



BROKEN REALMS

CURSED  
GIFT

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‘Voenthe and her kin have returned, High Oracle,’ said Siskai.

Morathi did not miss the hint of consternation in the warrior’s voice; it was intriguing, for Siskai was one of her most ruthless and unflappable killers.

‘Bring them,’ said Morathi, her high, cold voice echoing across the hall.

No sooner had Siskai hauled open the iron doors of the Helleheart’s audience hall than a sickly, crimson light spilled through from the corridor beyond. The stench of cursed magic met the High Oracle’s nostrils. She sat forward, her dark eyes sparkling with excitement.

Six figures staggered into view, guarded at glaivepoint by a retinue of Morathi’s household guard. All were cloaked and hooded, and even though the royal chambers were bathed in brazier light, the shadows seemed to flow about their lithe forms like running water. The Shadowstalkers knelt in deference, and Morathi saw that all of them were wrapped in bandages of bloodstained cloth, their faces and bare flesh concealed. Morathi could smell the scent of rotten, spoiled meat.

‘High Oracle,’ said the leader of the Shadowstalkers, a tall, slender figure wearing the mirrored mask of a Shroud Queen. Voenthe’s snaking hair floated about her, as if she were underwater. ‘Your will is done. We bear the Blood of Khaine.’

Morathi’s lips peeled back from her teeth in a triumphant smile.

Voenthe flashed a hand-signal, and one of the shademarked – a female, the twin sciansá of a Witch Aelf sheathed on her hips – came forward, clutching a dark crystal ewer in trembling arms. Morathi recognised the aura of magic-dampening nullstone, but the container was glowing red and criss-crossed with splintering cracks.

‘This is all that you bring me?’ she said.

The Shroud Queen shook her head. Two of Morathi’s household guards approached, dragging with them a small and pitiful figure: a human bound in chains, two bleeding holes where his eyes had once been. He wore the gilded robes of a sorcerer, and two curving horns sprouted from his temples. The man was whispering and giggling to himself, clearly half-deranged.

‘We captured this one within Varanthax’s Maw,’ said Voenthe. ‘One of the Everchosen’s filth, tasked with the extraction of Khaine’s Blood. It is from him that we recovered the sample you hold. But I must warn you, mistress, this substance is... it is foul, and it is dangerous. A single drop can warp the flesh, and—’

‘It is the Blood of Almighty Khaine,’ said Morathi. ‘Its power is great, yes, but the faithful must not fear its divine touch.’

She reached out and seized the ewer, feeling the burning heat of its contents through the nullstone receptacle. Here it was, the substance she had sought ever since she had heard rumours of its body-warping potency – pure varanite, the molten realmstone of the Eightpoints. Contained within this ewer was the power to remake one’s flesh and, perhaps, one’s very soul. This was her salvation, her path to a long-desired ascension.

A sudden scream snapped Morathi from her thoughts. The aelf who had carried the ewer had collapsed to her knees, clasping her skull with bandaged hands and wailing in agony. Morathi glanced over at Siskai, and the Ironscale snarled and came forward, shoving the stricken Shadowstalker roughly to the floor. Grasping a handful of the bloodstained wrappings, the Melusai tore them loose and recoiled with a hiss of disgust.

Morathi walked over to the convulsing aelf and cocked her head thoughtfully as she examined the effects of varanite exposure first-hand. It was not a pretty sight. All the way up the Shadowstalker’s body, from her hip to her neck, the flesh had transformed into dozens of gibbering, snapping mouths filled with mismatched fangs and lashing tongues. The wretched creature’s body was devouring itself.

The High Oracle unstopped the ewer and tipped it gently forwards. A single, blood-red globule escaped from the crystal container and splashed across the aelf's forehead. Almost instantly, the flesh rippled and bubbled like boiling oil and a foul, sulphurous smoke filled the chamber. Morathi saw the bones of the skull melt and fold, becoming a shapeless lump of matter; dozens of bloodshot eyes sprouted from nowhere and barbed tentacles burst forth, tasting the air with obscene, hungry motions.

'Fascinating,' said Morathi. Then she nodded to Siskai. The Ironscale stepped forward and drove her serpent-crested keldrisaith into the twitching monstrosity over and over until it stopped moving. At the same time, the Vyperic Guard advanced and set to butchering the rest of the contaminated Shadowstalkers. They put up no fight at all as they were slain; clearly, death came as quite the relief.

The captured sorcerer began to howl with laughter. Only a vicious blow from his Melusai captors silenced his mirth. He slumped in their arms, blood pouring from a crushed nose. Of the Shadowstalkers, only Voenthe was left alive. The Shroud Queen's opaque war-mask betrayed no hint of its bearer's emotions.

'Clearly there is some experimentation to be done,' said the High Oracle. 'The varanite will need to be tempered, its mutative qualities suppressed. Fortunately, I have some experience in such matters. Tell me this, Voenthe: can we recover more?'

Voenthe seemed to hesitate just a moment before answering. 'Much more, High Oracle. The Everchosen's agents have transformed Varanthax's Maw into a centre of infernal industry. They utilise daemon-creatures to draw varanite up from beneath the crust of the Eightpoints.'

The Shroud Queen gestured to her human prisoner. 'This one, he knows much about the Everchosen's plans. He serves the Gaunt Summoner known as the Eater of Tomes, the wretch whom Archaon tasks with extracting the substance.'

'You have served me well, Voenthe,' said Morathi, placing a hand upon her agent's shoulder.

'My life for Khaine, mistress.'

'Indeed,' said Morathi.

Voenthe did not even see the knife that plunged into her heart. The Shroud Queen's body slumped to the floor. The High Oracle regretted having to dispose of such a useful asset, but likely she had already been contaminated, and in any case, what had transpired within these chambers had to stay between Morathi and her Scáthborn for now. She had plenty more agents bearing the mircath shademark at her disposal.

'Now' said Morathi, turning to the eyeless captive. 'You and I have much to discuss, human. Beginning with this: what does the Everchosen plan to do with the realmstone he is gathering?'

'My lips are sealed,' cackled the sorcerer, chortling wetly through broken teeth. 'Sealed!'

Morathi sighed. 'Take him to the dungeons.'

In the end, the prisoner spoke freely and desperately. When Morathi had finished squeezing every drop of information out of the mewling lump of meat, she left the pain-dungeons, wiping blood from her ritual knife.

Siskai was waiting. The commander of the High Oracle's household guard did not speak, but Morathi could sense the Melusai's intrigue. She let the warrior stew for several minutes as they climbed the curving stair to her private chambers, past a gallery of statues – defeated foes, trapped forever in their final moment of agony.

'The Everchosen plans to unseal the Gates of Azyr,' said the High Oracle at last. 'He will corrupt the gates with varanite, transforming them into portals of Chaos energy through which his armies will march upon the heavens.'

Siskai thought about that for a moment before answering. 'What concern is that of ours?'

Morathi smiled. 'It is an amusing prospect, is it not? But we cannot let it happen. Not yet at least. For now, our alliance with Sigmar must remain intact, no matter how much it galls me to pretend that the simple-minded fool is my equal. Indeed, I believe

we shall strengthen our bonds. This intelligence presents me with an intriguing opportunity.'

Siskai did not speak. That terseness was one of the things that Morathi most valued about the Scáthborn.

'I require more varanite,' said the High Oracle. 'Much more. Summon the Vyperic Guard, and make ready to travel. I must speak with the man-god directly. Once Sigmar learns of the knife at his throat, he will surely join his cause to that of Hagg Nar. If all goes well, he will help me lay claim to that which I seek. Then the real work can begin.'

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