This may be easier than he thought.

"Its foundation is unstable," he called to Kothakas. "Sealing it should be a simple matter... I will ensure that the Snakemen do not interfere."

"Understood, Shalathu!" She spoke.

Kothakas pierced a Snakeman in the chest before hissing out a command to her group.

"Now, Scourges, there is no time to waste... cover the flanks. Give no quarter to these cursed Undead." Shalathu said, pointing to the scattered resistance on either side of him. The Reapers sliced through the camp like a knife towards a heart.

The sound of stone on metal rang out as the Reaper's Glaives penetrated the cracks in the stone around the gate.

Distant Skeleton Guard fired off bolts to drive them away, but as soon as they revealed their positions, they were met by the rusted blades and shields of Scourges.

Shalathu couldn't help but smile as the rocks began to move. The Voidgate would soon be sealed; their duty once more fulfilled. His people were once more protected.

Then a screeching roar sounded over the lip of the chasm.

Undead hands scrambled over the ledge, and dozens more Skeletal soldiers poured from the Rift like newly hatched spiders. He scolded himself for not guessing there would be more hidden below, concealed from the mists which flowed towards the tower.

"Reapers! In front of you!" Kothakas called out, but both of them and the Scourges around them were too preoccupied with their current task.

A shower of steel cut through many of the Reapers in the front, who moved forward to meet the threat.

Shalathu gritted his teeth. They were so close. He stared at the gate with seething hatred.

I shall not allow this abomination to stand, even if their High Queen comes to defend it herself, he thought.

"Do not abandon your task, Kothakas! I will drive them back!" Shalathu said as he moved forward. Reapers and Scourges assembled around him, eager to drive back the skeletons climbing out from the fissure to meet them.

Kothakas plunged her Halberd into the widened crack and leveraged all the strength of her four arms.

Ahead of her, Shalathu fought tooth and nail alongside other Scourges against the tightly formed ranks of Skeletons.

Hisholu felt this unfold from the edge of the camp, as his rear guard still fought with the remaining Snakemen and Skeleton Warriors scattered around the camp on the surface.

The mists emerging from the gate twisted and wove with the mists created by their censers, leading off into the distance. It was not simply seeping into the world but going somewhere...

"There's a tower at the edge of the camp," Hisholu said, pointing into the distance.

"What do you think is up th—" Zosas said, interrupted by a screech of pain.

A Great Scorpion leapt from a hiding place, pouncing onto a Scourge in their group, and lashing out with its poison stinger. Their companion was dead in an instant.

The Scorpion leapt back to a defensive position. Hisholu gripped his sword, readying himself.

Zosas pulled her focus from the Great Scorpion toward the tower, then over to the edge of the cliff where the rest of the warband gathered, then finally back to Hisholu.

"Get to the top," she said. "We shall cover your advance."

Hisholu surveyed the swirling mists below; the battle was heated; the Skeleton Warriors held in tight formation, slowly pushing back Shalathu towards the Voidgate as Kothakas still struggled against the stones which encased it.

If Hisholu were to figure out what was going on before the battle turned against them, he had little time.

He nodded, then scrambled up the wooden rampart as the Scorpion hissed and snapped its claws.

Hisholu leapt forward instead, surging towards the tower as Zosas and the others distracted the Great Scorpion.

Hurrying as quickly as he could, he climbed up the winding stairs of the old watchtower. As he reached the top, he sensed a lone figure among the thick mists at the top of the tower.

In front of him, a Master Priestess sat with her eyes closed, cross-legged on the floor, muttering incantations under her breath. She was channelling some powerful magic.

The staff stood upright in her grip, pulsating with magical power as the tendrils from the Voidgate funnelled into the bladed tip.

She is syphoning the magic, he thought, in awe.

The Priestess suddenly rose with incredible speed, lunging towards Hisholu. The Scourge didn't even have the chance to swing his sword before bFony nails raked against his clavicle, blood splattering against the wall.

He clutched the wound with a free hand and staggered back against the wall.

"A lone Scourge thinking he can best a Priestess of the Desert Gods?" She scowled. "Such arrogance borders upon blasphemy. I shall teach you a lesson that you will not forget."

Hisholu gritted his teeth and lunged, aiming for her chest. However, his sword swung wide, striking only air.

He felt her bony fingers dig into his side, drawing out blood. She fought with an unnatural strength, but Hisholu used his own momentum to spin himself back into another wall.

Hisholu coughed, trying to catch his breath. She laughed. She was toying with him.

"You have no idea what forces you are drawing on here." Hisholu stuttered, trying to buy time to think.

"Do you think I am a mere fool, Scourge? I know precisely what I am doing; I have spent months compiling this ritual to alter the path of the Voidgate and tearing a portal into your Plane with this relic. There, I will syphon the untapped power of the mists there; your people will hardly notice if some small portion of it were to go missing..."

Her staff started swirling with dark energy as she held it in front of her, pointing at Hisholu.

"Of course, if they do, I'll simply deal with them." She flicked her fingers, preparing a spell to cast.

Hisholu couldn't find a way out. He was too weak to run, let alone fight back. He stood to full height and waited for death.

Then rocks fell.

Outside the tower, the ledge which held the Voidgate had crumbled, as rocks tumbled over each other into the Rift.

Skeletons scrambled over the loose earth, desperate to get back to even ground, but the remaining Shadow Stalker held the line at the edge. The ground fell out from under the Undead as they tumbled down into the deep abyss of the fissure below them.

There was silence for a moment, relief. Then, uncertainty. The Voidgate remained even as the rocks framing it crumbled, suspended in the air like a rip in the fabric of reality.

Hisholu noticed the Priest was looking out towards it. Her mouth seemed to twitch between frustration and guile. Her staff was still syphoning the magic.

"Your staff. It's keeping the Voidgate open." Hisholu said. "You've tied its magic to it."

"Astute." Hisholu could hear satisfaction dripping from her voice as she replied to him. "Though, this knowledge will not save you."

Hisholu didn't wait until she faced him again. He grabbed the staff and kicked off the wall with all his strength, attempting to rip it free and tumble out the window. However, he underestimated Priestess's grip, pulling them both out.

They hurtled toward the broken ground, locked in each other's grasp. The Master Priestess reached for his throat, gripping it tight in a death grip. Then, with a crack, they both land hard on a bone-filled cart, sending splinters of wood and marrow in different directions.

Shalathu and the rest of the warband spun around in response.

Hisholu's head spun wildly, no longer feeling the staff in his hands. He started dragging himself away from the cart as the mage rose from the scattered bones.

Hisholu's focus was blurry, but the fall seemed to merely annoy the Master Priestess. The mists were still twisting into her staff.

Shalathu turned toward the magical syphoning, making the connection between the gate and the Priestess's spells. He was so obsessed with destroying the gate that he somehow ignored the abnormality completely.

Without a word, he scurried as quickly as he could towards the tower, following the syphon towards its source.

The Priestess watched the Shadow Stalkers approaching through the thick mists. Her followers reduced to a mere handful of Skeletons and Snakemen.

"A shame," she shook her head, "But I shall at least take satisfaction from this."

The Priestess raised her staff over Hisholu, preparing a spell with which to strike a death blow.

"Die!" Shalathu hissed as he arrived, leaping forward to tackle the Mummified Priestess.

Hisholu's jaw dropped in horror as his foe whirled around and drove the staff into Shalathu's side, tearing flesh and splattering blood across the already bloodied ground. She whipped the staff back, causing him to spin through the air and land with a thud a few paces away.

Hisholu sat stunned.

The Priestess moved to escape, but Kothakas stood ready.

Her blade swung true, cracking multiple of the Priestess's ribs. Soon, Scourges and Reapers fell on her from all sides. The Priestess's screams started loud, then quieted.

What little Undead remained to her was torn apart in the ensuing melee as they tried futilely to save her.

In the frenzy of the fighting, the Priestess's staff fell to the ground and rolled towards Hisholu, resting at his feet. He reached out to grab it while grasping his wounds with the rest of his remaining arms.

He stood slowly and looked toward the body of Shalathu.

"Hisholu." Shalathu weakly called out.

He was alive. Hisholu thought as he hobbled over and dropped to his knees beside Shalathu.

"Shalathu, are you alright?"

He wasn't. Much of his abdomen was missing, and he felt his blood trickling out.

"Hisholu." Shalathu repeated, gasping with every word. "You know your duty. Destroy the Priestess's staff. Close the Voidgate and stop its corruption."

Hisholu hesitated, looking down at the staff. He thought of all the wars they fought in the name of their home. Of the duty which bound them and their parents, which would bind their children as well; all for a home which they might never see.

"Why are you hesitating?" Shalathu spat through gritted teeth, blood pouring from his mouth. "You know well the destruction which the people of this Plane have caused. Do... not forget."

He hadn't forgotten. He wished he could. There was not a day that went by where he had not been reminded of his duty. Could he betray his very people for some faint hope of returning home? Though hope is all that drives them now, it was only hope that what they sacrificed would be enough to save their people.

Hisholu stood, gripping the staff. He looked around at the warband shuffling in and surrounding them.

On one side was Kothakas and those that followed her. On the other was Zosas, with a few scratches of her own but alive as well. She was backed by others who had raised their hands in support of Hisholu's questions mere hours ago.

"You must do it. The oath binds us. The sacrifice that our ancestors made preserves our people and our home, even if we can never return. Destroy the staff." Shalathu wheezed.

But what if Shalathu was right? What if they were making a difference? What if keeping the gate open now is causing irreversible damage? He accepted this burden until now...why had he begun to doubt his purpose?

Zosas took a step and put her hand on Hisholu's shoulder, but his mind was still overwhelmed.

He turned towards Kothakas, who was still. It was strange to Hisholu that none of the others had spoken; they too hesitated.

They lived their lives in service to a duty that they had never chosen, protecting this land of their ancestors. None had more of a right to return to it than they did.

Hisholu paused and looked upon his dying leader and all that he had sacrificed for him and for the safety of his people.

"Hisholu..." A single faint whisper came as Shalathu closed his eyes for the last time and heard the wood of the staff splinter.